Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects

Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds.
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The present American moment has been hailed by some as inaugurating an era of "post-black" politics with the candidacy and election of President Barack Obama. Obama's election, in the words of Manning Marable, indicates the possibility that America has entered "an age of post-racial politics, in which leadership and major public policy debates would not be distorted by factors of race and ethnicity" ("Racializing Obama: The Enigma of Post-Black Politics and Leadership," *Souls* 11, no. 1 [2009]: 1-15). While his campaign and victory heralded the message of hope in a "post-racial" landscape, the dangers of stumbling blindly onto the bandwagon could, and in some cases have, result(ed) in erasing race's enduring presence in contemporary American politics.

Thus, there is perhaps no better time for the publication of *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, as it counters contemporary public amnesia by reminding us that race and inequality still permeate the lives of minority populations. Speaking to an interdisciplinary audience and seeking to fill a critical gap in the field of American racial and ethnic studies, this collection of essays highlights the complex and slippery ways in which race

permeates Arab and Arab-American engagements with the American social hierarchy.

Foregrounding the complexities of Arab-American racial formation as a critical site of inquiry in the introduction, Nadine Naber calls for moving beyond the usual liberal multiculturalist "add on" approach in order to consider "the shifting and contradictory historical contexts through which Arab Americans have engaged with immigration, assimilation, and racialization" (p. 4). In a concise but evocative historical précis, she shows how "anti-Arab racism represents a recurring process of the construction of the Other within U.S. liberal politics in which long-term trends of racial exclusion become intensified within moments of crisis in the body politic…" (p. 31).

The first three chapters consider the usefulness of "race" as an analytical category in understanding the increasing marginalization of Arabs and Arab Americans in post-9/11 America. Employing ethnographic research, Louise Cainkar argues that using the seemingly "race-neutral" lens of essentialized cultural differences to marginalize Arabs glosses over what is, in fact, a highly racialized project with global goals. Most significantly, she posits that "Arabs have experienced the double burden of being excluded from whiteness *and* from mainstream recognition as people of color" (p. 80), thereby isolating them from mainstream vehicles of dissent. Providing an alternative perspective in "The Moral Analogies of Race," Andrew Shryock points to the limits of racialization as an effective trope in understanding the "racial ambiguity" and taxonomic uncertainty that ultimately marginalizes Arab-American communities even from the process of racialization itself. Further troubling these processes, Amaney Jamal posits that the "us versus them" logic used in the post-9/11 context to justify the infringement of civil liberties transcends racism based on phenotype toward a racism based on the representations of culture and values as inherently inferior. Even in cases where "the Other" is tolerated, she argues, the very process of tolerating is inherently racist and must be critically examined.

Turning to the relationship among Arab-American studies, ethnic studies, and whiteness studies, the next group of essays works to destabilize longstanding assumptions in academia that either cater to an assimilationist narrative or, alternatively, situate Arab Americans as non-agentive, racialized victims. Sawsan Abdulrahim's article stands out in that it foregrounds "whiteness" as the object of analysis, using empirical evidence of how Arab Americans engage in racial formation to further complicate "whiteness" as a theoretical frame of privilege and empowerment. In doing so, her work

parallels Shryock's and Sarah Gualtieri's conclusions surrounding the tenuous relationship that Arabs have with "whiteness," "an ideology that continues to be molded against a black 'other' often by members of groups who hold a precarious position on the racial hierarchy" (p. 145). Michelle Hartman's chapter further shows this "racial ambiguity" by exploring the implicit and explicit strategies of racialization in three Arab-American literary works.

The final set of essays examines the intersection of race and religion vis-à-vis the politics of representation through the "inferential racism" of prime-time television (Evelyn Alsultany), the collective essentialization of identities in *The New York Times* (Suad Joseph, Benjamin D'Harlingue, and Alvin Ka Hin Wong), the multiple axes of oppression and the wide range of identities associated with terrorism in the post-9/11 backlash (Naber), and the differential encounters with discrimination by Christian versus Muslim Arab-Americans (Jen'nan Ghazal Read).

While this volume brings race theory to bear on Arab and Arab-American histories in the United States, I think what is lacking is how these particular experiences bear on critical race theory itself. With the exception of addressing how some empirical examples complicate "whiteness," most of the essays remain descriptive as opposed to analytical in their employment of a social constructivist take on race. A more rigorous engagement with current trajectories in critical race studies (e.g., such as the recent turn to the materiality of race in Saldanha 2007, Mitropolous 2008, Graves 2009, and Das Gupta 2007) would widen the scope and relevance of this work as well as others in Arab-American studies. I also wonder if the authors considered distinguishing the experiences of Arab immigrants from those who self-identify as Arab or Muslim *American* and ask: What is at stake if we move the discussion away from diaspora and immigrant studies to situate Arab and Muslim *American* engagements within American studies at large? Finally, for a group of essays that repeatedly calls for recognizing the "overshadowed links between groups that have shared similar histories of immigrant exclusion and racism" (p. 302), I feel the inclusion of work exploring the relationship (or lack thereof) between the racialization of Arabs and Arab Americans with other Muslim and minority groups (e.g., South Asians, Iranians, Latinos, and women) would have been more provocative.

Ultimately, I would argue that one of the book's main strengths lies not so much in the individual contributions of each essay, but rather in the collective and highly descriptive representation of the ongoing negotiations of racialization that mark the lives of Arabs and Arab Americans in the United

States. Critiquing notions of tolerance and diversity within a liberal multicultural paradigm, Nader and others demonstrate how the "hypervisibility" of Arabs and Arab Americans post-9/11 has not only had the effect of "silencing critiques of state violence and the structural inequalities that produce hatred and racism, but also reveals the objectification that often accompanies inclusion" (p. 3). The notion of a post-black and therefore postracial America with the election of Obama privileges "blackness" as the sole and dominant experience of American oppression at the expense of other minority histories. After reading this collection, I hope that few people will still argue that America has reached a state of "postracial purity," but rather that older meanings and representations of marginalization and oppression have taken on a global and multiracial significance.

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