

## Transcultural Relations

ALFRED HORNUNG AND MARTINA KOHL, eds., *Arab American Literature and Culture* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), 299 pp.

The tragic attacks of 9/11 have reshaped global and local relationships and have directly affected Arab communities scattered throughout the United States, resulting in two new opposite phenomena: the growing senses of venom, hatred, and revenge inflicted on Arab American communities, and these communities' responses to new waves of 'Islamophobia.' These phenomena find apt argument and elaboration in the articles included in *Arab American Literature and Culture*, edited by Alfred Hornung and Martina Kohl, which is one of a number of books written in response to problematic matters involving Arab and Muslim communities both in the United States and in Europe. Hornung and Kohl examine "the situation of Arab descent worldwide" that has been influenced greatly by politics in the United States following the September 11 attacks (1).

Ghada Quaisia Audi's text, "Challenges Facing the Arab American Community from a Legal Perspective," demonstrates that while the United States Constitution maintains "the basic rights" of any American citizen—which includes Arab Americans—these basic rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution are being denied to Americans of Arab descent. "Within hours of the terrorist attacks of September 11," Audi explains, "Americans of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent were targeted for acts of hate, violence, discrimination, racial profiling, and economic ruin as a direct result of the highlighted negative generalized media and government scrutiny of Arabs" (9). Ostracism from the American community—a de-Americanization process—has cast Arab Americans as "'perpetual foreigners,' deemed as being loyal to their country of origin, rather than to America, and hence disloyal and subversive" (9). This process of 'de-Americanization' causes a sense of the spiritual exile that is felt by many Arab Americans, creating a complicated relationship between Americans of Arab descent and other Americans. Audi argues that even though the first amendment "guarantees the right of freedom of expression for everyone" (7), Islamic symbols such as the mosque are perceived as

anti-American. The continuing "headscarf/*hijab* debate" is another example of how Islamic customs are unwelcome in the United States (17). Audi not only points out these difficulties in her text, she offers a simple solution: citizens of the United States must be reminded that Arab Americans are Americans; they are an integral, essential part of the American community. As Americans they are guaranteed the same rights and freedom of expression—especially religious expression—as any other American and cannot be deported or isolated. Regarding Arab Americans' patriotic virtue, George W. Bush has stated that "there are thousands of Arab Americans that live in New York City who love the flag just as much [as other Americans]" (17-18).

The perception of Muslims in the United States is quite different from the German perspective, as Rolf D. Theis illustrates in his article concerning the learning environment and setting of Arab Americans and Muslims in a German high school in Frankfurt. "Muslim-Americans in the German Classroom" looks at Muslim American culture and literature as the "newcomers on the ESL teaching agenda in Germany" and "provides an outline of some basic ideas concerning *Landeskunde* / 'intercultural studies,' followed by an outline of ideas concerning a project on 'Muslims in the U.S.—based on teaching experience gained in a grade twelve classroom'" (25). Theis raises some interesting facts concerning this issue: "Students were quite surprised that a high percentage of American Muslims are African-American" (44), which gave European students the idea that Muslim communities in the U.S. are diverse in ethnicity. He also emphasizes the increasing status of Muslim American students: "Within the United States, there has been, not only since 9/11, a growing awareness of Muslims being one of the fast-growing communities in the country and of being a group that asks for and deserves more public recognition" (27). This awareness enhances the interests of Muslims in both the U.S. and Europe. Theis highlights the fact that "American Muslims have Arab origins" to stress how the racial origin of American Muslims contributes to an accurate understanding of the nature of Arab Americans in the U.S. Theis also questions how students cope with foreign cultural matters and factors in the context of

the “intercultural learning,” concluding that “one should be open to new information and, possibly, even to the realization that one can profit from taking a look at how other countries come to terms with problems that one faces in one’s own country as well” (30).

Lisa Suhair Majaj’s article “Arab American Literature: Origins and Developments” traces the background of Arab literature in the United States through its several stages beginning in the late 1800s. Arab literature flourished in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, and authors such as Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani created what is known as “the Mahjar (émigré) school of Arab American writing” (62). Majaj claims that this literature served “as bridges between East and West” when the Mahjar writers attempted “to establish philosophical points between Arabs and American ideologies and context” (62). At that period in time, Arab Americans were reluctant to write about their literature and culture due to anxieties regarding perceptions of their identity: Arab Americans “stressed their Christian identity, their geographical origin in the ‘Holy Land,’ and their ‘spiritually,’ employing biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the ‘exotic’ even as they implicitly sought to distance themselves from Islam” (63). Later in the twentieth century, however, tremendous changes took place as “Arab American literature emerged as a literature in its own right, with younger writers able to take for granted the existence of a community, both ethnic and literary” (64).

Mita Banerjee’s “Arab Americans in Literature and the Media” poses questions about the stereotypes of Orient and Occident conveyed in the media and probes into the portrayal of Arabs in film and other media. While “Bollywood, India’s film industry,” for instance, “is famous for stereotyping Western characters as invariably immoral and economically and politically corrupt,” Hollywood “has been criticized for its Orientalism” (99). Banerjee’s claim is that “Arab American literature can be seen as the other side of the projection or stereotype” and clearly shows that stereotypes are used as trademarks and their influences may come in the form of conceptualizing the audiences to this or that issue (100).

Similarly, an article entitled “From Sheikh to Terrorist? Arab Characters in American Film” by Banerjee and Günther Sommerschuh

discusses these stereotypes to “explore how the movie *The Wind and the Lion* (1975) could be incorporated in the EFL classroom when discussing the use of stereotypes in Hollywood productions especially in regard to Arab culture” (117). The text focuses more on the pedagogical criteria and features of teaching EFL students than on the Arab and Muslim problems misleadingly announced by the title, as the content has nothing to do with a “Sheikh” who turns into a “terrorist.” Actually, this part would be fruitful if it had explained how this “Sheikh” turns into a “terrorist.”

Heike Raphael-Hernandez’s “Representations of Arab Americans in Post-9/11 Films” analyzes seven films produced since 9/11 to illustrate “their changed representations of Arab and Muslim Americas” (124). Raphael-Hernandez agrees with Banerjee and Sommerschuh that the representations of Arabs have been highly intensified and exaggerated after 9/11. She illustrates how Arab Americans are now represented in films by highlighting problematic topics in Arab American community such as “honor killing, arranged marriages, and female genital mutilation” (124). In addition to contemporary issues, she deals with the representation of the Arab immigration from a historical perspective by claiming that despite current negative portrayals, Arab immigrants in the United States “enjoyed a relatively comfortable status that was closer to white privilege than to any other minority group” (125). They shared “the economic resources and mobility that were granted to whites in American society” (125). Regarding the representation of Arab Americans in movies prior 9/11, Raphael-Hernandez states that the “early productions drove the barbaric and sexual stereotypes to the extreme” (125). Clearly, the East was represented as in an inferior position to the West, but it was not seen as an enemy. Instead, the East was “the exotic site for sexual forbidden fruits and for passion” (125).

“Mosques in North America” by Omar Khalid reveals the significance of mosques, many of which also house or are utilized as a cultural or community center, a bookshop, a kitchen and a social hall, as well as recreational facilities, residential apartments, and in some cases even a funeral home (289). The article interestingly epitomizes various historical facts and aspects about mosques in the United States, such as the Islamic Cultural Center in Washington D.C. Khalid consid-

ers mosques an important Islamic symbol for Muslims in the U.S. but avoids tackling negative representations of the mosque as “an anti-U.S. symbol” after the 9/11 attacks (10).

The penultimate chapter of the text tells a fascinating story about the Hadeed family, who emigrated from Syria to the Caribbean island of Antigua during the 1950s. In “The Success Story of a Syrian Village,” Anton Escher describes how the family “distinguish[ed] themselves from the island’s other inhabitants through their native Arabic tongue, which they use[d] in addition to the official English language” (269). The success story of the Hadeed family can be understood through one of the principles adopted by the father of the family: “As a businessperson, if you can’t live with the people, you can’t make it” (271). Coexistence with the Others led to this family’s success.

*Arab American Literature and Culture* highlights the identity of Arab Americans and

how this identity is shaped and influenced by their diverse ethnicity; it clearly illustrates that Arab American identities are as diverse as their various Arab cultures. The thirteen articles examine Arab Americans’ positions in the United States by viewing the subject from a legal perspective, observing the media and its tools, and Arab Americans’ status in post 9/11 films. This fascinating text captures the 9/11 attacks as influential incidents that have greatly transformed the status of Arab and Muslim Americans in American society. *Arab American Literature and Culture* is a book that deals with diverse interesting issues that give close information about the Arab American Culture in the United States. I think that the book can be considered as a reference piece to readers who are interested in having an overview in this field.

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