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

An Interview with Joe Kadi

NADINE NABER

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,

