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Give a Listen

Richard Jeffrey Newman

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makes it special. Other selections are translated into English from Spanish, Dutch, or creole languages for the first time.

Another highlight is Reinaldo Arenas's rapturously erotic recounting of homosexual life in 1960s Cuba. His memoir, taken from *Before Night Falls* (1992), is no less earnestly political than many of the others in the anthology, but it somehow manages to be the most fun. Arenas's writing has a refreshing sense of play. Even as he testifies to the persecutions, concentration camps, punitive laws, and pathologizing forces meant to snuff gays from the country, he celebrates the pleasure of being taboo:

Many of the young men who marched in Revolutionary Square applauding Fidel Castro, and many of the soldiers who marched, rifle in hand and with martial expressions, came to our rooms after the parades to cuddle up naked and show their real selves, sometimes revealing a tenderness and true enjoyment such as I have not been able to find again anywhere else in the world. Perhaps deep down they realized they were breaking into the realm of the forbidden, the dangerous, and the damned. Perhaps that is the reason why, when that moment came, they showed such fullness, such radiance, and enjoyed every instant in the awareness that it might be their last, that it could cost them many years in jail.

Other contributions to the book dream of a time when same-gender loving couples may walk hand in hand in public without fear of violence, exile, imprisonment, or death. In "Independence Day Letter," perhaps the book's most effectively heartbreaking piece, Helen Klonaris appeals for

acceptance and love. "I am angry because I live in exile in this, my own country." The letter was originally published in the *Nassau Daily Tribune* as an open letter to the Bahamian community. Several of the female authors here make similar appeals for recognition and visibility in communities that insist lesbians do not exist. Mabel Cuesta's hopeful essay, on the other hand, depicts what she perceives to be a more relaxed attitude toward homosexuality in today's Cuba after chronicling the witch hunts of the 1980s. Cuesta sees promise in the local effort to help her and her partner build their home. Wesley E. A. Crichlow modeled his essay, "History, (Re) Memory, Testimony, and Biomythography: Charting a Buller Man's Trinidadian Past," on the genre of biomythography invented by Audre Lorde in order to chart the repression and oppression of his closeted youth. He positions his writing as an engine of social change, urging readers to consider the ways in which they might be complicit with his story and to take an ethical stance on heterosexism.

This broadminded anthology has set a precedent for even more finely tuned approaches to the queer Caribbean theme.

Glave rightly describes the inequalities suffered by gays and lesbians in the Caribbean as basic human rights issues. His activist leanings as cofounder of J-FLAG (Jamaican Forum for Lesbians All-Sexuals and Gays) are on display in his urgent address, as are Lawson Williams's in the essay, "On Homophobia and Gay Rights Activism in Jamaica," which concludes the book. Both men describe the entrenched vitriolic homophobia that brought them

to court in order to challenge the Offences Against the Person Act, a Jamaican law part of which prohibits the "abominable crime of buggery" (anal intercourse), an act punishable by imprisonment and hard labor. "Boom-bye-bye in a battybwyo head, rudebwyo nah promote de nasty man, dem haffi dead," Buju Banton sang in his hit 1990s dancehall song, essentially expressing that "faggots should be killed." As a reflection of just how dangerous it is to be openly gay in Jamaica, it's of note that Lawson Williams's name is a pseudonym and that J-FLAG's Kingston headquarters address remains unlisted.

You don't have to be gay, lesbian, or Caribbean (this reviewer fits none of those categories) to appreciate this anthology, though it is certainly a seminal contribution to the fields of Caribbean literature and gay and lesbian studies. Most of its contents are worth reading for the drama, sensitivity, and complexity required of such identities. The conversation has begun. I hope this broadminded anthology has set a precedent for even more finely tuned approaches to the queer Caribbean theme, and I applaud Thomas Glave for his dream: "If it is impossible to know how many people might steer clear of this collection because of its subject matter, we know that it is simultaneously possible to dream, in the most lustrous colors imaginable, of all those who will be drawn to these pages precisely *because of their contents.*"

Emily Raboteau is assistant professor of English at the City College of New York and the author of a novel, The Professor's Daughter. She is currently working on a book of creative nonfiction about exodus movements of the African Diaspora.

Give a Listen

Richard Jeffrey Newman

**INCLINED TO SPEAK:
AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY
ARAB AMERICAN POETRY**

Edited by Hayan Charara

University of Arkansas Press

<http://www.uark.edu/~uapinfo>

328 pages; cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$24.95

Reading the first paragraph of Hayan Charara's introduction to *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* persuaded me not to read the rest of what Charara had to say until I finished the book. These two sentences in particular illustrate why:

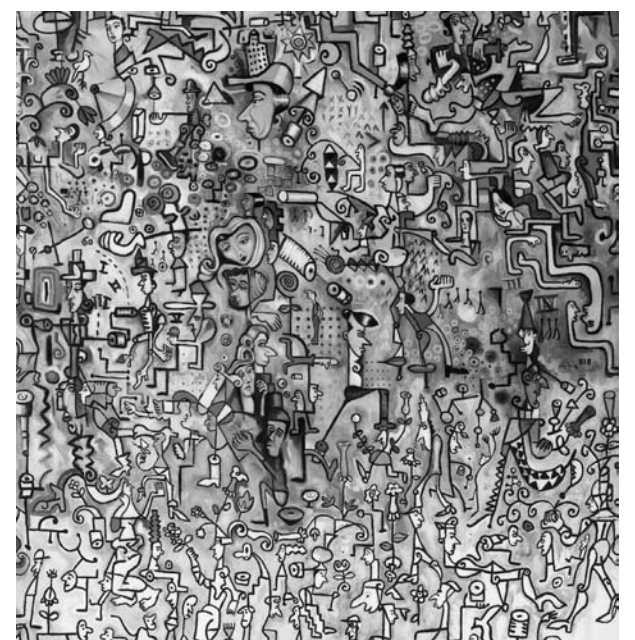
Identity only further complicates the matter [of understanding the literatures of the world], and for Arab American poetry this also happens to be the sphere toward which most discussions gravitate and the traps from which most Arab American poets work ceaselessly to break free. Whether the thirty-nine poets represented in this anthology like it or not (I would argue that most of them dislike it), identity is, for their readers, typically both an entry and an exit point to their poems.

I already knew some of the poets in *Inclined to*

Speak. Kazim Ali, Suheir Hammad, Nathalie Handal, Khaled Mattawa, and Naomi Shihab Nye were the names I recognized, but I knew next to nothing about, because I had given precious little thought to the question of, what (an) Arab American poetry/poetries (much less poetics) might be. Charara's introduction, I knew, would have to take that question on, along with its implications for what Arab American identity might be, and while I was of course interested in what he had to say, I wanted first to encounter the poets and poems he'd chosen not so much on their own terms, since in an edited anthology the terms are set by the editor, but rather in my ignorance, because I understood that ignorance to be what placed me in *Inclined to Speak's* primary audience.

These contributors are poets first and foremost, and it is as poets, not spokespeople, that they deserve to be read.

The second reason I wanted to wait to read Charara's introduction is that the issues raised and questions implied by the sentences I have quoted above are, without denying the specificity of Arab American experience, familiar. Every ethnic American community I can think of confronts them in one way or another, and I did not want the familiarity of what I knew Charara would talk about to shape the way I read *Inclined to Speak* any more than it would already be shaped by my knowledge of the cultural,



Detail from cover

political, and intellectual baggage that any anthology of ethnic American poetry carries by definition.

There are, as there should be, poems in *Inclined to Speak* about Arab American identity, the immigrant experience, and anti-Arab racism in the US; there are poems about the war in Iraq, the role the US plays in the Middle East and about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Some of these poems might more properly be labeled propaganda: Suheir Hammad's "Silence," for example, about the "accidental" shooting of a young and deaf Palestinian man who could not hear his Israeli pursuers shouting "Stop!" Other poems,

— Newman continued on next page

however, mine their politics with an anger that rejects self-righteousness, emerging instead with images that burn themselves into a reader's consciousness more permanently than propaganda could ever hope to accomplish. Here is the fourth section of Sinan Antoon's "Wrinkles: on the wind's forehead":

the soldier's fingers scrape
and scabble
like question marks
or sickles
they search the womb
of the wind
for weapons
.....
nothing but smoke
and depleted uranium.

To be fair to Hammad, whose explicit activism probably means that she risks propaganda in her work more than many other poets, the other poems of hers chosen by Charara are propaganda's precise opposite, and it is a measure of his success as an editor that while *Inclined to Speak* accounts for poems like Hammad's "Silence" and how they fit into whatever one might mean by the term "Arab American poetries," he never attempts to propagandize that term. Indeed, the range of poetry Charara has included would make that kind of preachiness impossible. There are love poems, nature poems, and spiritual poems; there are formal poems, almost all of which are ghazals; and there are prose poems, narrative poems, poems that explode narrative, experimental poems, lyric poems, surreal poems, comic poems, and more. Here's the beginning of Walid Bitar's "Looking You in the Back of the Head," which made me laugh out loud:

I'll compare you to the outskirts of
Copenhagen,

I'll compare you to a swan made of twisted
coat hangers, to Mars, to a toad, to pink
gum stretched from the pavement by a clog,
to a rose,
a mailman's uniform, the Klondike Goldrush,
popcorn spilled on a black velvet purse,
an alligator, a sky blue bongo drum,
a pomegranate with many cavities, a pine nut,
an unsigned income tax return, I'll compare
you to a pear, an avocado, I don't care
as long as after all is said and done
it wasn't you I was talking about.

Making my way through *Inclined to Speak*, which is organized alphabetically, I felt myself guided through a literary landscape I had not previously explored by someone who had clearly taken the time to map out not only the well-known and required stopping places, but also the little-known spots that the "official" guidebooks overlook, whether by design or not. The list of poets who were a revelation to me is not short. Among them are Etel Adnan, Walid Bitar, Ahimsa Timoteo Bodhrán, Hayan Charara, Hedy Habra, Sam Hamod, Lawrence Joseph, Fady Joudah, Mohja Kahf, and Jack Marshall. As I read from poet to poet—and here is a revelation in keeping with the "baggage" I mentioned above—I was both astonished and indignant (on my behalf, because how did I not know this? as well as on behalf of the writers, because how did I not know this?) to discover just how many of them have been either winners of or finalists for the National Book Award, the American Book Award, the Yale Younger Poets Prize, and the Pushcart Prize, not to mention those who have won first book prizes, PEN-related awards, and more.

Ignorance like mine, however, as Charara writes in the introduction, is not surprising.

[M]ost anthologies of American literature,
fiction or poetry, old or new, unless they

deal thematically with Arab Americans, directly (like this one) or indirectly, rarely include an Arab American writer, much less a number of them—this despite the fact that since September 11, 2001, interest in Arabs and Arab culture is probably greater than ever before in American history.

The invisibility of ethnic American identity within mainstream American culture, literary or otherwise, is certainly not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is particularly egregious that Arab American writers should be as invisible as they are at this moment in history, and so it is important that *Inclined to Speak* be read widely. Still, it would be a mistake to read *Inclined to Speak* in such explicitly political and sociological terms, even though it is a book that cannot help but make a political and sociological statement. The poets represented in this anthology may be Arab American, and their work may represent Arab American consciousness, in all, or at least some significant portion, of its diversity—Christian, Jewish, and queer Arab Americans are among the subgroups Charara has included—but they are poets first and foremost, and it is as poets, not spokespeople, that they deserve to be read. To do otherwise would be to make them invisible all over again, defeating the purpose of this fine and important book.

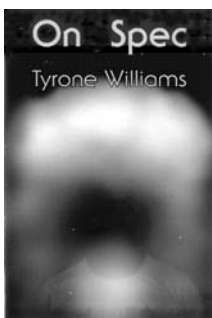
Richard Jeffrey Newman is associate professor of English at Nassau Community College, where he coordinates the Creative Writing Project. He is the author of *The Silence Of Men*, a book of poems, and two books of translations from classical Iranian literature.

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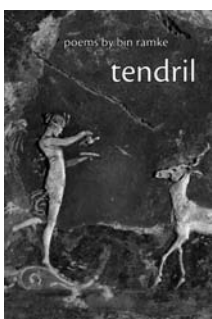
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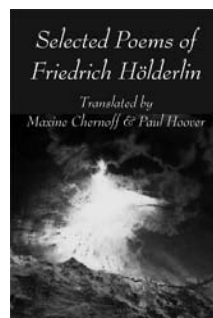


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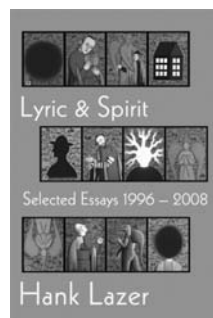


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