“Going Transnational: Re-Mapping the Arab American Experience”

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The transnational turn in the fields of American studies and migration studies has been instrumental in foregrounding a de-territorialized space (to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s sense of the term) that challenges the use of the ‘nation’ as a primary category of analysis. Traditional scholarship in area studies (American studies) and ethnic studies (Arab American studies) has relied on this category of analysis to theoretically imagine the Arab American identity as primarily invested in wrestling with such conceptions as assimilation, acculturation, alienation, and exclusion in a U.S. continuum projecting cultural transition from an earlier emphasis on melting-pot as a means for inclusion to a new emerging sense of multiculturalism. This framework has been further complicated by an increasing interest in rooting such an experience in American Orientalist yearnings that render Arab Americans as the racialized, gendered, and sexualized other. It is in this context that I propose a post-nationalist reading of the Arab American image bringing into conversation critical sociocultural and geopolitical issues central to the formation of the Arab identity. At the core of this reading is an intersectional analysis of Arabs’ popularized understanding of nation, class, gender, and sexuality. To illustrate this intersectionality, I conduct content analysis of a popular Egyptian film, Youssef Chahine’s el-’Akhar (The Other) (1999), which mediates an Arab-oriented examination of three particular issues, namely, globalization, materialism, and power. The significance of this study lies in its articulation of a much-needed transnational dimension to help subvert the one-dimensional portrayals of Arabness in U.S. popular culture while delineating 9/11 as a marker of visibility for the Arab American identity.