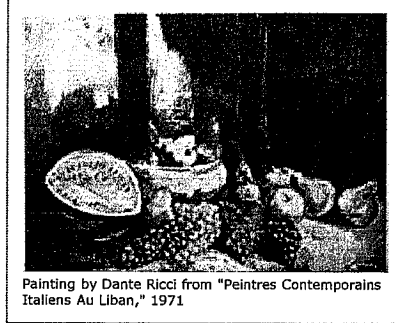


Take Lessons: An Intellectual Master Class

By Theri Alyce Pickens

Arab and Arab-American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging

Edited by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber
Syracuse University Press, 2010



Painting by Dante Ricci from "Peintres Contemporains Italiens Au Liban," 1971

Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber have created a masterpiece. Their edited collection "Arab and Arab-American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging" showcases a variety of feminist ideas and forges new territory in Arab and Arab American studies as well as

feminism. Within this anthology, poets, scholars, activists, novelists and various other artists combine their voices to articulate the possibilities inherent in and pitfalls facing Arab and Arab-American feminist thought. These writers tackle complex issues within these cultures without giving credence to Orientalist and Islamophobic notions. My only concern about this anthology is that some readers may not be ready for it because of their objections to or ignorance of Arab and Arab-American feminisms. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that it is an invaluable contribution not only to scholarship, but to the world at large. I realize the cloying effect that such grandiose claims can have, particularly in a book review. They are nevertheless merited, as this collection questions, criticizes, illuminates, and mourns, while simultaneously maintaining a high level of intellectual rigor.

"Arab and Arab-American Feminisms" is organized by subject matter and split into five sections: "Living with/in Empire," "Defying Categories," "Activist Communities," "On Our Own Terms," and "Home and Homelands." Some of these distinctions are arbitrary, as certain pieces could fit into more than one category. The headings and sections, however, provide a roadmap to think through the questions these authors raise, additionally offering a foothold for beginners, acknowledging that one must read these selections within a specific cultural and political context. The mélange of styles – creative, scholarly, interview, personal reflection – allows for several points of entry into the texts and permits the anthology to cover a great deal of ground. While it could be said that the multiplicity of approaches is disorienting, it is exactly such multiplicity that makes these complex ideas more comprehensible.

The first section, "Living with/in Empire," encourages meditation on the very identity categories that define the term "Arab" and "Arab-American." Unlike previous essays of this sort, the meditations do not deal with the implications of these terms specifically, but rather the geopolitical and philosophical tenets upon which they rest. The second section, "Defying Categories," pushes beyond the limits of these two terms with a certain degree of cheek, affirming the multiplicity and wide range of experience encompassed by the terms "Arab" and "Arab-American." The third section "Activist Communities," explains and analyzes how feminists fight against gendered oppression both within and outside of the Arab world. This section details some authors' quarrels within the academy and within the Arab community, as well as the resistance they face. Naturally, many of these contributions focus on Palestine, but they also provide insight and—dare I say it—a prescription for enacting justice within one's own community. Part four, "On Our Own Terms," personalizes the political and emphasizes two very important, simultaneous experiences: the way lives are influenced and scripted by categorization, and the way writers navigate and negotiate the strictures placed upon them. The last part, "Home and Homelands," focuses on memory and exile. It stretches the definition of "exile" and challenges the easy bifurcation between "home" and "back home."

There are so many reasons to commend this anthology that I scarcely know where to begin. Each section includes a creative piece, a queer voice, and a scholarly writing. Far from being tokens within each section, these varied approaches allow for multiple and, sometimes, conflicting opinions. I wish to spotlight several selections in particular, keeping in mind that all of them (without exception) make significant contributions. Evelyn Alsultany's interview with Ella Shohat is particularly illuminating not only because of the interviewer's skill, but also because Shohat herself gives a personal account of the way the idea of "Arab versus Jew" creates a useless binary. Shohat also explains the utility of

multiculturalism less as simply a way to include "many cultures," and more as an authentic avenue for social change. Happy/LA Hyder's work, "Dyke March, San Francisco, 2004: Many Are Intrigued By The Fact That I Am Also A Belly Dancer," examines heterosexist and ageist notions of what it means to be a belly dancer. Her account of the willful ignoring of lesbians and the demonization of belly dancing reclaims bodies that have become nearly invisible to the imagination.

"On Rachel Corrie, Palestine, and Feminist Solidarity" by Therese Saliba explores the complications of mourning and grieving in the face of struggling for justice. The author's personal relationship with Rachel Corrie highlights the significant risk that activists take in proclaiming their desire to see a free Palestine. She also points out the manipulative allusions to race that are made in order to silence critiques of Israel – regardless of the race of the activist (Rachel Corrie was white).

"Teaching Scriptural Texts in the Classroom: The Question of Gender" by Moulouk Berry gives an intriguing account of a professor's struggle to open up conversation within a collegiate environment. Berry delineates her intention and rationale for teaching a class about (instead of "on") the Qu'ran, and her students' resistance to learning multiple interpretations. This phenomenon of student resistance, rigidity, and disrespect for professorial expertise (and for learning in general) is, unfortunately, all too common and imposes limits on dialogue.

Amal Hassan Fadlalla's poem "her memory of your hands is a rainbow" (translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa) is moving and beautiful. This piece is worth quoting at length: "Sweet and generous Nile?/sweet and branched out for miles/wash my features with your water,/release my wings and my hands,/scatter my history with your rain,/in the heart of the West Bank,/break my bracelets and my chains,/turn me into a sandalwood powder rubbed in a kaffiyeh/for Rachel under the tank/facing a bullet and a platoon/and open a Mexican street/for the girl going out to her shift." Fadlalla's language rests along the interstices of longing, loss, and beauty by recalling vivid images, scents, and tastes.

I would be remiss if I did not also point out the triumphs of the introduction to this anthology. The editors take a pointillist approach to introducing the volume by recounting three episodes that elucidate various matrices of race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Not only does the introduction undertake a corrective endeavor, but it also complicates its own correction. In so doing, the editors set the tone for readings that "[offer] historicized perspectives on gender, sexuality, and Arab and Arab-American women, queer, and transgender experiences that are situated within multiple overlapping intersecting structures of power and privilege." One of the particular achievements of the anthology is that the queer voices are neither marginalized nor privileged, but integrated into the volume. I take care to point out this facet because, until now, there has been such a paltry amount of scholarship on queer Arab and Arab-American voices.

Given the no-holds-barred approach that many contributors take, my only concern for the text is that those who need to read it will most likely ignore it. Some who take it up may shy away because many of these selections put forth a new ethical imperative for responding to Arab and Arab-American feminists. For those who are intent on believing that the term "Arab (American) feminism" is oxymoronic, this collection stands in complete and vehement opposition. And for anyone suggesting that teaching or learning about the subject can be avoided based on a lack of information, this text provides the antidote. My only regret is that we didn't have it sooner.

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