

**EDWARD E. CURTIS IV, *Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest* (New York: New York University Press, 2022). Pp. 256. \$30.00 cloth. ISBN 9781479812561.**

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In *Muslims of the Heartland*, Edward Curtis profiles America's earliest Syrian Muslim families to highlight their crucial political and cultural impact on the American Midwest during the first half of the twentieth century. Using vivid narrative prose, Curtis follows individuals and families on their journeys from Greater Lebanon to America's heartland to uncover the history of Muslims in North and South Dakota, Iowa, Indiana, and Michigan. By writing these peddlers, homesteaders, and small-town entrepreneurs back into the narrative of the Midwest, Curtis succeeds in demonstrating the crucial impact early Muslims made on American culture. Curtis's main goal is to challenge popular conceptions of the American Midwest as a white, Christian region, and through lively stories of North Dakota farm life, the Iowa grocery business, and industrial labor along the shores of Lake Michigan, he demonstrates that Syrian Muslims practiced and advocated for their religion, making Islam an integral part of the Midwestern story.

Curtis's book on the Muslim Midwest complements a growing scholarship that seeks to demonstrate the racial and religious diversity of America's heartland. Scholars of Latinx history have been at the forefront of this effort. Most recently, Mike Amezcua's *Making the Mexican Midwest* and the edited volume *Building Sustainable Worlds* have interrogated the place of Latinx migrants in factory and agricultural jobs across the region.<sup>1</sup> Alixa Naff's landmark study of early Syrian immigrants, *Becoming American*, uncovered the robust Syrian diaspora that stretched across Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, and the Dakotas, but with the exception of Sally Howell's *Old Islam in Detroit*,

few scholars have investigated the networks of Syrians living in the Midwest in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Curtis's book successfully uncovers these networks with a careful investigation of the Muslim men and women living in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Ross, North Dakota; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Michigan City, Indiana; and Dearborn, Michigan. Using a mix of local newspaper articles, Sanborn maps, local records, and Alixa Naff's own interviews from the National Museum of American History, Curtis paints an intimate portrait of "how ordinary Syrian Muslim Midwestern life often was" (14). He demonstrates how Syrian Muslims secured land patents for 120-acre homesteads in North and South Dakota, fought bravely in World War I, and ran stores that supplied struggling Iowa farmers with dry goods on credit during the depths of the Great Depression. Consciously avoiding the "academic language that makes it hard for people who are not professors to read history books," Curtis portrays Syrian immigrants as quintessential American settlers who struggled and triumphed alongside their German and Swedish neighbors (12). Indeed, Curtis's book is accessible and readable and will appeal to undergraduates with an interest in local history and members of the general population who might shy away from more academic monographs.

Curtis's book also uncovers the complex and bitter history of xenophobia that confronted ethnic and religious minorities in the American Midwest. Curtis follows Syrian homesteaders, railroad workers, wives, and even a poet, whose unwavering commitment to Islam meant they confronted prejudice, particularly in the rural Midwest. In Ross, North Dakota, for instance, local newspapers categorized the town's large Syrian community as racially inferior, while the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* drew on orientalist tropes to characterize the local Muslim community. Regardless of these hardships, local Syrians established some of America's first mosques in Ross, North Dakota (1930), Cedar Rapids, Iowa (1934), and Michigan City, Indiana (1921), demonstrating that religious diversity thrived on the "multiethnic Great Plains" (65). Dynamic mosques drew more and more Muslim migrants to the Midwest and soon the "Midwestern Mahjar" developed a character of its own, and its members espoused a flexible form of Islam that allowed its adherents to carve out a space for themselves within American society.

Curtis follows the histories of dozens of Syrian migrants, the most fascinating of which are women, a group often neglected in Arab American studies. Drawing on the tradition of Evelyn Shakir's *Bint*

*Arab*,<sup>3</sup> Curtis profiles Fatima Igram and Hasibe Aosse, who were crucial in founding the Cedar Rapids Mosque. He also devotes considerable time developing the story of Aliya Hassen, who grew up in South Dakota and moved to Dearborn, Michigan, where she became a poet, Muslim activist, and advocate for racial justice, eventually befriending Malcolm X and co-founding the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), a group modeled on the NAACP. Recovering these women's histories is important work, making it clear that there is so much more to be learned from the dynamic lives of early Arab American women in the United States. Indeed, Curtis might have pressed further into gendered analysis at moments when Muslim women faced particular constraints. His thoughtful narrative reveals that many faced domestic violence and spousal infidelity on the American prairie, challenges that would have alienated them from the narratives of economic uplift and progress espoused by most Syrian immigrants. Aliya Hassen herself sought a divorce from a Syrian American man on the grounds of "extreme cruelty" (175). Recent work by Devi Mays and Randa Tawil has uncovered the constraints placed on female migrants as they traveled across the Arab American diaspora and Curtis's work offers glimpses into ways second-generation immigrants negotiated violence as part of their daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

Thoughtful books, however, point toward exciting avenues for further research and *Muslims of the Heartland* does just this. By uncovering the extraordinary lives of seemingly ordinary Syrian immigrants in the American Midwest, Curtis demonstrates that Muslims have a long and complex history in a region of the United States commonly associated with monolithic whiteness. This book would make an excellent addition to an undergraduate course on Arab American Studies or American Studies syllabi and will serve as a poignant reminder to contemporary Muslims that Islam has been a key part of America's religious landscape throughout the twentieth century.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mike Amezcua, *Making the Mexican Midwest: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Theresa Delgadillo, Ramon Rivera-Servera, Geraldo Cadava, and Claire Fox, eds., *Building Sustainable Worlds: Latinx Placemaking in the Midwest* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); Sally Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit: Rediscovering the Muslim American Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Devi Mays, "‘I Killed Her Because I Loved Her Too Much’: Gender and Violence in the 20th Century Sephardi Diaspora," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 2, no. 1 (2014): 4–30; Randa Tawil, "A ‘Flying Carpet to Doom’: Retracing Gender and Orientalism through the Transnational Journeys of a Syrian Migrant Woman, 1912–1949," *Frontiers (Boulder)* 43, no. 1 (2022): 120–44.