

Eileen T. Lundy and Edward J. Lundy, eds. *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016. 267 pp. US\$27.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4773-1073-1.

As a once fresh-faced sophomore at a small liberal arts college in New England, I was forced to grapple with what seemed a daunting question: what do I major in? Drawn to its purported freedom of study, in conjunction with the fact that I had (somehow) already acquired multiple credits towards completion of the degree, I settled comfortably on American studies. An emerging interdisciplinary field, American studies has made significant strides in recent decades. Once a field characterized by scholarship exclusively focused on the *United States* of America, American studies now incorporates transnational and hemispheric methodologies and approaches to the United States. What was once, rightly, critiqued for perpetuating ideas of American exceptionalism, now more fully considers the legacies of settler colonialism, slavery and European expansion, interrogating notions of indigeneity, gender, race/ethnicity, and disability as well.

In *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East*, Eileen T. Lundy and Edward J. Lundy embark on the formidable endeavor of tracing the introduction and development of American studies in an unlikely place—the Middle East. As Fulbright scholars and lecturers, they joined the faculty of the American studies program at the University of Jordan (UJ) during the summer of 2003. While teaching in the Middle East, anti-American sentiment was intensifying. In light of the disturbing accounts of torture and abuse in Abu Ghraib, the United States' invasion of Iraq, and the dubious justifications offered by the US government in support of the indefinite detention of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, it seemed almost unfathomable that interest in American studies programs in the Middle East would exist, never mind rise to the extent that it did. Through a compilation of essays composed by those who worked in these programs, *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East*, sets out to explore the dynamics that motivated the establishment of American studies programs in the Arab world.

The first two sections attempt to situate American studies as a broader academic field. Part I—Questions and Challenges and “the American Question” examines the beginnings of American studies as a one-way transfer of information. (27) In this view, the United States is a success story, the archetypal world power, and exalted source of intellectual advancement. “The American Question,” traces American studies from initially being a story of human *encounter*, to its important shift towards the emphasis on offering a comparative lens, particularly in programs outside of the United States.

In the chapter, “The Politics of American-Style Higher Education in the Middle East,” the book diverges greatly from its overarching theme, -- American studies -- and sets up an interesting paradox: although the United States' popularity in the Middle East has been steadily decreasing, “the regional appetite for institutions that bear the label “American” have not experienced a similar decline. (33) This chapter, in particular, with its almost exclusive focus on the “American *university*” abroad, interrogates the notion of an American nation building “project.” Concentrating on such a limited view and understanding of the field, “The Politics of American-Style Higher Education in the Middle East,” almost implodes on itself. In one sense, the chapter attempts to deconstruct the problematic realities of simply transferring the American educational model overseas.

Effectively, this transfer operates as “a form of cultural imperialism.” (37) While this, indisputably, is a legitimate concern, and problematic if true, this observation necessarily conflates American studies with American education, and treats American studies as it was framed in its early years, as opposed to the state of the field as it stands today. I push back on and question both of these “assumptions.”

In the context of the larger concern of the book—American *studies* and not the United States’ *educational system*—the central inquiry in this chapter seems to be strikingly misplaced. As the editors themselves note, what started out as a field exclusively dedicated to the study of the United States of America has now become a distinctively transnational discipline. The current shift towards the Americas—emphasis added on the “s,” highlights an awareness and appreciation for the multiplicity of American voices, cultures, and experiences. Thus, Chapter 2, perhaps included to offer contextual gloss on the connection between America (The West) and higher education in the Middle East, falls flat. In effect, “The Politics of American-Style Higher Education in the Middle East,” proves to be more of a contrasting inclusion to the American *studies* centered compilation, than as an elucidating contribution. Moreover, an included note clarified the origins of the phrase “American-style university,” as deriving from a report for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “American-style university,” it states, was used “to refer to American, Australian, British, and Canadian universities that have recently opened their doors in the Middle East...” (48) Thus, it should come as no surprise that this chapter, although interesting and clearly well researched, feels out-of-place in the larger scheme of the text.

The second part of *Practicing Transnationalism* “Contexts and Implications” encounters similar issues of focus. Chapter 3 provides a historical survey of liberal education in the United States, exploring the changing educational system post-Civil War, particularly with Congress’s passing of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. By establishing state public universities, the Morrill Land Grant Act altered the educational landscape. American Protestant universities no longer dominated the United States as the only option for higher education. Interesting and informative, but where does American studies fit in all of this? Unfortunately, it does not really factor into this chapter at all, at least not in any significant way. “Shifting the Gorilla: The Failure of the American Unipolar in the Middle East,” is arguably the chapter most guilty of this. In an essay of almost fourteen pages, less than one page even *discusses* American studies in the Middle East. “Discourse, Palestine, and the Authoritative News Media,” explores the manner in which the United States consumes, understands, and treats Palestine, by way of its news media coverage. Yet again, by giving exclusive attention to the United State’s view of the conflict, this chapter subtly reifies “American” as connoting *only* the United States of America. This is in direct contravention to the modern shift within the field of American studies that book initially lays out. Given the class, religious, and racial dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this chapter could have been an incredible opportunity to engage with the discourses found in the broader scope of the Americas. What does news media coverage look like in South America? Is there a Central American view of Palestine?

Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East often loses itself in the technical weeds of the educational system both here, and abroad. At times, the compilation oscillates, not all too gracefully, between American studies as a field of

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study and the American *university*. While, perhaps, an only superficial distinction, the conflating of the two has considerable implications. As the editors correctly point out, American studies no longer has the singular focus that it once touted. Ultimately, *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East*, struggles to overcome the very pitfalls that the field of American studies itself has perennially faced. Due to its relative “newness” in the landscape of academia, both American studies and *Practicing Transnationalism: American Studies in the Middle East* fall victim to the very *newness* that makes them so fascinating.

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