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*New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* by Therí A. Pickens (review)

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THERÍ A. PICKENS, *New Body Politics: Narrating Arab and Black Identity in the Contemporary United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Pp. 164. \$140.00 cloth.

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Framing her insightful analysis around key questions regarding corporeality, sociopolitical positions, and race, Therí Pickens maps out in this important and timely book some vital connections between Arab and Black bodies as they are represented, experienced, and lived in the US. With a focus on a selection of literary and cultural texts by and about Arab American and African American writers, *New Body Politics* is the first book-length study to map out a comparative approach to the analysis of Arab and Black identities, with careful attention given to concepts of “*embodiment* and *embodied experience*” (p. 1). An emphasis on the everyday, the “quotidian,” and the “fragile” aspects of these embodied experiences and the ways in which they shape the political places this study at an important and underexplored scholarly juncture that encompasses various fields of study, including disability studies, gender studies, critical race theory, African American studies, and Arab American studies (p. 1, 2).

To underscore the linkages and resonances between Arab American and African American embodiments, the book focuses on texts that directly speak to shared experiences of racialization, invisibility, and gendered violence as articulated in an array of Arab American and African American literary, cultural, and political texts. Building on the relational framework set up in the book’s introduction, with the example it provides of the resonances between Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and Joseph Geha’s short story collection *Through and Through* (1990), chapters one and two place texts by and about African Americans and Arab Americans in direct conversation with each other. In reading Palestinian American poet and activist Suheir Hammad’s work in the context of the Black feminist poetics of June Jordan and hip hop conventions in chapter one, Pickens emphasizes the life-affirming resilience of cross-racial and cross-cultural genealogies of struggle against militarized states and war violence. In chapter two, Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* is analyzed alongside Alicia Erian’s *Towelhead* to highlight a revisionary politics and the “liberatory potential of bodies in contact” that animates these novels’ depictions of and response to sexual and racial violence (p. 12). With an emphasis on the radical potentials of the body as a physical and political entity, the rest of the book further delves into how depictions of bodily functions such as “[r]espiration, touch, illness, pain, and

death” (p. 11) in various literary, cultural, and social discourses confronts dominant constructions of normalcy and health, especially as modeled and represented by white identities. Chapter three focuses on portrayals of hospitals, terminal illness, death, and bodily pain in Lebanese American writer Rabih Alameddine’s fiction, while chapter four analyzes the rhetoric of HIV/AIDS activism, specifically as deployed in texts (autobiographies, magazine articles, and pamphlets) by and about African American sports star Magic Johnson. The fifth and final chapter returns to the first two chapters’ textual pairing framework by reading *The Wounded Breast: Intimate Journeys Through Cancer* (2001) by Lebanese American scholar Evelyne Accad alongside *The Cancer Journals* (1997) by Caribbean American feminist writer Audre Lorde. The wide range of texts handled in *New Body Politics*, and the astute critical lens through which they are used to trace and foreground cross-racial and cross-cultural conversations between and among African Americans and Arab Americans renders Pickens’ intervention a pivotal one in comparative ethnic and critical race studies.

In pursuing such critical pairings and analyses, Pickens is careful not to collapse Black and Arab experiences into a general and homogenous whole without regard to the historical and political specificities particular to each minority group. She is also attentive to showing that this relational approach is not meant to portray the racialization of Arab Americans as a mere historical continuation or a current phase of the discriminatory racial logics confronted by African Americans before them. Rather, what Pickens’ striking analyses evocatively stress throughout the book is the simultaneity of racialization and oppression of Blacks and Arabs throughout seemingly different political and historical moments.

At the heart of Pickens’ discussion of relations between Arab Americans and African Americans is the ways in which access to citizenship, economic capital, and immigration histories have directly shaped the status of these minoritized groups along the axis of white hierarchies in the US. Arab American immigration, for instance, is characterized by a period in the early twentieth century during which Arab Americans lobbied, through a series of court cases referred to as the prerequisite cases, to be officially classified as white. This classification persists today even though it is to a large extent contested by many Arab Americans who regard themselves as racialized minorities. Nevertheless, Arab Americans’ immigrant histories and their relative privileged access to economic capital have often resulted in schisms and tensions in Arab-Black relations. Pickens, however, is right to argue that placing literary and cultural texts by and about Arab Americans and African Americans in conversation with each other overrides and challenges the pitting of these groups against each other. She astutely points to three “historically based but limited” narratives that have defined Arab American and African American relations, namely the “competition, hierarchies of

whiteness, [and] replacement paradigms” (p. 5). For instance, in addition to competing with African Americans for resources or possessing the relative privilege of being legally white, Arab Americans have been perceived, particularly after 9/11, to have replaced Blacks “as the most disenfranchised group in America” (p. 8), a paradigm that Pickens effectively argues against throughout her discussion.

In bringing the selected texts together in *New Body Politics*, Pickens underscores in crucial and timely ways the confluences and intersections of US racism, Orientalism, and imperialism as they are inscribed and reinscribed on raced and gendered bodies. Pickens’ intervention points to the limits of succumbing to compartmentalized knowledges about minoritized groups like African Americans and Arab Americans. In doing so, she builds on the important history of cross-racial and transnational solidarities made evident by the works of scholars and activists like Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and June Jordan, at the same time opening up promising scholarly vistas for further studies on the intertwined histories of US minorities. The particular emphasis on the fragility and vulnerability of raced bodies through a phenomenological focus on bodily touch, breath, illness, and death gives this study a durable immediacy and tactility that are hard to ignore.