REVIEW OF

New Body Politics


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Theri A. Pickens’ (2014) New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States is a politically complex, culturally nuanced, and historically informed study of raced corporeality, based on a comparative analysis of African American and Arab American identities. The author critically addresses the whole array of identity politics, intersecting the concepts of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and ability. She problematizes the very notion of intersectional identity, and poses some original questions about the everyday embodied experiences – such as breathing, touching, illness, pain, and death – and their cultural, social, and political significance. Analyzing corporeality as an immediate constituent of a political discourse, Pickens exercises critique of the nation state, exile, culture, positionality, institutional particularities, as well as the domestic and international politics. Using critical race theory, critical cultural analysis, elements of ethnic, gender, and feminist studies, Arab American and African American literary studies, as well as the field of phenomenology; New Body Politics offers an engaging interdisciplinary conversation, whose relevance and salience in the contemporary US (and the world) culture can hardly be underestimated.

A clearly manifested focus of bodies as produced by and productive of historical and contemporary political discourse is the book’s signature trait. With that research focus, the author problematizes the notions of agency, representation, power, and privilege. She addresses the boy as representative of both its (culturally- and ethnically- determinative) family, and – allegorically – of the entire nation-state. Locating the body in the US context of the already problematic phenomenon of fluid diversity, the author brings the typically marginalized groups of the Arabs and the Blacks into a scholarly conversation with each other, by means of suggesting a certain repetitive universality of their respective marginalization, exclusion, representation, and resistance. The comparative analysis of multiple (predominately literary) texts representing these two demographically distinct groups suggests that – regardless of their racial and ethnic difference – in the political and ideological context of the Unites States, African American and Arab American bodies have been similarly raced, classes, gendered, and dis/abled. Relaying on Moraga and Anzaldúa’s “theory in the flesh”1 as well as Alcoff’s “visible identities,”2 the author aims to challenge the traditional mechanisms of racism, sexism, and ableism. Referring to the intertwined history of the Arab and African Americans, the author addresses and eventually challenges what she defines as “historically based but limited options: competition, hierarchies of whiteness, or replacement paradigms” (5). In that context, Pickens further addresses the intertwined issues of immigration, citizenship, and naturalization laws, as well as access to economic capital, symbolic whitewashing, and class travel.

A nuanced understanding of history and its impact of representation and interpretation
of Arab and African American identities is a notable strength of the book. The author explains how xenophobia is always space- and time-sensitive, and locates the reader in the various historical and geographical contexts, ranging from the 1967 (aka the Six-Day War), to the days of American segregation, South African apartheid, Israel/Palestine conflict, 9/11, election of the first African American president, no name a few. Providing those contexts allows the reader to better understand the concepts of “white privilege,” “white supremacy,” passing,” as well as make sense of the by now common expression “Arabs are the new Blacks.”

Another remarkable particularity of the book is the author’s engagements with the established scholars in the field – in particular, the powerful voices of those traditionally affected on both – Arab and African American – sides. Those voices include Toni Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Audre Lorde, Barbara Nimri Aziz, and Suheir Hamad, among countless others. Morrison’s insights on Americanization and maltreatment of the Blacks in the Unites States are particularly insightful for understanding Hammad’s signature work *Born Palestinian, Born Black*. The author pairs Black and Arab narratives because, she manifests, “rethinking this ideology challenges the doxic seduction of whiteness, maleness, and ablebodiness masquerading as normalcy” (9). Arab American and African American women writers of color provide a significant common ground in their exploration of intersectional identity, addressed in the book.

The books consists of several chapters, the first starting with the corporeal act which defines life – aka breathing – and ending with the act of death. In-between the beginning and the end of life, the author also analyses respiration, touch, caress, rape, illness, and pain. The first two chapters analyze breathing and touching, respectively, in their relation to critique of war, ideology, and poverty. The most prominent parts of these chapters are represented by the author’s in-depth analysis of tropes and symbols, representing the “Other,” and expressed through powerful ethnically-specific metaphors of corporeality, such as, for example, correlating breath – aka life – with the existence of Palestine; interpreting derogatory stereotypes such as *towelhead*, *camel-jockey*, and *sand niggger* as biased cultural signifiers, or associating blackness with self-identifying as a social problem.

In the following two chapters, Pickens adds another category – ability – to her intersectional analysis of Black and Arab identities by introducing illness, politicizing hospitals as spaces of negotiation of self, other, and belonging, and overall contributing to the discussion of both hybrid and fluid identity. These discussions are not shy of good examples, including but not limited to discussions of discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS as well as breast cancer, bodily normativity, and its correlation with the raced and gendered identity. In her analysis, Pickens refers to “queer phenomenology” as suggested by Sara Ahmed, to elaborate on the concept of positionality, definitions of self, other, and self in relation to other and a specific location. Most importantly, the author attempts to negotiate a relationship between being displaces and feeling embodied. Overall, the chapters are rich in literary texts that include DEP poetry, traditional poetry, hip-hop, short stories, longer novels, as well as film adaptations or relevant fiction. The book also offers – somewhat surprisingly – a detailed analysis of Magic Johnson’s case and HIV/AIDS activism coverage. To overarch those diverse sources and subjects, Pickens suggests that “one cannot have domination of bodies without domination of discourse” (21), and challenges the reader with a question what happens to the body as a claimed site of resistance if the body is violated.

The weakest part of the book is its lack of a clearly manifested focus and a more accurate
negotiation of data the author chose to analyze. The title serves as an over-generalized portmanteau poster for intersectional negotiation of Arab and African American identities, yet— with all due respect to the intertwined history of the two groups—the author fails to explain why she chose those particular pieces of literature, how they speak to each other, and what she aims to communicate with her particular selection. For example, Hammad’s work is extremely relevant to the post-9/11 rhetoric as well as today’s discussion of the arguably post-racial society. Besides, Hammad’s work is in many ways auto-biographical and political in its bridging of the personal and the public. Towelhead, on the contrary, is a purely fictional novel, and—it is significantly more dated. If the author chooses such different pieces, the reader deserves to understand what the purpose of such selection is, what the implications and outcomes of those discussions are in their togetherness, and how they are representative of the larger social reality. Since the title suggests that narration and negotiation of African and Arab Identities is dedicated to the contemporary United States, it would be useful to know where that contemporariness starts for the author, and why.

Another somewhat unclear research approach of the author concerns the lack of a more logical and nuanced negotiation of femininity and masculinity foci in the book. The title does not specify that the overwhelming majority of the cases addressed in the volume are about female corporeality, and the female (Arab or Black) body being subject of patriarchy. Much in the book reads like a critical feminist analysis, focusing on the exclusively female victimized body—and by doing so, neglecting the important discourses surrounding the Arab and the Black masculinity (as addressed, for example, in multiple works of Bryant Keith Alexander, among many others). Therefore, when chapter 4—the only chapter that covers a case with a male protagonist—brings up Magic Johnson and shifts the discussion towards a non-fictional case focusing on black masculinity, the reader is left wondering how Magic Johnson ended up in that fiction-and-female-centered discussion in the first place. Chapter five, contrastively, covers breast cancer… Although the diversity of the case studies referring to intersectionality of identity is certainly appealing, the logic behind the selection and the consequent underdeveloped “so what” is somewhat confusing.

The conclusion of the book is critical and thought-provoking. It invites discussions of hybrid identities, double (or in-between) consciousness, whiteness, racism, and hierarchy of color. In addition to politicizing raced and gendered bodies, it also politicizes contemporary history, policymaking, and challenges institutionalized and often overseen racism. Overall, New Body Politics offers a comprehensive and very informative study of raced and gendered corporeality, politicized identity, and negotiation of the body as a site of resistance. Well-written and intellectually engaging, this original research project merges an impressive variety of diverse sources and data, as well as a number of scholarly disciplines. On that note, this book provides a worthwhile perspective for critical race theorists, gender and feminists studies; critical cultural and identity scholars; as well as historians, ethnographers, sociologists, and literary scholars.
(NOTES)

9Ibid.