

Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity. Edited by Aly Ramy MK. London: Pluto Press/University of Chicago Press, 2016. 255 pp., \$35.

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Teresa M. Cappiali,
Collegio Carlo Alberto (Italy)

Based on more than 7 years of research in London's Arab community, Ramy Aly's *Becoming Arab in London: Performativity and the Undoing of Identity* investigates how "Arab-ness" has been discursively represented and imagined in Britain. It also shows how Arab youth, born and raised in London, practice their "ethnic identities" and cope with competing discourses about "being" Arab at the intersection with gender and class.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge 1990), Aly explains that *one is not born an "Arab," but becomes one* through the repetition (even though imperfect) of social codes that define what it means to be an "Arab". He relies on Butler's distinction between *performance*—or *how* people *do* or *perform* specific social norms—and *performativity*—or *why* they *do* or *perform* these norms in particular ways. This distinction allows him to explain not only how one becomes "Arab" by reproducing "ethnic" norms, but also how one re-defines these norms through everyday narratives and practices. Aly elaborates on the key concept of ethno-normativity, which represents norms, discourses and practices, which "naturalise the notion of 'ethnicity' and provide it with the status of a proper (ontological) object" (p. 199). Ethno-norms structure both ethnic identity (or socio-political praxis) and individual identity (or sense of self) and compel individuals to conform to ideals of ethnicity (as well as specific ideals of gender and class linked to them) that are considered "normal" by the group (p. 19).

The concept of ethno-normativity allows Aly to uncover two main dimensions at work: first, how the structuring power of competing discourses about "being" Arab in London compels individuals and groups to perform their "Arab-ness" and, second, how and why Arab youth *do* gender, ethnicity and class by using multiple coping strategies to respond to this pressure within specific ethno-norms. Looking at the first dimension, the author explains that the structuring power of competing

discourses about “ethnic” belonging in London is produced and reproduced in the specific context of Britain’s racial governmentality, or the race relations paradigm. With the support of institutions such as the media, the education system, and the wider society more generally, the state, through this paradigm, conveys the idea that Britain is divided in ethnic groups and communities that are in competition over their “ethnic” distinctiveness (p. 205).

Furthermore, the race relations paradigm contributes to the construction of “Arabs” not only as “a racially and geographically diverse identity” (and thus as “non-white” and “non-English”), but also as “‘hidden’ or ‘unintelligible’ to the state and society” (p. 197). These discourses are reflected in the ways “Arab youth” are, for instance, constructed as “ethnic subjects” and “racialized others” in schools. In Chapter 2, for instance, Aly explains that “Arab youth” learn first and foremost *to become Arabs* in school, as their peers play a key role in reminding them over and over again that they are neither “white” nor “English” (often through derogatory expressions, such as “You, dirty Arab!”). Additionally, this paradigm contributes to the reinforcement of a second, complementary structuring discourse deployed by parents and the communities more generally. This second narrative conveys idealized norms of Arab manhood and womanhood that are considered fundamentally distinct from “white” British and compels the youth to conform to them.

The performativity perspective allows Aly to explain the second dimension ethno-normativity introduced above—that is, *how* and *why* the Arab youth *do* (or *perform*) gender, ethnicity and class in their every-day practices. In his view, the youth can not only reproduce cultural traditions in the face of dominant discourses (p. 202), but also re-articulate them by adopting coping strategies to redefine their “Arab” belonging. He shows that while some youth redefine their *identification* and *desire* for their ethnicity, others elude the injunction of being “Arabs” by strategies that he calls *hiding* and *passing (as being English)*. In particular, the two practices of hiding and passing suggest “a practical project of survival within a system of signification where Arab-ness remains inherently negative and stigmatized” (p. 203).

The author’s theorization of performativity, while revealing very well how discourses of “Arab-ness” relate to the ways this latter is practiced and performed by Arab youth born and raised in London, also suffers from one main limitation. According to the author, these discourses are pervasive and enduring, and work together to produce Arabs’ subjectivity

(p. 202). However, the author tends to overestimate the role of structuring discourses at the expense of the agency of the Arab youth themselves. This approach leads him to depict these youth as passive and apolitical. A further theorization of the role of agency and forms of resistance by this youth would have allowed him to explore narratives and practices that are also challenging and transforming the construction of Arabs' "otherness" beyond the ethno-norms imposed by the receiving society and their community. Maybe it would have also allowed him to identify new forms of *doing* outside the cultural reproduction of ethnic belonging, as Fatima El-Tayeb explains very well in *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minnesota 2011).

An important contribution to ethnic studies, *Becoming Arab in London* shows the potential of ethnographic research in uncovering social dynamics of every-day life practices by individuals and communities. This book should be read by scholars from different disciplines who are interested not only in questioning essentialized definitions of ethnicity (and how they are entangled with gender and class), but also challenging how specific groups, and especially "Arabs," have been, and are still being, constructed as "racialized others" in receiving societies today.

***The Muslim Question in Europe: Political Controversies and Public Philosophies.* By Peter O'Brien. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016. 318 pp., \$32.95 (paper).**

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Vincent Lloyd,
Villanova University

One way of approaching discussions of Islam in the West is to probe questions of religious diversity and secularism. Is the West as secular as it presents itself? What of the deep entanglements (symbolic, legal, and financial) of Christian churches and European states? Does the presence of Muslim communities expose the limits of the religious tolerance that is officially espoused? While Peter O'Brien is interested in these questions, he is also, especially, interested in a more fundamental set of questions. O'Brien wonders to what extent the presence of Muslim communities