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Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation

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Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation

Abstract

This is a book review of Waleed Mahdi, *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation* (Syracuse University Press, 2020).

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Author Notes

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Mahdi, Waleed, *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation* (Syracuse University Press, 2020).

Arab American Studies is a relatively new field in terms of academic disciplines, and Waleed Mahdi's *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation* contributes to the small but growing number of works on representations of Arab Americans in media. In one of the book's important interventions, Mahdi argues that we cannot understand Arab American cultural citizenship solely through a national context, which is not the only locus of identity. He demonstrates how Arab American Otherness is not just an outcome of US Orientalist and racialized histories, but rather "imagines Arab American Otherness as an outcome of the polarized cultural imaginations of "Self" and "Other" that exist in both US and Arab nationalist narratives" (5). While these are recognizable binary distinctions that have been previously studied in the literary context (see Carol Fadda Conrey, Wail Hassan, and Steven Salaita), Mahdi ingeniously capitalizes on the force of popular and niche cinematic representation to understand how these polarizing dynamics play out on the silver screen. *Arab Americans in Film* is the first book length treatment of Arab Americans in cinema that considers the US film industry alongside Egyptian cinema, the largest producer of Arabic-language films in the world. Additionally, Mahdi addresses the conflation of Muslim and Arab identities in the US context wherein Islam is racialized as nonwhite and portrayed as antithetical to Americanness, and therefore his work adds to the study of religion and film because it directly relates to representations of Islam.

The two main objectives of the book are to unsettle the optic of the nation state as the chief category of analysis, and to then analyze post 9/11 films that "offer representations with alternative narratives of Arab American citizenship and belonging, ones that defy mapping according to the

reductive binaries of Hollywood and Egyptian cinemas” which takes as a given a “chasm between Arab Americans and their American and Arabic identities” (6). Drawing on the work of Nadine Naber, Evelyn Alsultany, and Carol Fadda-Conrey, Mahdi reads Arab Americanness in a transnational context through juxtaposing Hollywood and Egyptian cinema. He also builds on the work of the late scholar, Jack Shaheen, whose foundational work analyzes decades of cinema and comics through Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism.

The first two chapters give broad historical surveys of Hollywood and Egyptian cinema and the number of films that Mahdi analyzes is impressive and sweeping. In the first chapter on Hollywood, Waleed traces the long history of Orientalist representations, including the racialization of Arabs as nonwhite, homogenous, and not belonging to the nation. He then turns to ensuing shifts in representation in the 1970s onward influenced by foreign policies and events such as the Six Day War, the 1972 attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, and the Gulf Wars. Of interest to religious studies scholars in this chapter and subsequent chapters, is the blurring of Islam and Arabness in US media, and the portrayal of Islam as terroristic, inherently violent, and antidemocratic. All of which are regularly articulated, from the 1970s onward, through pro-Israel and Zionist propaganda (a detailed and vital section of the chapter). The second chapter reviews Egyptian cinema, arguing that the filmmaking industry has “actively resisted the perceived US cultural imperial project represented by Hollywood” and is critical of the American Dream and its neoliberal economies (100). Yet the chapter concludes that the depictions of Arab American characters are ultimately reductive. Egyptian Americans are presented with a choice: alienation and corruption versus home, authenticity, and belonging. The very fact of the choice renders Arab and American identities as fundamentally incompatible.

The following three chapters focus in on one to three post 9/11 films for closer analysis. When discussing representations of Arab Americans in mainstream media, the overwhelming tendency is to use 9/11 as a chronological marker, dividing the subject into pre and post 9/11 national contexts. *Arab Americans in Film* acknowledges the magnitude of this event for Arab Americans, while challenging the notion that 9/11 is a watershed moment in terms of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism in the US. Chapter Three analyzes Jeffrey Nachmanoff's *Traitor* (2008), arguing that even post 9/11 Hollywood films that challenge one-dimensional portrayals of Arab American characters still rely on post 9/11 anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism and national security as the context for their stories, and emphasize the characters' patriotism as the redeeming quality that binds them to the nation. Chapter Four analyzes Adel Adeeb's *Laylat el-Baby Doll* (2008) and describes how the film disrupts the binaries he describes in Chapter Two and is "more reflective of the diasporic public spheres which its Arab characters continue to negotiate for a sense of cultural citizenship in a globalized yet heavily nationalistic world" (166). He notes how the characters use fatal and neoliberal modes of diasporic activism and by doing so, "opens the door for imagining what it may be like to be part of a US-based Arab diaspora, but also questions whether the United States and Egypt are willing to accommodate this sort of cultural citizenship" (158). This question leads to the final chapter and Arab American self-representation.

The final chapter analyzes three post 9/11 films made by Arab American filmmakers: Hesham Issawi's *AmericanEast* (2007), Cherian Dabis's *Amreeka* (2009), and Sam Kadi's *The Citizen* (2012). Incorporating themes of exclusion and experiences of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism, as well as critiques of state and police surveillance, these films take on the illusionary promises of the American Dream. Mahdi begins by investigating the type-casting challenges of Arab American actors, positing that because US filmmaking "capitalizes on a sense of Arab

Americans' post 9/11 visibility" they are rendered "professionally invisible" (172). The chapter includes a comprehensive look at Arab American filmmaking and the work of prominent Arab American actors, in addition to its focus on how these three specific films work to provide counternarratives to the stereotypes of Hollywood and Egyptian cinema. In the epilogue, Mahdi turns to a theme that I hope increases in future film scholarship: films made by and about Arab Americans that are not limited by the post 9/11 context or terrorism. He briefly looks to two films, Rola Nashef's *Detroit Unleaded* (2013) and Cherien Dabis' *May in the Summer* (2013), that explore gendered social norms in Arab immigrant communities and are made with Arab American audiences in mind.

The strengths of the book are its careful attention to class and economics, and to national contexts and mythologies. Written in a straightforward style, this is not a heavily theoretical book, nor does it delve deeply into genres, aesthetics, or filmmaking; rather, it focuses on plot, character development, and imagery. In such a comprehensive work, its broad strokes are areas for future elaboration. For example, the book attends to race vis a vis Arabness, but not to the complexities of US and Egyptian racial hierarchies and histories of anti-Blackness. In the chapter on *Traitor*, with its Black, Arab protagonist, Mahdi notes the importance of the character's African American heritage and how it disrupts binaries in the film, but absent is a more nuanced analysis of race established by scholars like Sylvia Chan-Malik, Theri Pickens, and Su'ad Abdul Khabeer. The book's discussions of gender would benefit from a more explicitly intersectional, feminist framing; a consideration of how Western feminism is deployed against Muslim and Arab women; and a more critical investigation of the interplay between race, class, gender, and sexuality. As examples, the book describes how the rape of a woman symbolizes the US as violent, and how castration is used as a metaphor for invasion, while glossing over the metaphoric use of sexual violence. In

another section, the book discusses how the ubiquitous representation of US women as licentious creates a binary between Egyptian innocence versus American promiscuity. These are opportunities to explore how nationalist narratives are wedded to heteronormativity and gendered social norms, and to examine the homophobia and misogyny inherent in using the emasculation of men and the violation of women as tropes. In fact, the constellation of rich ideas and detailed, wide-ranging film archive is a goldmine for other scholars to begin to delve into transnational analysis with other critical studies bends, e.g., ecocritical studies, transnational feminist/queer studies, disability studies, and so on.

Arab Americans in Film stands out as a valuable resource and a starting point for conversation about film and representation. Together, the chapters introduce readers to the history of Arab Americans in film more broadly, making it an important contribution to film studies. By using Hollywood, Egyptian, and Arab American cinema as sites of comparison, Mahdi enables readers to apprehend transnational contexts. He describes the contours of Arab American cultural citizenship as an “ever-changing amalgamation of thoughts, attitudes and positions that result from Arab Americans’ cross-cultural and multidimensional positionality” (212-213). Readers are thus able to engage with the dynamism of Arab American cultural citizenship, as the book traces the various forms it takes within a multitude of intersecting histories, and how these forms are translated onto our screens. The epilogue makes a move that I am always grateful for in books that cover huge swaths of territory, both in terms of time and geography: it invites scholars to build on his work and lays out paths of inquiry. Arab American filmmaking is only growing, and Mahdi ends by posing the question of what a future aesthetics of Arab American filmmaking could be.