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To Be or Not To Be Arab in London

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Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity

By Ramy M.K. Aly

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In an era of migration and anxiety, if not hysteria, about terrorism, it is useful to examine how Arab people in the West understand and construct their identity. Ramy Aly undertakes just such a project in his *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity*, which he acknowledges is something of an autoethnography based on his own experiences as an Arab living in Britain.

As he explains on the first page, his position is that “Arabness, like all other categorical labels, is best understood not as a form of authentic ‘being’ but as repertoires of ‘doing,’ achieved through the imperfect repetition of culture over time and space” (1). Treating ‘Arabness’ as a performance rather than an essence, his analysis is informed by Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity and on gender heteronormativity. The negotiation of ‘Arabness’ in Britain is naturally situated within British concepts and practices of multiculturalism and racial/ethnic identity; in fact, he notes that “Arab” was added as an official category to the 2011 census. In Britain—and to an extent in the United States—the effect of identity politics is the notion that racial/ethnic “communities” are real and that they “must parade their differences and showcase their foods, smells, clothes, traditions, colors and thus their distinctiveness in order to be recognized and incorporated into the consciousness of the nation” and consequently, “The idea of having or possessing an ethnicity, of being part of a group, is so embedded and naturalized that we see ethnicity and ethnic groups everywhere” (30)—even where they do not (yet) exist. This is what he regards as the discourse and practice of “ethnonormativity,” an obvious correlate to Judith Butler’s (1990) ideas on gender heteronormativity.

Aly begins in the first chapter by illustrating how and why such a settled and essential “Arab identity” has never existed in London and perhaps cannot exist. He traces the history of Arab migration since the early twentieth century, including the founding of Arab associations and publications. Of course, despite their own attempts to forge a pan-Arab identity, Arabs in London (and in the Middle East) were

and are a highly diverse demographic, who come from different countries with different traditions. Insofar as London's Arabs could be viewed "as fundamentally unified not simply by their culture but also by their politics," such a simplification required ignoring the "divisive and contested nature" of the Arab diaspora (41). The depth of the differences became apparent when wealthy Gulf state tourists and investors descended on London after the 1970s, distinctly different in look and lifestyle from the previous Arab-descended Londoners who had been in the country, in some cases, for generations. More recently, waves of migrants escaping oppression and war in the Middle East have further complicated the complexion of the community of Arabs in London.

"It is no wonder that I could find no coherent 'Arab community' in Britain," Aly concludes at the end of the chapter. Throughout the rest of the book, he follows London Arabs to three specific sites—British schools and universities (chapter two), *Shisha* or smoking cafés (chapter three), and dance parties (chapter four). In each context he weaves in his own fieldwork observations, offering extensive interview quotations and theoretical commentary, invariably and inevitably linking "Arab" identity with gender and class. Accordingly, he also investigates not only the more visible male Arabs but also women, who naturally have their own life-courses but whose gender and sexuality are especially significant sites for the contestation of Arabness. In fact, he appreciates that "it would be difficult not to see how these heterosexualizing demands are inflected by ethnonormativity. Together with class these are the building blocks of identitarianism" (96).

However, he is quick to stress that local Arabs do not perceive themselves as simply enacting an "Arab identity", rather, "becoming an 'Arab man' or 'Arab woman' is part of a project of cultural survival and social intelligibility, and [...] Arab identity is not an essence or a cause of behaviors and dispositions but an instrumental reaction to being hailed and subjected by social institutions, hegemonic gendered norms, national and international politics and media representations" (70). Nor does Islam offer a simple solution, not only because of differences in religious traditions and beliefs but also because of the presence of non-Arab Muslims in the region, such as South Asians and Somalis, whom London Arabs—especially Arab women—avoid.

Despite the fact that Aly eschews concepts like identity and ethnicity as British multiculturalist categories rather than as naturally emerging from Arabs, he cannot help but notice that, at least in Arab student societies, "being Arab [...] was now about 'Arab ethnicity' in Britain" and not, for instance, about Arab politics (135). He also grasps with his observation that London Arabs cannot help but recycle and re-appropriate some of the Western, indeed Orientalist, impressions of Arabness, often highly gendered ones like belly dancing. In the end, as one short-lived British-Arab magazine stated, "We are hybrids.... We are not a race and therefore not easily identified. We must therefore identify ourselves" (176).

Yet Aly rejects a "constructivist" approach to the question of Arabs' place in Britain, preferring, as the book's title indicates and as described here, a performative approach to "how one might become an 'Arab' or *do Arabness* in London" (195, emphasis added) that is, to "'everyday Arabness,' a cultural identification experienced in everyday settings" and to "projects of social intelligibility and cultural

survival, rather than Arab identity or identities” (214). For this purpose, he leans quite heavily on Western cultural theory, including Judith Butler, Derrida, Bakhtin, and even Freud and Lacan. I am always a bit troubled when authors try to force ethnographic materials through such theoretical lenses. He also includes a fair amount of comparative references to other cultures and ethnographies, extending what is still a relatively short book (214 pages). Despite these concerns, it is hard to imagine that any anthropologist would disagree with his fundamental claim, that Arabness in London (or anywhere else for that matter) is neither an essence nor a finished project but an ongoing process of navigation and performance. Since his work is, as he reminds us, the first such study of London’s Arabs, it is an important contribution not only to the anthropology of Arab identity but also to anthropological critiques of multiculturalism and liberal identity regimes.

Works Cited:

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.

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