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Arabs and Muslims After 9/11

— Thomas Abowd

Arabs and Muslims in the Media
Race and Representation After 9/11
By Evelyn Alsultany
New York: New York University Press, 2012,
239 pages, \$23 paperback.

Arab America
Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism
By Nadine Naber
New York: New York University Press, 320 pages, \$24 paperback.

THE LITERATURE ON Arabs and Muslims in the contemporary Americas is not simply a growing body of diverse work, but one expanding in its theoretical sophistication and originality. Limitations of past studies of these ethnic and racial communities included a frequent failure to adequately explore the inter-connections of class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression that intersect the lives of Arabs and Muslims.

It is exciting to read recent interventions by two of the leading authorities on Arabs and Muslims in the contemporary United States. Evelyn Alsultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* and Nadine Naber's *Arab America* are timely scholarly works, each as politically committed as they are intellectually rigorous. Both expose what few books on these subjects have sought to: namely, the continual but variable linkages of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism to broader dynamics such as the national imagination in times of war, immigration politics, and imperial designs and desires.

Alsultany explores the multifaceted and shifting politics of representation in the United State since the attacks of September 11, 2001. This study takes the reader into realms of popular culture that help shape the perspectives of tens of millions of Americans about much maligned and misunderstood peoples. Alsultany's focus on television and film permits us to see these mediums and the images and messages they produce in more complex ways.

One of the insidious ways in which popular culture functions ideologically is in its seeming innocence, its appeal as leisure and "fun." But racist representations billed as amusement and entertainment have nearly always been about ratings and profit, too.

The programming Alsultany examines — from the television series "24" to the Canadian situation comedy "Little Mosque on the Prairie" — is driven, she reminds us, in no small part by audience demands and desires. But what is also made evident in her book is that images, messages and meanings which television and cinema produce also shape audience perspectives. Both cultural dynamics interact dialectically to reproduce each other.

Arabs and Muslims in the Media is intriguing in several respects, not least in its surprising and thought-provoking initial assertion. In the first chapter Alsultany poses the compelling question: How is it that, contrary to what critical observers of U.S. popular culture might widely assume, so many post-9/11 representations of Arabs and Muslims were actually sympathetic and even anti-racist? From this critical point of departure Alsultany then moves to broaden her discussion of ideology and public culture.

In each of the following chapters various representational modes and dominant tropes are examined, drawing from key theorists of media and culture. Alsultany's breadth of sources, the number of different shows, films and genres reviewed, is quite impressive. By the end of the book, the reader is left wondering if there was anything Alsultany had not screened. Her range of coverage, and perceptive connections she makes among various depictions in this age of heightened fears and "terror warnings," enable her to assert some crucial points.

A Complex Critique

For one thing, individual portrayals of Arabs and Muslims need to be characterized more fully than simply as good or bad, racist or anti-racist. Seemingly “positive” representations, upon closer examination, can be shown to be ambivalent and unstable.

Further, analyses that look strictly at individual depictions in isolation all too often miss their political subtleties. Instead, critical observers need to read them as part of broader ideological constellations, whose general trajectory of stereotypical content relies on the occasional “sensitive” or supposedly sensitive portrayal.

Among the important “representational modes” that Alsultany analyzes is one she terms “simplified complex representations.” This approach seeks to balance a negative portrayal of Arabs or Muslims with a positive one. In doing so they routinely satiate mainstream American viewers’ abiding concern for a “both sides” depiction, one considered objective and “fair and balanced.”

This, of course, begs the question “balanced between what and what?” Alsultany’s book unearths the nuances and contradictions associated with this and other ways of projecting populations much under siege in the United States and across the globe.

Representing and “Saving” Women

In Chapter Three, Alsultany focuses more specifically on the representation of Muslim women. Her investigation relies as much on a critique of the broader cultural and political realities that help produce gendered and racialized depictions as on the intentions and final products of writers and directors.

In fact, this media analysis emphasizes that there are few if any portrayals that exist independent of wider political realities, discourses, struggles and social movements.

The prevalent post-9/11 political discourse of “saving Muslim women,” deployed at specific moments since 2001 by political elites to justify acts of war and military occupation, clearly resonate with writers, directors and viewers. Initiating imperial wars in the Middle East in the last decade has been promoted by evoking concern for Muslim women who are routinely depicted as essentially victims.

The conceit of “civilized” (or “more civilized”) countries “saving” or “liberating” women elsewhere has its roots in the colonial racism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Egyptian feminist and historian Leila Ahmed (*Women and Gender in Islam*, 1992), writing about British colonial rule in Egypt, refers to this practice as “colonial feminism.”

Alsultany’s work has much to say about these historical expressions of racism and dominance, cast as acts of solidarity. She builds on and expands previous critiques, providing a well-crafted analysis of our contemporary encounter with the intersections of gender, racism and imperialism.

The concerns and struggles of women (and men) in the Muslim world present a challenge to feminist scholars who wish to write in solidarity with them. The problem, as Alsultany asserts, “is not that the viewer feels pity or outrage at these horrifying stories; such stories are indeed worthy of outrage. The problem, rather, is how these horrifying stories create a monolithic portrait of Islam that is then easily mobilized by the government to justify U.S. intervention in Arab and Muslim countries.” (73)

This chapter like others underscores the point that ideology is not simply found in what is said but in what is not said, what is omitted from a particular representation. These silences are typically every bit as vital as what’s actively, explicitly and predictably conveyed. Arabs and Muslims in the Media ensures that such subtle strategies and designs will not go unchallenged.

Lives of Arab American Youth

Nadine Naber’s *Arab America* shares with Alsultany’s work a sophisticated analysis of race, gender and sexuality in the contemporary United States. And like Alsultany, Naber skillfully examines these forces of oppression, generated in specific local articulations as well as from the broader structural forces that have impinged on Arab Americans.

Whereas Alsultany’s book relies principally on a media studies approach to culture and racism, Naber’s methodologies are primarily ethnographic. The research strategies of *Arab America* include several years of participant observation and intensive interviews with those whose tribulations and achievements she writes about.

This study focuses on the daily, lived experiences of Arab American youth and young adults in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Naber consciously privileges the voices and interpretations of the young adults whose lives she chronicles, resisting the typical urge of researchers to tell a story from the position of “omniscient narrator.”

Early on, the author explains her commitment to taking the lead from those whose tribulations and achievements she seeks to share. This, she tells the reader, involves allowing herself to be guided theoretically and thematically by her interlocutors, rather than trying to impose her own notions about what is important about their lives.

As Naber explains in the first chapter, she allows her research to “follow wherever the stories, imaginations, and visions of my interlocutors would lead me.” (9) This she refers to as “articulations of Arabness,” an idea she carries through each of the chapters that follow.

The work is pathbreaking not least in its focus on the understudied subjects of political activism and youth culture in Arab American contexts. This study is also creative in the ways in which Naber delineates and expands the realm of the political. Her particular methodological approach leads to insights that truly could have been obtained in no other way.

Naber’s several years of involvement with these young Arab Americans yields richly textured and detailed accounts that tell us a great deal about the particular experiences of Arab American youth. Her ethnography relates revealingly how young activists compose their own histories, but how they do so within constraints not simply of their choosing.

One set of these constraints relates to the broader forces of racism and state generated suspicion of Arabs, before and after 9/11. Arab America investigates the daily, local experiences of Arab American youth as they and the communities of resistance they form are intersected by racism, sexism, militarism, homophobia and other expressions of domination and violence. This she does in a range of ways, but this ethnography is most original in its careful attention to activism and arenas of struggle and resistance.

Multiple Activist Dimensions

Like Alsultany, Naber critiques the persistently patronizing ways in which Arab and Muslim women are regarded as victims and stripped of agency. She does this most effectively by writing about the multiple ways in which these young adults conceptualize activist struggles.

This book is original in a number of ways of interest to progressives and activists. Among them is the author’s attention to leftists and radical politics, not simply to more mainstream less critical activist projects. She includes struggles that take seriously a critique of homophobia and U.S. imperialism, the political economy of the prison system, racism on college campuses, and solidarity with Palestinians under Israeli colonial rule.

Yet Naber also shows how frequently depoliticized realms, such as familial life, are always infused with a politics not simply reducible to patriarchy and gender oppression. This book is quite effective in exposing intersections of generational clashes, racism, and class and status not sufficiently studied among scholars of Arab American life.

The work is further valuable in the insights it generates about divisions with leftist groups and collectives — for instance, how divisions and hierarchies related to gender and class cross-cut and divide even the most astute and radical of political groups. Naber takes this critical approach seriously as she investigates contested notions of what it means to be radical or anti-imperialist within the Arab communities she studied.

It is refreshing to read a scholarly study that not only addresses activism and leftist politics but also is based on informed and sophisticated understandings of these struggles. In this way, the work departs from so many other books that, while perhaps sympathetic to those in struggle, are not based on actual involvement.

Naber’s ethnography does what all politically committed accounts must do if they are to be meaningful. It explores and dissects how what we regard as a community or family are, more frequently than we acknowledge, divided and fractured rather than unitary and “whole.”

Arab America benefits tremendously from the scholar’s political proximity and commitments to those she writes about. There are real debates in scholarly circles about how such closeness affects one’s capacity to be “objective.” The question is a fair one, indeed. But such challenges almost always operate with the implicit and dangerous assumption that those most objective are those least partisan.

Naber’s work demonstrates that retaining one’s politically committed posture and forging objective and scholarly accounts are not necessarily in contradiction. It is a tribute to this principle.

Arab America and Arabs and Muslims in the Media are major contributions to studies of particularly vulnerable communities in an age of racial profiling schemes, drones, and dirty wars. But they also help us understand broader theoretical questions and political conundrums.

Reviewing both works was also a pleasure because each is well-written, accessible, and engaging. Those intrigued by the multiple concerns around immigration politics, class and racial justice, the politics of gender and sexuality, militarism, and the ways they impact Arab and Muslims will certainly want to read (and teach) these important books.

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