Review
Reviewed Work(s): New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States by Therí A. Pickens
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Theri A. Pickens’s *New Body Politics* is an insightful study of the underpinnings of racism, sexism, and ableism. Pickens focuses on Arab American and African American bodies and highlights how they inform each other in a United States cultural context. She underscores the reciprocal relationship between bodies and bodily functions, and she examines their political connotations through the lens of disability studies. Pickens examines the gap between the normal and the pathological, and deconstructs how stereotypes of Black and Arab bodies are constructed. Her work offers an interdisciplinary insight into how bodies become the medium to access the world. She contends that “the flesh not only comprises the world and helps one make sense of that world but is also beholden to and constrained by that social, cultural, and political world” (1). Drawing on American Studies, comparative ethnic studies, literary and cultural studies, gender studies, disability studies, and phenomenology, this work offers a much-needed understanding into how Arab and Black bodies mark, and are marked by, the world. Pickens’s analysis underscores how Black and Arab physiques unpack the problematic ideology of the nation-state while displacing concepts of whiteness, maleness, and able-bodiedness disguised as normalcy (9).

In the first section, Pickens illuminates how fleeting embodied experiences, such as breathing and touching, serve as mediums of resistance that critique war, poverty, and the nation-state. In Chapter one, “Respiration Resistance; Suheir Hammad’s Invocation of Breath,” Pickens analyzes Suheir Hammad’s poetry and highlights how she mobilizes breath to discuss the political scenario of occupied Palestine. She argues that the fragility of the body and embodied experience are central to sociopolitical discourse; she highlights the body as a volatile object of inquiry and explores the fragile body as a site of resistance. This chapter sheds light on transitory embodied experience, such as respiration, and brilliantly traces how it transforms into an act of resistance and reclamation. Chapter two, “Try a Little Tenderness: Tactile Experience in Danzy Senna and Alicia Erian,” explores the ephemeral experience of touch. Pickens examines bodies in contact through Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead* (2005) and Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* (2004) while examining how the boundaries of the physical body are constituted by touching and by being touched. She investigates how the tactile function and sight constitute mixed, raced subjectivity and rearticulates national belonging whereas whiteness is decentralized. Pickens details how gender and race are culturally located through

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these texts while underscoring how ethnicity is constructed in contemporary America. She theorizes physical contact as a more representative sense-making model than vision while questioning the optic function and the visual construction of citizenship. Pickens queries whether belonging can be construed through touch rather than through sight through these texts (45).

The next section moves forward to explore how illness is constructed in and on the racially othered body. In Chapter three, “Unfitting and Not Belonging; Feeling Embodied and Being Displaced in Rabih Alameddine’s Fiction,” Pickens scrutinizes the hospital as a space of exile and displacement. Alameddine’s characters subvert normalcy and refuse to subscribe to it; they resist cure, healing, and belonging while questioning medical authority. Pickens deftly articulates the complexities underlying the nature of cure, care, and authority while accentuating the complex relationship between embodiment and belonging in this section. Chapter four, “Beyond 1991: Magic Johnson and the Limits of HIV/AIDS Activism,” deliberates about how the nation normalizes the body and determines which bodies are acceptable in the public sphere. Pickens examines how Johnson’s black and athletic body is construed to dispel rumors about AIDS and to create awareness about HIV. Johnson displaces the traditional conception of health that is founded on physical markers of illness, Pickens contends, by demonstrating that sickness need not necessarily be visible; he also dispels the rumor associated with HIV and homosexuality by presenting himself as a heterosexual man. Johnson’s narrative questions the stereotype of the hypersexualized and super-able Black male athlete; he becomes the “off-limits sex symbol” who strives to spread AIDS awareness, in Pickens’ estimation. His heterosexuality and healthy appearance normalizes HIV/AIDS and the risks associated with it. Johnson’s faith in his healthy body to promote prevention, Pickens concludes, is a short-lived success as his body lacks the physical markers of fragility associated with illness (111).

The final chapter, “The Big C Meets the Big O: Pain and Pleasure in Breast Cancer Narratives,” weaves together the major ideas discussed thus far through the cancer memoirs of Audre Lorde and Evelyne Accad. Pickens argues that Lorde and Accad mobilize pain to undermine the medical establishment. They seek comfort in their non-normative, disfigured, and disabled bodies, and they choose to put their scarred bodies on display to reclaim disabled embodiment. Pickens emphasizes how Lorde and Accad draw attention to sexual pleasure and the erotic as healing mechanisms that reduce the pain of cancer treatment. Their disfigured and mutated bodies displace femininity through the amputation of breasts, which represent sexuality and fertility, to accentuate illness, vulnerability, and death (120). Pickens argues how Lorde and Accad translate pain through language; they refuse to allow pain to collapse language and make the tortured subject invisible.
Their writing thwarts the medical regime’s ability to define and categorize their bodies; it offers instead, an affirmation and acceptance of the scarred body and disabled experience of people of color.

This book is compulsory reading for those interested in the intersections of nationalism, race, gender, and ethnic studies. It opens a much-needed discussion in the field of disability studies that predominantly engages with white male bodies. This interdisciplinary approach examines how racial, gendered, and able-bodied stereotypes inform the agenda of nationalism while exploring how non-normative Black and Arab bodies displace citizenship in the contemporary United States. It voices the need to reexamine abject, mutated, infertile, homosocial, and incapacitated bodies as a critique of the socio-political construction of normalcy. It stresses contested citizenship for Blacks and Arabs in America while highlighting how racial and embodied difference is normalized through the narrative of American exceptionalism. Pickens brilliantly weaves together matters of race, gender, ability, and ethnicity in this scholarly work and elicits an integrative and complex analysis of non-white and non-normative embodiment. New Body Politics is a bold and new venture that brings together disability studies and U.S minority literature; this is an important comparative study of African American and Arab American literatures that draws attention to the reciprocal relationship of the body and the political sphere.

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