

**ARAB ROUTES:  
PATHWAYS TO SYRIAN CALIFORNIA**

Sarah M. A. Gualtieri  
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(224 pages, notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index) \$24.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Stacy Fahrenthold

There are certain givens in Arab American history, a set of stories that guide the field's well-trod contours and create consensus around a mythological arc: the Arbeelys were Arab America's first family; New York City's "little Syria" was its capital; peddling formed its economy. These narratives—Mayflowerisms, immigration historians call them—have been held as self-evident in our field, originating in early community studies and repeated in the historiography. A recent upsurge in critical studies of the Arab *mahjar*, however, brings a spate of literature that troubles those metanarratives. What if the heuristics that we adopt as scholars blind us to other histories of Arab America, for instance, of Syrians on the Pacific coast or in the US-Mexico borderlands or in blended Arab-Latinx communities? Sarah Gualtieri's *Arab Routes: Pathways to Syrian California* is a monumental contribution to this debate. Her work lends further depth to the critiques of Atlantocentrism, ethnic essentialism, and peddlers-to-proprietors mythologies that have begun to appear in the subfield. In addition, *Arab Routes* lays out an alternative research agenda, co-creates new archives, and embraces new social historical

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methodologies. In so doing, it presents us with a first history of Syrians in California and offers up “pathways” to reassessing our conceptual toolkits.

*Arab Routes* is arranged episodically, centered on a set of arguments rather than a chronology. Gualtieri’s introduction, “Arab Amairka,” sets out her goal of putting California on the map for Arab American studies, a project in service of a broader hemispheric vision of Syrian migration between California and points south. The transnational ties Syrians forged between migrant colonies in the United States and Latin America represent a major lacuna in this field, driven by older traditions of American exceptionalism in immigration studies and the tendency for scholars to examine Arab Americans apart from their immigrant neighbors. Chapter 1, “The Syrian Pacific,” examines the naturalization records of Syrians who arrived in Los Angeles after living in Mexico. Here, Gualtieri argues that Syrians who took this route represent a previously invisible community, owing to step migration patterns. She builds on her earlier work on whiteness, illustrating the complicating role that Syrians with Mexican nationality played in racial formation in Los Angeles. Syrian Mexicans were “at times too Asian, at others too Mexican, and sometimes not Mexican enough,” and struggles over categorization that occurred south of the border further complicated Syrian racial belongings after their arrival in the United States (37).

Chapter 2 examines the work of Syrian American lawyer George Shibley, who defended Mexican American clients charged in the city’s infamous 1942 Sleepy Lagoon trial, in which seventeen Mexican American youths were indicted for the murder of José Gallardo Díaz and twelve of them (called the 38th Street Boys) were convicted, despite a profound lack of evidence. Shibley played a pivotal role in getting the defendants’ sentences overturned in 1944, arguing that racist profiling had tainted the investigation as well as the court proceedings. The complex interethnic dimensions Gualtieri sketches in chapter 1 are also vivid here, illustrated in the legal advocacy of an individual whose Arab identity was elided from historical memory. Gualtieri’s narrative approach juxtaposes Shibley’s personal history with a broader discussion of interethnic solidarities among Arab Americans and the LA Chicana community. “I have always identified with whatever minority is being picked on at the time,” Shibley proclaimed. This conviction animated his work in criminal defense: in addition to the 38th Street Boys, he represented the Palestinian militant Sirhan Sirhan

and LGBT activist and Mattachine Society founder Dale Jennings (46). In telling the attorney's story, Gualtieri invites readers to reflect on how archival practices condition what stories are thinkable. Reflecting on a 1944 photograph depicting an unnamed Shibley alongside released defendants, for instance, we wonder how naming Shibley would reframe the Sleepy Lagoon case around advocacy networks linking two targeted immigrant communities (54).

The author does similar work in chapter 3, on the *mahranjanat* of Syrian California. These "Syrian fiestas" were a key part of Arab American identity formation even as they occurred within the multiethnic context of Los Angeles county. Gualtieri argues that dismissing the festivals as depoliticized or auto-orientalized spaces leads to the inaccurate notion that Arab immigrants were also merely, in Edward Said's words, "interested in seeing themselves in a harmless folkloric light, tirelessly assimilating and accommodating" (74; Said 1995, 53). Instead, she shows how festivals offered space for community stewardship and preservation of intergenerational ethnic culture. These celebrations were rendered irrelevant only by a dramatic shift in nativist mood against Arab immigrants after the 1967 war, as US media depictions of Arabs pivoted sharply into racist vilification.

Subsequently, Arab American scholarship has labored to retrieve the *mahrajanat* from the erasures of the post-1967 period (90). Chapter 4 draws together the stories of third-generation Arab American scholars and activists as they reclaimed the histories of their grandmothers. Gualtieri explores how the radical activism of the 1980s and 1990s animated new patterns of archival work, a formative moment for Arab American studies as a field. Gualtieri argues that these genealogical projects in Syrian Los Angeles represent a "rearrival" to identification with Arabness, often in the context of Palestinian solidarity (95). At the same time, plural notions of Arabness arose, troubling the "disconnect between archives and history telling" (109), between lived experiences of Arab Los Angeles and the solidifying contours of a historiography positing Arab New York as *the* diaspora story. In immigration history, Gualtieri convincingly argues, narratives can be so powerful that they override what the archives offer. A diverse, plural history of Arab America awaits.

Gualtieri reveals further disjuncture between Arab pasts in California and the dominant historiographical arc in chapter 5, where she examines

Syrian American inflections in classic postwar California photography. Here, she focuses on the Khoury and Auad Café on Muscle Beach (pictured in the image featured on *Arab Routes*' cover). Not only were Arab Americans central to the production of "beach culture" spaces; the silence that envelops them is also the product of historical narration. Gualtieri's Muscle Beach reveals an alternative history, striking a dissonant chord with the field's hegemonic focus on Ellis Island and the New York City "mother colony," shaped by important projects like Alixa Naff's 1962 oral histories or most recently, Rabee Jaber's 2009 novel, *Amerika*. Gualtieri argues that the hegemonic focus on "little Syria" has obscured important lines of inquiry: Khoury's Café had Latin American origins; Naff's interviewees lived not in New York, but in California; and Jaber's protagonist, Marta Haddad, ends up in Pasadena. Gualtieri reveals the field's Atlantocentrism as a set of authorial choices.

The book closes brilliantly in a conclusion, "*Mestizaje* in Arab American Families," where Gualtieri pivots away from Joseph Arbeely—the patriarch of Arab New York's "first family"—to bring to light an obscured figure. Hadji Ali was a tarbush-wearing Arab Muslim who worked for the US Army's Camel Corps in the 1840s, decades before Arbeely came to New York in 1878. Ali's story plays out differently: he marries a Mexican woman and traverses the borderlands between Sonora, Mexico, and Arizona. We are prompted to ask ourselves: why has Arbeely's story resonated with the field, when Ali's has not? Gualtieri powerfully answers that the selection of "certain kinds of firsts" shapes immigration history (140). Mayflowerisms render invisible multitudinous instances of mixed marriages, interethnic solidarities, and both inter- and intra-ethnic cultural conflict, dimensions that can only be more deeply explored if we let go of respectability tropes and long-held stereotypes about *mahjari* life. In a twist, Gualtieri reveals that even the Arbeely family had deep ties to Syrian Los Angeles.

*Arab Routes* is both a starting point for delivering new histories and a field manual for historians navigating the politics of immigrant metanarratives. Gualtieri is invested in Arabizing California as well as in putting Los Angeles on the Arab American map; her book succeeds mightily on both fronts. The author also calls for deeper exploration of Arab Latinidad, a sense of "being Latin American, and expressing this attachment in an Arabized register" (5), a theme that is not unpacked at length in this text but which

sets the stage for further research. Meanwhile, *Arab Routes* is candid in its critiques but also compassionate and unswerving in recognizing that historical work is *never* merely retrieval of the past; it is always the result of “archival transactions,” archival augmentation, or archival co-production. In sum, this book most satisfies in the ways that it unsettles the field’s contours in a way that evokes Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995). When Gualtieri pursues pathways to Syrian California, her mission is to retrieve questions unanswered by earlier generations of scholars and, consequently, by the fields they founded. At a slim 150 pages with copious endnotes to parse, the book will become a meaningful text for scholars, graduate students, or advanced undergraduates in ethnic studies, Middle East studies, and migration history at large.