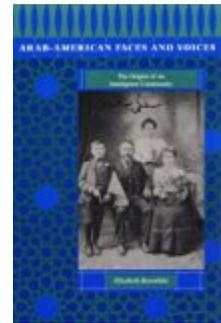




Elizabeth Boosahda. *Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xix + 284 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-70920-1; ISBN 978-0-292-70919-5.

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## The Arabs of Oak Hill, Worcester

In *Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community*, Elizabeth Boosahda provides a vivid illustration of Arab immigration to the United States and the processes of integration and assimilation taking place thereafter. The work relays the origins and history of Arab American communities in North and South America that had links to New England and specifically to Worcester, Massachusetts, where large Arab American communities were established. Boosahda's purpose is to relay the daily lives of immigrants coming from Greater Syria to the United States in the period from 1880 to 1915 and to challenge "long held myths and stereotypes about Arabs" (p. xiii). Diligence, hard work, and thrift are among the oft-repeated descriptions that characterize this Worcester community. Boosahda illustrates the adventurous, entrepreneurial character of Arab men and women, who often came to the United States landless, penniless, and unable to speak English. While some worked in factories or city governments, others became small tradesmen or merchants. The staple figure was the peddler, traveling from door to door, selling lace, dry goods, threads and pins to housewives across the country. Men and women alike peddled, and their efforts became launching pads to successful careers. Chapters 1 through 4 describe the everyday lives of the immigrants who arrived in the United States from 1880 to 1915. Chapter 1 provides historical background on the Ottoman province of Syria, which included the district of Mount Lebanon and the province of Palestine. Chapter 2 describes the reasons behind and the processes

of migration. Chapter 3 details how Arabs, Italians, Irish, and French immigrants lived together in Worcester. Chapter 4 covers the various types of work Arab Americans engaged in: peddling, small business, textiles, and medicine. It includes a short section on Arab-American involvement in labor strikes in Massachusetts in 1899 and 1912.

Chapters 5 through 7, covering the years from 1880 to 1989, include the contributions and achievements that Arab Americans made and the legacies and customs they brought with them. Chapter 5 covers aspects of tradition, education, and culture: marital practices, women's positions, family tasks, community life, cooking, attitudes towards literacy, and music and dance. Chapter 6 covers the process of Americanization through racial categorization, citizenship, military service, community organizations, and participations in public events. The final chapter provides an overview of the legacies of the Arabic language and food, and lists public Arab American personas and their contributions to New England society. Although at times reinforcing women's performance of obedience in the public sphere, Boosahda does successfully undo certain stereotypes of Arab women who, when single, were often the first in the family to emigrate. Her chapter on migration provides rare insight into the experiences and biographies of Arab migrants, undertaking the long journey to the United States and the confusion, regulations, and examinations that awaited them on arrival. Boosahda details the various networks of re-

sources, charitable organizations, and religious institutions that Arab immigrants relied on upon arrival in the United States. Throughout the book, Boosahda captures and documents the sights and sounds of turn of the century Worcester. She offers a lively tour of Arab American life replete with colorful anecdotes, photographs, and documents that provide a unique window on daily life.

*Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community* is directed at the general reader and thus necessarily has some limitations. Boosahda provides a historical summary from the Ottoman Empire to the European Mandatory period. While the summary is a useful introduction, its brevity and sharp, disjointed jumps (at one point going from “the millet system” to “missionaries from Massachusetts”) reduce several historical processes into a unified, teleological narrative. Boosahda’s portrayal of life in the province of Syria leaves much to be desired. She explains, for example, that when Arab immigrants were asked why they left their home countries “many admitted they had too much energy and imagination to accept the time-honored way of life that others, family and neighbors never questioned” (p. 19). Such generalizations result in a depiction of Syria and Lebanon as static places where culture and society remain constant through time.

In addition, Boosahda’s emphasis on emigration primarily for the purposes of “adventure and wealth” neglects the complex changes that the Middle East witnessed from 1860 to 1915. As various historians of the Middle East have shown, the later half of the nineteenth century was a dynamic period of social, political, and economic transformation. Greater Syria witnessed uneven integration into the global economy through the Ottoman centralizing policies of the *tanzimat*. Shifts in the world market affected not only Syria’s cities but also its more remote and barely settled rural areas. The Syrian peasantry was immersed at various periods in internecine struggle as well as strikes, campaigns, and communes that called for regional autonomy from the Ottoman Sultanate.[1]

Boosahda’s effort to present an alternate depiction of Arab Americans falters into an apologetic tone that naturalizes and essentializes cultural characteristics. Arab immigrants to the United States are repeatedly said to have “a strict sense of honesty, morality, and a natural feel for commerce” (p. 8). Such depictions leave little room to ponder the differences, complexities, and diversities within Arab communities. Arab Americans are also essentialized to a certain extent, described in

terms of mentalities and psyches, i.e. “literacy was important to the Arab psyche” (p. 104). The “naturalness” of Arab American morality and honesty are compounded by the portrayal of their interaction with the state, which emerges as a benevolent apparatus, compelled by the entrepreneurial (read capitalist) tendencies of their Syrian subjects. Arab Americans, or more accurately, Christian Syrian and Lebanese Americans of Worcester, emerge as an appealing, patriotic “model minority” that was able to assimilate and integrate smoothly in the land of opportunity and wealth. Boosahda’s discussion of work among Arab Americans, for example, concludes in their successful climbing of an economic ladder. Social mobility is depicted as openly available to all, but more readily accessible to Arab Americans because of “commitment, discipline, and the support of family and community” (p. 87).

Boosahda follows a “melting pot” narrative of American immigration. She affirms the United States as a place of multiculturalism and coexistence. Immigrants, either Arab or European, are depicted as seeking and consolidating an “American identity” while preserving a somewhat idealized cultural heritage. Structural inequalities are absent from this narrative. While Boosahda briefly discusses the ambiguous and changing characterization of Arabs as whites or non-whites, the wider lexicon of race and class and its reverberations in U.S. society is strikingly overlooked. Moreover, there is no discussion of the privilege that Christian Arabs, U.S. citizens and upper middle-class Arabs held in their access to whiteness and/or social and material capital. The history of the United States as a colonial settler state and the positions Arab Americans may hold in its various constellations is thus curiously neglected. This absence is at its most ironic when Boosahda depicts the Syrian American Association’s participation in the 1930 parade commemorating the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony: “[The Syrian American Association] entered a float that depicted an American historical scene and won second prize for the best decorated float.... The float was a replica of Diggory Sergeant’s log cabin with his nameplate attached to the outside of the cabin. He lived on the high ridge of Sagatabscot Hill ... known as Union Hill. It was on this elevation that a Native American murdered Diggory Sergeant.... Ten members of the association were on the float dressed as Diggory Sergeant, his wife, and their five children or as Native Americans” (pp. 150-151).

The reenactment of the colonial encounter between settlers and the indigenous population of North America, with Arab Americans identifying with the white settler, is in and of itself fascinating. Unfortunately, Boosahda

describes the event but does not comment or reflect on what it may indicate as far as the Arab Americans in Worcester and their relationship to official American history. In addition, Boosahda spends considerable time listing and commemorating the Arab Americans who served in the two world wars and “subsequent wars” (p. 140). These men she explains “made the supreme sacrifice in the service of our country” (p. 140). Ultimately Boosahda replicates an anxiety to prove “good citizenship” without interrogating the notions and the problematics inherent in citizenship, belonging, identity, patriotism, and otherness.

The idealization of assimilation and “multiculturalism” is at its clearest in the absence of any discussion of the post September 11 reality that Arab Americans experience in the United States. Boosahda brings her narrative up to September 1, 2001 when the United States Postal Service released a first class postage stamp honoring the largest Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr and “paying tribute to the estimated six million American Muslims and 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide” (p. 178). Boosahda does not extend her analysis ten more days to address the World Trade Center attacks and their multiple consequences for Arab Americans through changes in immigration policies, detentions, deportations, FBI investigations, racial profiling, hate crimes, and discrimination.[2]

Boosahda’s work is invested with much passion and a desire to relay the stories and lives of a group of people whose invisibility has been, until recently, a central theme in North America.[3] Boosahda’s work is signifi-

cant in that it makes the Arab Americans of Worcester audible and visible. It also provides a rich example of the possibilities and potential of oral history. Boosahda conducted over two hundred interviews with Arab American immigrants and collected from them a wealth of biographical information as well as photographs and documents. This book does not, however, draw on recent historiography that problematizes Middle Eastern history or the discursive and practical processes of immigration and assimilation/exclusion in the United States. Basic standards of transliteration are ignored, for example. *Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community* will be most compelling to teachers, professors, and general readers; it provides an interesting, vivid, well-written, and accessible introduction to Arab American life.

#### Notes

[1]. Linda Schilcher, “Violence in Rural Syria in the 1880s and 1890s: State Centralization, Rural Integration, and the World Market,” in *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury (Miami: University of Florida Press, 1991).

[2]. Mustafa Bayoumi, “Freedom of Religion Is Being Restricted for Muslim Americans,” *The Progressive Media Project* (January 16, 2002).

[3]. Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Identities: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23 (2000): pp. 37-61.

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