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Class Equality, Gender Justice, and Living in Harmony with Mother Earth

An Interview with Joe Kadi

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Joe Kadi reflects upon the vision behind the groundbreaking anthology edited in 1994, Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists. Joe addresses how personal history coupled with writings by U.S. women of color inspired development of this book. Kadi addresses similarities and differences between the issues the book addressed and the issues facing Arab American communities in a post-9/11 historical moment. Joe talks about an identification as both a feminist and a transgender/genderqueer person. Joe also affirms a commitment to a vision for struggles against imperialism, racism, and sexism that do not ignore issues of class, homophobia, and environmental justice, within and beyond Arab American communities.

Nadine Naber: Your edited anthology, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists*, was groundbreaking. It challenged the invisibility of Arab Americans and Arab Canadians and produced a key shift in feminist studies by providing a reference point for understanding some of the issues that impact Arab American and Arab Canadian women's lives. Can you tell us about the vision behind the book?

Joe Kadi: I love reading. Ever since I was a kid I'd lose myself in books. It's one of the ways I survived my childhood. Later, trying to make sense of the world, I again found myself lost in books, this time written by feminists, working-class people, queers, Arabs, other people of color. It was so healing and liberatory. These writings helped me make sense of the world, and they helped me figure out how to understand my life in relation to social, cultural, political structures. Feminist literature in particular just blew my mind. In the early '80s I was married to a man who was abusing me, although abuse was so normal for me that I didn't really

notice. During that time, I connected with other feminists who shared with me the writings of bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Dorothy Allison, Chrystos. Wow—talk about opening up my world. I especially loved the anthologies written by women of color, such as *This Bridge Called My Back*. I found that the anthologies offered this amazing diversity of voices, this wild array of history and culture where pieces both connected with each other and stood on their own. I would always think, “Gee, I wish we (that is, Arab feminists) had an anthology like that!” We just didn’t have books like this. At a point in the late ’80s several women, who had the same desire, encouraged me to take on the task. And I, naive as I was about the world of writing, publishing, and editing, said “Okay!” I really had no idea how much work was involved, and how hard it would be to find a publisher. It was a whole new world for me, and I had a difficult time navigating it.

NN: The book impacted me tremendously by validating my experiences and providing a tool for teaching about Arab American femininities in a context in which literature on Arab American women is limited. Can you tell us more about the impact of the book? How do you think it has impacted feminist thought or feminist studies in the U.S.? How has it impacted Arab American women’s lives?

JK: It’s hard for me to answer this question in any kind of accurate way. I only know when people seek me out and tell me what the book means to them. Occasionally, someone will take the time to write me a letter and tell me she read about her own life in a way that made sense for the first time ever in *Food for Our Grandmothers*. Sometimes South End Press tells me that a professor in such-and-such a place is using it as a course textbook. Other times people will come up to me at readings and let me know how positively the book has impacted their life. But there is no way for me to track the book’s impact except through these sporadic exchanges. I will say, though, that when people write to me or come up to me after a reading and tell me the book has given them a sense of culture, history, or identity they didn’t have before, that is a precious gift.

NN: It has been twelve years since the publication of *Food for Our Grandmothers*. In your view, how have some of the issues the authors who contributed to *Food for Our Grandmothers* spoke to changed since then? How would you frame an anthology on Arab American and Arab Canadian feminists if you were going to publish it today?

JK: Have the issues changed? Basically, I do not believe so. We are still battling very tough issues, some from the broader society, some from without our own community. In terms of the broader society, we’re still dealing with sexism,

ableism, classism, heterosexism, and virulent anti-Arab racism pushing the myths about passive, downtrodden Arab women and brutally oppressive, demonized Arab men. Issues of sexism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism in our own community are still prevalent and need to be challenged. However, within these basic frameworks, I believe the oppression we experience has intensified and deepened since the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and since the U.S. invaded Iraq (perhaps I should say: since the U.S. attacked Iraq in a more forceful and violent way than it had during the years of the embargo).

If I was going to take on the task of editing another anthology, I would need to address that. I would also want to make the book more diverse than *Food for Our Grandmothers*, by ensuring there were more immigrant women, queer or trans women or both, working-class women, and Muslim women.

NN: Despite the fact that many Arab American feminists use the framework of “intersectionality” (which tends to refer to the links among race, class, and gender), there has been little written on socioeconomic class. You have written an entire book entitled *Thinking Class*. What would you say the significance of socioeconomic class is to the study or practice of feminism in general?

JK: As a working-class person who thinks a lot about class and perceives the way it impacts us in our daily lives, I simply cannot stress the importance of this issue enough and the need for all caring, thinking people to take this issue seriously. Of course, I include feminists in the phrase “caring, thinking people.” To me feminism is at its root concerned with justice for all living beings, and a cornerstone of justice is that basic needs of food, shelter, and dignified, safe work are met. These are critical class issues. They aren’t the only critical class issues (culture springs to mind as another), but they are cornerstone ones, and working-poor and working-class people are routinely deprived of these basic needs.

Right now we are seeing a terrifying assault on working-poor and working-class people in the United States. The rates of homelessness have skyrocketed—the average age of a homeless person in the U.S., the richest country in the world, is nine years old. The middle class is disappearing. The gap between rich and poor is heightening. Up until five years ago I was living in rural Wisconsin, which is, as all of rural America, economically depressed. Most people work shit jobs for shit wages. They juggle two or three jobs and have no health insurance. Friends of mine currently had their heat turned off or lived without phones because they simply cannot pay their bills—and these are people working more than forty hours a week. It is a national disgrace. We need campaigns for living wages; we need national health care; we need decent jobs that do not harm the

environment. I am fearful about the upcoming national election. While I don't believe the Democrats are the be-all and end-all, I do want them to come to power so there is not another four years of Republican rule. I can only shudder when I consider that possibility.

NN: You have also critiqued homophobia during a historical moment in which few Arab American writers have raised LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) issues.

JK: There's a lot of homophobia within the Arab American community. Absolutely. Yet, I have to add, there's a lot of homophobia everywhere; our community is no different from the larger society. I usually say these two statements together because there's so much anti-Arab racism right now that if I were to simply say the first statement and not add the second, I would be adding fuel to the fire of racism. One of the ways anti-Arab racism works is that our community is tagged as more homophobic than the white mainstream culture held up as the norm.

It's hard to always have to qualify these things. If I were simply having a conversation with you, the editors of this journal, a group of Arab American women, I would be able to say, "There's a lot of homophobia in our community." You would understand what I mean and nod in agreement, and we'd have a discussion about our community with all of its flaws and grace and infuriating qualities and goodness. But if I'm talking to non-Arabs (and I don't just mean white people here!), and I say, "There's a lot of homophobia in Arab American society," the nodding would be of a very different quality. The nod of "Oh, yeah, those Arabs. They're totally homophobic, and they're so misogynist. You poor thing! How do you put up with it?"

I hope you're following me here. What I'm trying to say is that many of us inside the community are operating from a holistic understanding of the community, but pretty much nobody else is. So we always have to explain, to contextualize, our words and ideas. Which isn't a totally bad thing. I mean, clarity is good; explaining things fully in their proper context is good. On the other hand, it does get a bit tiring!

NN: What have been your experiences with feminisms in the U.S.? What does women of color feminism mean to you? (Or are there other feminist spaces that have meaning to you?)

JK: My experiences with different feminists have pretty much run the gamut, as I expect all of ours have. I have experienced great support and inclusion from different white women and different women of color, and I have experienced

disrespectful and painful dismissal by different white women and different women of color. Sometimes feminists have argued that “Arabs aren’t people of color”; others exhibit absolutely abysmal ignorance about Arabs generally; others actually believe the crap about “Arab men are the most sexist men of all!” and “Arab women are the most oppressed women of all, and gee, it’s lucky your husband let you come to this event, and why aren’t you wearing a veil?” Rather mind-blowing.

I always state that there is a wide array of responses to Arab women within feminist circles, and that I have, over my twenty-five years as part of this movement, encountered many feminists who are supportive and concerned about my community. I am very disturbed by the current mainstream media discussion of feminism, in which the women’s movement is continually painted as a very white movement that is very racist. In my own experience that is an inaccurate portrayal—I have always participated in a multiracial women’s movement that actively fights racism. This inaccurate portrayal has filtered down to progressive young women, both white and of color. I have, several times in the past few years, found myself talking with a group of young women and had to dispel their notion of a completely racist women’s movement made up solely of white women. This has become especially obvious to me in recent years, as I have been teaching in the women’s studies program at the University of Calgary.

I do want to make it clear that, as a transgender/genderqueer person, I am still a feminist, still concerned with feminist issues. I know there can be questions, even anxieties, about what it means when someone who has clearly identified as a feminist woman suddenly emerges as a transgender person. My feminist values, my concern about what is happening to women globally and locally, my love for the common woman have not changed. I imagine it will be an interesting experience for me to experience these key pieces of my feminist self from a different vantage point.

NN: What are your visions for transformation? What I mean is that if you could create a different world, a world without oppression, what would it look like? What do you think needs to change? And what do you suggest that we do differently in order to get there?

JK: I want to help transform our society, our world, into one where social justice, active participation, and sustainability are foundational building blocks. My absolute priority vision is that my species—humankind—live in harmony with Mother Earth and take care of her. What will this mean? For starters, stop clear-cutting forests; stop building subdivisions on open, healthy land; stop dumping toxins into our rivers and into our soil. Stop acting as though we can continue to

run our society on a limited, finite natural resource—oil—when it is a cold, hard fact that we will be running out of oil at some point in the future, possibly sooner than we think. Stop acting as though we can live disconnected from the planet that is our home.

And of course environmental issues are so connected to all other issues—you can't fully make sense of what imperialism did in the Arab world without understanding the environmental degradation that went along with that. You can't make sense of pollution patterns—such as the locations of toxic-waste dumps—in this country if you don't take a hard look at race and class demographics.

It's difficult, but I hold on to my vision of all of us living in harmony with Mother Earth and caring for her.

I am now back in Canada, which is my home country. I am living in the Rocky Mountains of western Canada, where there are still huge tracts of unspoiled wilderness. But even here, the assault on the earth is continuing. The oil and gas industries are wreaking tremendous havoc here, and are pushing to do more. The Alberta provincial government, which is a right-wing government and has been in power for three decades, tends to allow business to do what it wants. It's quite painful seeing the destruction of pieces of beautiful wilderness.

I wonder if I might close with the last stanza of my poem "Relatively Small Pieces of Land" that expresses some of these ideas:

Each day I make the choice to stay
on, with, by the land.

Is it the ruffed grouse, or my heart? The
coyote's howl of anguished desire, or mine?

Who shed her skin last night,
transformed by the light of the
moon? Who called to the night sky? Who
embraced with her whole heart? Who risked
it all, for love, simplicity, a precious
small piece of bluffland in a driftless region?