

Review: *Arab and Jewish Women in Kentucky*

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Nora Rose Moosnick. *Arab and Jewish Women in Kentucky: Stories of Accommodation and Audacity*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8131-3621-9.

The title of this book, *Arab and Jewish Women in Kentucky*, is eye-catching. Indeed, a subject matter combining Arabs, Jews, and Kentucky may initially seem curious. However, it is the premise of the author, Nora Rose Moosnick, that this union is not so peculiar, and that by uncovering the stories of Arab and Jewish Kentuckians, certain commonalities emerge. Moosnick focuses on women, remarking that their lives most aptly illustrate these connections. The book contains stories of ten women from a variety of generations. Some are immigrants, others first or second generation Kentuckians. Most are still alive, though some not. Amidst these differences, past and present lives are both contrasted and linked.

In shedding light on these stories, the aim of the book is to incorporate Arab and Jewish lives into a new understanding of “out-of-the-way places in America” (3). By doing so, the project displays women’s stories as evidence to dispel assumptions that homogenize Arab Americans, Jewish Americans, and Kentucky, respectively. Such assumptions and homogenizations include the following: Arab Americans are always Muslim, “foreign,” and detached from American society; Jewish and Arab American communities are dichotomized and at odds with one another; Jewish lives are situated in relation to Israel and the Holocaust; the Kentucky population is Christian, white, uneducated, and lacks culture and diversity. By focusing on the stories of women, Moosnick also aims to integrate women into literature on Kentucky, addressing their marginalization from its history. Thus, the author proposes that an investigation into the lives of Arab and Jewish women illuminates, on the one hand, the interconnection of communities that are too often considered dichotomous, and on the other, the diversity of a state that is too often considered homogeneous.

The stories include those of Jewish women, Christian and Muslim Arab women, and lives that span the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This combination is used to build up the argument that connections between the lives of Arab and Jewish women living in Kentucky transcend generational, ethnic, and religious differences. Issues of identity as immigrants, or descendants of immigrants are raised, and their sense of “Arabness,” “Jewishness,” and “Americanness” connect their experiences. Such points anchor the argument locally, being specific to the context of Arabs, Jews and Kentucky. Other themes are more universal: for example, the theme of women and work, which speaks clearly in a number of chapters. Similarly, the transgression of traditional gender roles is drawn on as a linking theme, whether it be through work, acquisition of financial independence, or as maternal or non-maternal figures. Other points drawn on are women and technology, women and sports, and women climbing the social ladder. Through an array of examples, Moosnick successfully paints a diverse yet interconnected picture of both past and present lives of Jewish and Arab women in Kentucky.

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Moosnick is a sociologist, and uses qualitative research and analysis. She conducts interviews with women about the contemporary experience of life in Kentucky, as well as interviews to build up an oral history. The introduction and postscript discuss benefits and pitfalls of oral history as a method. One point of caution she highlights is the incorporation of stories into an analytical theme. Moosnick uses two overarching analytical themes of marginalization and fear to situate and unite the stories. She problematizes this thematic framing, and recognizes that not all interviewees claim to identify with these themes. She is careful to emphasize, then, that these are her own interpretive frameworks, and as a sociologist, that she was especially observant of such wider social issues. The author refers to Alessandro Portelli's call for the need to document ordinary, everyday lives as a means to promote democracy, because doing so writes silent voices into larger historical narratives. Moosnick also highlights the pitfalls of this task, questioning the role of the documentarian and the need for transparency in the aims of the documentarian. With the rise of reality shows and social media, Moosnick also asks whether we are over-documenting lives. Are interviewees, or indeed the documentarian, seeking fame through oral history? Finally, she questions how one accesses the truth, whether work produced by the documentarian is "blurring the lines between truth and fiction," and if so, whether it matters. (183). To answer these questions, she calls for reflexive research methods, cultural contextualization, and the focus on community needs (186).

There is a distinctly personal dimension to the book. In the preface, Moosnick situates herself within the work, acknowledging that "the personal and professional are intricately tied" (xv). The project was inspired by her own background as a Kentuckian woman and descendant of Jewish immigrants, and in the process she uncovers part of her own family history. Indeed, one of the ten women whose stories are told is her own Grandmother, Rose Moosnick. In unraveling Rose's life, the author incorporates herself as a source of oral history, revealing stories she remembers her father and great-aunt telling about her Grandmother (Chapter 5). The personal connection to the project is present throughout the book, and whilst specific details on how every interviewee was found are not given, there is a sense that many were located through an extension of her own personal network in Kentucky.

For the oral historian, chapter five ("Archetypal and Distant Figures") is of most interest. Moosnick focuses on the lives of two women of a much earlier generation, both named Rose. Rose Rowady was Arab, and Rose Moosnick was Jewish. Their stories are told through interviews with their sons (the reader is reminded that Rose Moosnick's son is the author's uncle). The chapter offers an insight into how immigrants to America, and more specifically women immigrants, survived in the early twentieth century. Memories of the two Roses are distant: both sons were in their nineties at the time of interview, and their mothers had died over thirty years previously. This generational difference and significant lapse of time between the events and the interview is a weakness in building up a reliable narrative. Moosnick addresses this weakness, questioning the reliability of conducting oral history through living relatives of a different generation and, more specifically, "men reminiscing about their mothers late in their own lives" (149). She observes that particular memories are brought up in a mother-son context, coupled with a sense of nostalgia, as the sons are now at the end of their own lives. Memories of their

mothers are romanticized, highlighting their survival, strength, success, and economic and educational achievements. Though recognizing this trend, as well as marked differences between the two Roses, Moosnick nevertheless incorporates these romanticized depictions into a greater theme of strong women, who were focused on social mobility and providing opportunities for their children.

Moosnick clearly states that the book is not an academic work, and is intended to speak to a wide audience. This aim is apparent through her use of clear and accessible language. Yet this becomes problematic, as statements are sometimes too general. Ironically, considering the goal is to debunk assumptions, other generalizations and assumptions emerge from the text. For example, in discussing Teresa Isaac, an Arab politician in Kentucky, Moosnick states, "Let's be clear: Teresa is not the typical Arab politician," (54) and describes how Teresa is "exceptional" because she reaches out to both Arab Christians and Muslims alike, and because she "claims her Arab roots, whereas other Arab Americans do not" (57). Such general statements assume that other Arab Americans do not do the same, and a deeper analysis of Arab Americans would surely complicate the view of Teresa as being "exceptional" for the reasons Moosnick ascribes.

The book, *Arab and Jewish Women in Kentucky*, achieves its goal of highlighting intersections and shared experiences of different generations of Arab and Jewish women. It also sheds light on the diversity of Kentucky, incorporating Arabs and Jewish narratives into the history of the state. It deals with a subject matter through a language that will appeal to a non-academic audience, especially those within the Kentucky community. The book would also be useful as an educational text for an undergraduate reader interested in the study of twentieth century American society, the history of immigrants to the country, or specifically twentieth-century Arab American, Jewish American, or American women's history. To an historian unfamiliar with Kentucky history specifically, however, one is left with the impression that issues could at times be rendered more complex, and less generalized.