

Tunisian women actors, ranging from elite academics who acted as intermediaries between the state and rural women, to fashion and society magazine editors who were entrusted with creating a new national discourse on gender roles, sexuality, and dress codes. The author shows how Tunisian feminists' and academics' engagements with third-world decolonial feminist networks and alliances allowed them to influence key aspects of Tunisian state feminism and create pockets of socially and economically conscious local feminist politics against the grain of both the liberal feminist ethos espoused by the state elite, and the conservative nationalist discourses on women's role in the family, market, and society.

One point that needed more elaboration in this otherwise excellent work was the ways in which alliances with third-world transnational socialism at that time influenced some of the Tunisian state's feminist policies and pushed it more to the left. While I generally agree with the author's characterization of Bourguiba's Tunisia as firmly part of the democratic liberal American camp during the Cold War, many of its national subsequent programs on rural poverty, education, and family planning were inspired and influenced to a great extent by prevailing third-world socialist state-led development strategies and transnational decolonial alliances. This central contradiction in Tunisian history needed to be explored more fully, especially in relation to state-led poverty alleviation campaigns and family planning programs and the ways they influenced rural women. Nevertheless, this does not take away from the importance of this book, which is highly recommended to scholars working on transnational feminism(s), postcolonial state-building, and the often-neglected role of Cold War politics in shaping third-world modernizing projects during the second half of the 20th century.

doi:10.1017/S002074382300096X

The Right Kind of Suffering: Gender, Sexuality, and Arab Asylum Seekers in America

**Rhoda Kanaaneh (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2023).
Pp. 216. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477326725**

Reviewed by Eszter Zimanyi , Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA (eszter.zimanyi@asc.upenn.edu)

The Refugee Convention of 1951 affirms the right to seek asylum for any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or . . . unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country.”¹ But what, exactly, constitutes a “well-founded fear”? How is fear determined by government authorities adjudicating asylum claims? And how does an asylum seeker convey the right kind of suffering to ensure a positive outcome for their request for refuge?

¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” accessed 25 July 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.



These are the questions undergirding anthropologist Rhoda Kanaaneh's new book, *The Right Kind of Suffering: Gender, Sexuality, and Arab Asylum Seekers in America*. Drawing on her experiences as a volunteer interpreter for Arabic-speaking asylum seekers, as well as her own family history as the child of Palestinian refugees, Kanaaneh weaves an intimate narrative about the particular demands made of, and challenges facing, Arab and Muslim asylum seekers whose cases rest on their experiences of gendered violence and sexuality-based persecution. Through the personal testimonies of four "successful" asylum seekers, each of whom represent a chapter in the book, Kanaaneh demystifies the American asylum system and highlights how asylum seekers must learn to perform their fear and suffering through simplistic narrative scripts that appeal to the sensibilities of American judges.

Kanaaneh's aims in this book are twofold. First, she encourages readers to think critically about who is allowed to become an American, and under what conditions. She reveals how Americans propagate problematic narratives about rescuing asylum seekers from "oppressive" cultures to refortify their national identity around the mythology of living in a superior society. The framing of gender- and sexuality-based oppression as cultural is key here, as it allows the US government to position asylum seekers as victims of a timeless and unchanging violence of which America is presumed to be free, while simultaneously abdicating responsibility for creating or exacerbating the conditions that drive mass displacement around much of the globe. Doing so allows Americans to feel self-righteous about providing a safe haven to the limited number of asylum seekers the country does accept, without reflecting on how US policies foment violence abroad.

Second, by sharing the personal stories of four individuals who overcome various obstacles before and after being granted asylum, Kanaaneh seeks to humanize asylum seekers at large. I should note here that I am a scholar of documentary film and media, and so, it is Kanaaneh's call to "humanize" asylum seekers, her invitation to readers to "walk in someone else's shoes," and her reference to herself as an "advocate" that stood out most to me in this book, as these same investments form the rationale for a wide range of humanitarian media (pp. 4, 5). With its repeated references to rehearsals, framing, and performance, and its nods to Bollywood movies and dreams of happy endings, Kanaaneh's text is decidedly cinematic. Her clear, accessible, and, at times, diaristic prose makes reading *The Right Kind of Suffering* feel like watching a film, one in which Kanaaneh appears self-reflexively in the role of director.

Indeed, self-reflexivity is a key element of the book, and Kanaaneh willingly offers herself up to the reader's criticism throughout. She acknowledges that the act of interpretation is never neutral and that working within the bounds of the US asylum system has often required her to participate in the strategic essentialization and retraumatization of the very people she seeks to help. Writing this book seems in some ways to be Kanaaneh's attempt to rectify the necessary harms she feels she has been complicit in as a translator; it is a space to represent more nuanced testimonies from asylees that speak to their full personhood and their multiple motivations for seeking asylum. Yet, even here, Kanaaneh must make active decisions about who, what, and how to represent, and her positionality as an academic researcher writing a book for a global audience institutes its own set of power dynamics between herself and her subjects. What, then, would it mean to approach Kanaaneh's text like a documentary? And what larger questions does her book elicit for scholars and media-makers working with vulnerable subjects?

Throughout the book, Kanaaneh unpacks how asylum seekers learn to represent themselves in ways that appeal to American values and biases. Take Suad, a young Sudanese woman whose case centers on female genital mutilation and her fear of being recircumcised. Suad's written statements emphasize that she is educated, highly motivated, and has ambitions of working in a "respectable" field as a lab technician. Through repeated rehearsals with her legal team, she learns to articulate her asylum claim through the language of Western feminism and, over time, comes to frame circumcision practices as part of a broader

culture of discrimination against women in Sudan. By framing her story this way, Suad's lawyers ensure that she will appeal to an asylum system that desires upwardly mobile and entrepreneurial immigrants who express gratitude for the opportunities provided by their host country and keep any criticisms they may have of the United States quiet. Similar narrative strategies are deployed by lawyers working for Fatima, a victim of domestic abuse, and Fadi and Marwa, who both experienced persecution as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Although Kanaaneh does not dispute the material and psychological violence from which her subjects have fled, she proceeds further to demonstrate how the asylum system causes its own set of harms through its demands for evidence and authentication. Asylum seekers are subjected to invasive medical exams and interrogations to legitimate their claims, and they must regularly rehearse their testimonies with their lawyers in preparation for potential cross-examination. In court, they must reproduce their stories in the exact chronological order in which it is documented in their case files to be seen as truthful. However, they must avoid coming across as too rehearsed, as doing so would make them seem deceptive. This process is emotionally draining and risks retraumatizing asylum seekers by forcing them to repeatedly recount their traumatic memories.

Building on the work of scholars like Lila Abu Lughod, Jasbir Puar, and Miriam Ticktin, Kanaaneh centers the perspectives and first-hand experiences of asylum seekers whom she treats as experts on the asylum system in their own right. She emphasizes that, although the asylum system imposes simplistic narratives onto asylum seekers, her subjects neither were passively molded by their lawyers, nor have they received their asylum through acts of deception. Rather, they are aware of the performances they are asked to play, and resourcefully navigate the asylum system as best as they can to secure their political rights to protection.

Kanaaneh is clear from the beginning that the people she has chosen to write about are privileged relative to most asylum seekers in the United States. Her interlocutors all come from middle-class backgrounds, which allowed them to legally enter the country on tourist visas before filing for asylum. All of them benefited, to varying extents, from the help of personal networks, community members, and nonprofit organizations upon their arrival in the United States, and, unlike most asylum seekers, had access to legal representation while navigating the asylum process. Still, Kanaaneh's subjects faced countless setbacks and challenges, from the emotional stress of delayed court dates to the financial toll of spending years without the legal authorization to work.

In the book's conclusion, Kanaaneh explains that she chose the stories of relatively privileged and successful applicants over the stories of other less resourced and unsuccessful ones because she hopes "learning of the injustices of asylum through these less bleak 'success stories' [will] make the accounts easier to consume" (p. 165). This sentiment, although understandable, reveals a key contradiction at the heart of Kanaaneh's book. The author convincingly critiques how Americans favor asylum applicants who appear assimilable and nonthreatening, and whose stories of resilience and overcoming the odds offer feel-good inspiration without any required self-reflection on the part of American society. Yet, in seeking to "humanize" asylum seekers, Kanaaneh finds herself, in similar fashion, choosing subjects who are presumed "easier" for readers to empathize with, even as she gives space to their criticisms of the US asylum system and acknowledges their struggles with racism and Islamophobia in America.

Kanaaneh's choice of subjects raises important, lingering questions about with whom we identify and to what ends that identification is forged. Is identification, for instance, a necessary precondition to enacting solidarity with oppressed peoples? And what would it mean if, instead of seeking to humanize asylum seekers, we held up a mirror to citizen-readers, made clear our complicity in policies that foster violence and dispossession elsewhere, and argued for our collective *responsibility* to the world's oppressed, irrespective of their social class, education level, ability, or general palatability to us?

Ultimately, *The Right Kind of Suffering* privileges the detailed, experiential narratives of asylum seekers that are often missing from top-down analyses of asylum systems. Its compelling style and readability make it an ideal introductory text for undergraduate students and community members who are interested in learning about the American asylum system and the challenges faced by asylees before and after their refuge is granted.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823001228

Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut

Ghassan Moussawi (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020). Pp. 198. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781439918500

Reviewed by Nadia Guessous , Feminist and Gender Studies, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, CO, USA (nguessous@coloradocollege.edu)

Ghassan Moussawi's *Disruptive Situations* is a provocative book that unsettles disciplinary boundaries, centers the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, and de-exceptionalizes queer strategies of survival used to navigate everyday life disruptions in the context of post-civil war Beirut. Although the book is based on research among LGBT individuals in Beirut, it refuses to partake in the dominant heteronormative academic distribution of labor that dictates that research among queer individuals and communities can only yield knowledge about queerness, gender, and sexuality (although these are of course important issues that the book richly and thoughtfully explores). Instead, Moussawi uses his careful research to provide a sense of the quotidian precarities and strategies of survival necessitated by life in post-war Beirut—a situation characterized by frequent shortages of basic services, endemic violence, political turmoil, and what one of his interlocutors describes as living “in a state of everyday war” (p. 5). He uses the intentionally nebulous and hard to translate Arabic term *al-waḍʿ* (the way that things are) to describe “the state of constantly living in uncertainty” and to capture its shared and ongoing rather than exceptional nature (p. 23). In describing the strategies used by his interlocutors to navigate this situation as queer tactics, he not only shows the relevance of queer theory to thinking about experiences such as life in the aftermath of war, the ravages of neoliberalism, and endemic trauma, he also parochializes the assumption that queerness is primarily that which disrupts the putative stability of gendered and sexual norms. By asking that we take seriously queer modalities of agency that operate in contexts in which daily disruptions and instability are the norm, he moves beyond a normative/non-normative binary and shows what can be gained from theorizing queerness outside the West and from locations characterized by endemic precarity. He also enacts (and therefore invites) a more intersectional understanding of queerness that attends to the mediating effects of class, race, gender, religion, etc., and foregrounds the role of geopolitics, political economy, and the coloniality of transnational discourses about gender and sexuality in his analysis.

Using a transnational feminist and queer studies approach, the book speaks back in powerful ways to a dominant Western discourse that praises Beirut for being “gay friendly” and the Paris (or Provincetown) of the Middle East. In doing so, he asks “for whom is Beirut cosmopolitan and gay friendly” and what does this discourse serve to elide and deflect attention from? (p. 57). His book is as much preoccupied with taking his LGBT Beirut interlocutors