

**GHASSAN ZEINEDDINE, NABEEL ABRAHAM, and SALLY HOWELL, eds., *Hadha Baladuna: Arab American Narratives of Boundary and Belonging* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022). Pp. 248. \$25.99 paper. ISBN: 9780814349250.**

REVIEWED BY REBECCA A. KARAM, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Michigan State University, email: [karamreb@msu.edu](mailto:karamreb@msu.edu)



Metropolitan Detroit is home to one of the largest and oldest Arab American communities in the United States. This fact is well-documented and widely understood. What is much less understood, however, is that Metro Detroit's Arab American community is also extremely diverse. This is true in terms of religious identity, socioeconomic status, nation of origin, generation, and many other sociodemographic traits. As such, the geographic area makes an excellent point of focus for an anthology of nonfiction works exploring Arab American identity and experience. Enter *Hadha Baladuna* (meaning "this is our country"), the first work of creative nonfiction in the field of Arab American literature that focuses entirely on the Arab diaspora in Metro Detroit, edited by Ghassan Zeineddine, Nabeel Abraham, and Sally Howell. The multifaceted diversity of the community is on full display within this collection, demonstrating that there is no singular way to experience Arab Detroit. Or as Howell (coeditor and contributor to the volume) puts it, "There are as many ways to be Arab as there are Arabs" (134).

The book is the newest installment in the "Arab Detroit" series, which includes *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* published in 2000 and *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade* published in 2011.<sup>1</sup> It departs from the previous texts in that it explores Arab American life from a distinctly insider's perspective, as opposed to an academic one. This does not mean the book would not be at home in a scholarly context. Indeed, the essays featured within would be excellent in showing the complexities and lived realities of Arab American identity in social science and humanities courses that focus on Arabs in

diaspora and intersecting topics such as transnationalism, gender and sexuality, family, race, and culture.

Within its contents, *Hadha Baladuna* offers readers autobiographical reflections, poetry, photographic portraits, and more. The featured writers trace their heritage from a wide array of national and cultural communities, including Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen. Their stories touch on a wide range of topics and while every reader is certain to pick up on different themes, three stood out: transnationalism, the complexity of insider/outsider status, and sexuality and gender.

After a brief introduction by the editors, the book opens with Ghassan Zeineddine's "An Atlas of Homes" which traces his family's century-long transnational existence of being neither here nor there. His grandfather migrated from Lebanon to the United States in the 1920s by way of São Paulo, returning home to find a wife in the 1930s, and journeying back to the United States, at some point sending his family back to Lebanon. Zeineddine's parents' generation also bounced from country to country, with Zeineddine following the same path—confounding simple labels like first-, second-, and third-generation American. One of the finest elements of this piece is its demonstration of Dearborn as being a "portal" (32) to Lebanon, cutting through space and time to offer immigrants all the comforts *and* discomforts of being back in one's home country. As is the case for many immigrants, engaging in transnationalism means one's connection to their nation of origin is rarely static.

The theme of transnationalism also reverberates throughout Kamelya Omayma Youssef's "Notes on a Dearborn," tinged by pain of being a refugee. What does transnationalism mean when one cannot physically return to their home country? She writes about the specialness of being a refugee in Dearborn:

For us, Dearborn was not a museum of the past we could pass through. For us, Dearborn was home. We had no homes to go back to in Lebanon, nor did our parents have enough money to buy plane tickets. We did not vacation. We bought clothes off the clearance rack at Kids "R" Us, Jacobson's, Mervyn's, and Hudson's. We hung out with our cousins and the kids of our parents' friends. We played on the lawn while our parents drank thick, bitter coffee in hand-painted fanajeen and occasionally smoked cigarettes. We saved our hand-me-downs to send back to our cousins in the village. We did not know the

words colander or parsley because we only needed to know musfaye and ba'dounis. (184)

Refugee status shaped the community's experience with transnationalism. As Youssef explains, "The difference between here and there was a technicality. The difference between here and there was none" (185).

Another prominent theme in the book is that of belonging, liminality, and the complexity of being both insider and outsider as Arab Americans in Detroit. As is the case for many Arabs in the diaspora, outsider status is felt most prominently outside the ethnic community, especially in relation to one's Americanness. In several pieces, the shifting political landscape immediately following 9/11 shaped encounters with discrimination and contributed to one's subjective sense of being different. Hayan Charara's poem "1979" captures a fleeting moment in the wake of the energy crisis and reflects how patterns of anti-Arab sentiment are decades in the making:

We were stopped  
 at a red light, I was in the passenger seat,  
 and a guy crossing the street looked  
 at the Buick, then at us, flipped  
 us the middle finger and said,  
 "Go home, camel jockeys."  
 (156)

That many Arabs in the diaspora feel like outsiders in their new homelands is not surprising. What is more surprising, however, is that even within Metro Detroit's Arab American community, many Arab Americans *still* feel like outsiders. This theme is present in nearly all the pieces, but especially in Karoub's essay "Not Arab Enough." Here, he shines a light on the irony that "Dearborn, rightly dubbed 'the capital of Arab America,' is the only city in America where you can be called out for not being Arab enough" (124). For some of the writers, outsider status within the diaspora is the result of generational distance from migration—for example, Arabic may no longer be a native tongue or may be spoken with an accent. For others, it comes suddenly as a result of breaking silence around taboos including sexuality, gender, and violence.

Possibly the most striking theme in the book is that of gender and sexuality. Mai Jakubowski's "On the Margins: Queer, Arab, American," provides readers with a nuanced coming-of-age story from the perspective of a "queer Arab Polish American person who was raised Muslim [in Dearborn] and is just doing their best" (123). Their writing reveals painfully relatable moments of growing up as a preteen girl in the early 2000s with the "ever-moving goalposts of expectations" of what it means to be a good Arab: being so excited to wear a new skirt to school only for the Arab dad to strike it down as *'ayb* (shameful). The theme of performing their own sexuality and gender identity and then being punished for doing so reoccurs many times throughout the piece, until finally Jakubowski comes out and makes peace with their father's disapproval. Another essay, Terri Bazzi's heart-wrenching "Urban Nomad," focuses on sexual abuse by a family member and the fallout she faced upon speaking out about it. Its nonchronological format is especially resonant, amplifying the jarring topic at hand. The piece is a testimony to the bravery and pain that comes with fighting back against violent oppression and those who seek to hide it from public scrutiny, all within one's own minority community.

For all its eclecticism, there remain a handful of topics not thoroughly explored in the volume. The first is the experience of living in Arab Detroit's outer-ring, sprawling suburban communities. By the editors' own admission, "Dearborn is an outsized character throughout this book" (4). Life in this ethnic enclave differs from majority-White suburbs in which Arab Americans are ethnically marked, a burden which carries a certain danger in the face of rising anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hostility. Perhaps relatedly, no essay offers a sustained exploration of Arab Detroit during the Trump years. While Abraham's essay recounts a recent charged encounter in a Target checkout line, few others give more than a brief mention of the 2016 election. Additionally, readers hoping for a direct treatment of life as an Arab Christian or Chaldean will not find much on this topic within the volume. Given the continued dynamism of Metro Detroit's Arab American community, a future creative non-fiction edition of *Arab Detroit* would be welcome and perhaps these issues (and more) might be tackled then.

In sum, *Hadha Baladuna* centers paradoxes of the personal – the inner conflict of what it means to feel like a real, authentic Arab while having the freedom to define oneself. It is a book about the contradictions of "hardship and ease, certainty and confusion, belonging and fear" (4), all of which shape what it means to be Arab in

Arab Detroit. The volume significantly adds to our understanding of the complexity of Arab American life in and around Metro Detroit. It does not do so from a distance but breaks down the barriers between academic literature and our own personal experiences by weaving together intimate personal stories grounded in the larger social context. It is up close, personal, emotional, and sometimes messy. *Hadha Baladuna* is accessible and relatable, ideal for use in the classroom. And while the works are firmly rooted in the region, the themes of transnationalism, the complexity of insider/outsider status, and sexuality and gender transcend any geographic boundary and will resonate with readers far from Metro Detroit. As such, it would be relevant to classes dealing with Arab, MENA, and SWANA diaspora, migration and generational change, families, gender and sexuality, and politics. For this reader, whose heart will always be in Arab Detroit, the volume is a tremendous success and worth reading.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, eds., *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Nabeel Abraham, Sally Howell, and Andrew Shryock, eds., *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).