Book Review

Review of Maira, Sunaina Marr. 2016. *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror*. New York: New York University Press. 320 pp. Paperback. US\$27.98. ISBN: 9781479880515.

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The increase in and widespread acceptance of state surveillance following 9/11 is well documented. This went largely uncontested in mainstream discourse until WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden's exposé of the NSA and the CIA in 2013. Now surveillance is a more common topic of discussion. What is less common is an investigation of how this climate of surveillance in the United States has affected young people, particularly racialized Muslim, South Asian, Afghan, and Arab youth, who have grown up with this reality. Sunaina Marr Maira's book *The 9/11 Generation* fills this void. An in-depth exploration of the lives of young racialized activists in Silicon Valley, *The 9/11 Generation* is an ethnography of political engagement, surveillance, and solidarity.

Maira is interested in the turn to rights-based activism. She centers on the ways in which young South Asian, Arab, and Afghan Americans engage with rights, specifically civil rights, human rights, women's rights, and gay rights. In focusing on young people who are politically engaged, she provides a picture of the possibilities and pitfalls of rights-based organizing among young Muslim Americans. This is relevant to the fields of social movements and human rights studies.

Another thread running throughout this book is Maira's engagement with the trope of the "model minority," exceptionalism, and a sustained demonstration of how Muslims have been evicted from citizenship post 9/11. She juxtaposes "good" Muslims with what she characterizes as angry politics, describing how it is not possible to be seen as a "good" Muslim and to simultaneously take a political stance on topics relating to the Middle East, particularly Palestine, and American imperialism. In focusing on tropes of "good" and "bad" Muslims, Maira reveals how these categorizations function to control the behaviour of citizens and maintain the current balance of power.

The 9/11 Generation begins with an ethnographic description of Silicon Valley and youth organizing. Maira provides this description to contextualize the racial and economic setting in which her participants have come of age. In addition to a class analysis of racialized and/or migrant workers, she demonstrates how Islamophobia post-9/11 impacted the lives of young people living in Silicon Valley, a supposed bastion of liberal diversity. She also elaborates on the distinction between "good" Muslims (peaceful productive capitalist citizens who believe in American democracy) and "bad" Muslims (those who are skeptical or openly critical of the US government, foreign policy, and the War on Terror). This distinction

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regulates the behaviour of “model minorities” and draws a dividing line between “acceptable” citizens and “radicals.”

Chapter two analyzes the successes of cross-racial alliances and interfaith activism in the context of hyper-surveillance. Maira analyzes these movements through exploring the turn to “civil rights” as an organizing tool. In doing so, Maira exposes how civil rights operates as a form of governmentality in that it focuses resistance on a discourse of inclusion, while simultaneously excluding a critique of American imperialism and the War on Terror. As such, civil rights are ineffective in building other forms of international solidarity and alliances and therefore are a limited tool for political change. She outlines the important shift that occurred from politics of protest and redistribution to one of rights and recognition. Maira shows how “faithwashing,” which goes hand-in-hand with the model minority trope, has effectively depoliticized religious groups. In the neo-liberal era, this critique is an important one as it brings to light the subtle workings of power and suppression.

In chapter three, Maira explores the turn to rights-based activism more deeply by focusing on human rights. She demonstrates how, like tolerance, human rights language has been mobilized as a political discourse and practice of governmentality. This results in some people and countries being considered more entitled to be rights-bearing subjects than others. For example, Maira demonstrates how Palestinian rights are not seen as human rights. This loss of rights occurs via Israeli state exceptionalism that obscures state racism and imperial violence. In this chapter, Maira describes how young activists have become aware that using human rights as a mobilizing tool against US imperialism, particularly in relation to Palestine, has failed, thus opening the door for different mobilizing strategies.

Continuing with the theme of human rights and humanitarianism, Maira then turns to Afghanistan in chapter four. She continues her critique of the “model minority” by demonstrating how categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” refugees and terrorists are created in popular culture. As with many so-called failed states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia, Maira shows how their history of modernity and secularity has been suppressed to create an imperial “subject” worthy of American intervention. Through narratives from Afghan and Pakistani American youth, Maira demonstrates how the state of exception operates and how these categories of “deserving” and “undeserving” countries and people are created.

Perhaps the chapter of most interest to surveillance studies scholars, chapter five examines what it means for young people to live in the everyday context of surveillance. Muslim American youth who have come of age in the post-9/11 era experience everyday state surveillance. This leads to normalization, self-surveillance, and a “pre-emptive present” (Nguyen 2012: 167). Pre-emptive surveillance describes tactics used by law enforcement officials such as predatory prosecution and entrapment. A “pre-emptive present,” then, describes the lives of young people who live in a state of everyday surveillance and their strategies of trying to pre-emptively outwit government surveillance tactics. These pre-emptive strategies involve publicizing their movements, engaging in-person with law enforcement officers, including spies, and anticipating surveillance tactics. This chapter is ethnographic, drawing on interviews with young Muslim activists to describe the climate of surveillance post-9/11 and the chilling effect it has on dissent and activism. Using interviews, Maira describes effects of the “superpanopticon” in which racialized Muslim youth live their lives (Poster 1990: 93). She outlines the everyday tactics and affective strategies that young people use to cope with and resist surveillance.

Maira continues to describe what it means for young people to come of age in the surveillance state in chapter six. Here, Maira outlines what she calls “surveillance effects:” how young people engage in forms of countersurveillance. More subjective than pre-emptive strategies, forms of countersurveillance range from self-scrutiny, self-policing, to self-regulation of their politics so as to be read as “moderate” or less

radical. Maira frames this ethnographic analysis within the broader question of how liberal democracy and rights-based narratives create and sustain “others” so that imperial policies are not interrogated.

The 9/11 Generation ends with a look at what democracy means for young people who are living in a context where liberal democracy is used to cover up Western imperialism and where protest movements in the Arab world are fighting US backed regimes. A recurring question for me while reading this book was how the Trump era has affected young Muslim activism, politicization, and socialization in the United States. Perhaps a follow up publication on the heels of this text is needed. From using a wide range of social theories to engaging young people with origins in such diverse places as South Asia, Afghanistan, Palestine, and other Arab countries, this book covers a lot of ground. As such, *The 9/11 Generation* is more suited to advanced readers. Maira does an admirable job integrating ethnographic field notes and interviews with a theoretical and conceptual analysis of the state of surveillance, neoliberalism, and nationalism in Silicon Valley. Her critique of rights-based organizing, liberal democracy, and activism is an important addition to literature on rights.

References

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