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[Interview] "Spotlight on John Tofik Karam: Manifold Destiny"

[Interview and Review by] Ken Chitwood

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## **Spotlight on John Tofik Karam: Manifold Destiny**

*Interview and Review by Ken Chitwood*

Borders, as Manuel Vásquez and Marie Friedmann Marquardt remind us, are liminal spaces (2003). Neither fully *here* nor fully *there*, but persistently and perniciously present, borderlands and those who dwell within them occupy a position at, across, and between various religious, political, social, cultural, and gendered boundaries at multiple scales. Such is the case for Arabs living in the Tri-Border Area (a.k.a., Triple Frontier, *Tres Fronteras*, or *Três Fronteiras*) at the confluence of the Iguazú and Paraná rivers separating Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. There, Arabs have faced surveillance and suspicion, found financial success and struggled to survive, worked with and against those in power, maintained ties to places like the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon and put down deep roots in local communities as residents of cities like Puerto Iguazú (Argentina), Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay). All the while, John Tofik Karam writes in *Manifold Destiny: Arabs at an American Crossroads of Exceptional Rule*, they have abided in – and helped animate – an American hemisphere where U.S. power was once considered a “manifest destiny.” In recent decades, through what Karam calls “manifold destiny,” these Arabs “came to terms with [the] exceptional rule” of multiple orders, “connecting and connected by a hemispheric America.” (p. 201)

In this erudite and elaborate ethnography, Karam has carefully crafted a narrative of how Arabs in the Tri-Border Region trouble our understanding of borders, global Islam, Brazil, Latin America, the Americas, the transnational Middle East, and American empire. Focusing on transnational projects, economic enterprises, as well political, cultural, and religious initiatives that cross national boundaries on a regular basis, (p. 2) Karam traces how Arabs came to terms with the exceptional rule of rival states and overlapping political, social, and military orders (p. 5) in Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina (p. 9). Specifically, Karam explores how Arabs embody and enliven “a semiperipheral America that neither led to nor derived from U.S. influence in the hemisphere.” (p. 10) Relying on a treasure-trove of detailed interviews with local interlocutors collected over multiple years and on all sides of the border(s), Karam’s work offers textured nuance to

our understanding of what it means to live in a “free trade, war-torn, and speculative Americas.” (p. 3)

For example, in Chapter 3: “Test of Faith,” Karam explores “what political scientist Olivier Roy called ‘the new frontier of the imagined ummah’ in this hemisphere’s unresolved anti-Semitism.” (p. 86) Focusing on the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the July 1994 bombing of the Jewish Community Centre in the Argentinian capital, and their aftermaths, Karam details how Arab Muslims came to be targeted “at the border in the name of so-called *antiterrorismo*.” (p. 87) While other analyses, including my own, have analyzed the rhetoric around “Arabs at the borders” in light of 9/11 and the “War on Terror” (See Chitwood, 2021, pp. 151-180), Karam’s examination offers three important interventions.

First, that the discourse around, and surveillance of, Arabs in the Tri-Border Area is perhaps best viewed through the lens of local events (e.g., the bombings in the 1990s) and the manifestations of state power in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in particular. Although the US remains in peripheral view – and comes to play a larger role in the 2000s (see Chapter 5: “Beginning the ‘War without End’”) – Karam’s emphasis on a more focused regional scale helps better situate what it looked like for the Tri-Border Area to become considered a *cueva de terroristas* (den of terrorists) in the context of daily life (p. 112). Second, this regional focus simultaneously allows for a new perspective on the global *ummah* and how both Sunni and Shii claim to be at the center of it. Although we may tend to focus on the Middle East, Asia, or Africa in seeking to understand Sunni/Shii claims and counterclaims to *ummah* hegemony, Karam’s examples of how Arab Muslims in the Tri-Border Area “forged an ummah that ‘signified both a common heritage and new modes of Muslim identity, unity, and difference’” (p. 101) in the context of violence and disruption at home and abroad illustrates how we need to widen our view to better understand the *global* nature of Sunni/Shii splits (p. 87) and efforts at unity or ecumenicism within the *ummah* as a whole. Karam calls the Tri-Border Area an “Ummah America” border, a “hemispheric crossroads of an Ummah” (p. 105) that is a representative site within a larger-scale, latticed, and multi-layered network I elsewhere refer to rather clumsily as “global Islam.” (Chitwood 2021, p. 14) Third, and in relation to the above, Karam investigates how Arab Muslims tried to survive and resist the pressures

brought on by increased state surveillance by both working with, and protesting against, state authorities. He describes the mosque construction projects, holiday celebrations, and other efforts at cooperation that they hoped would lead to acceptance. Included here is how Arabs enmeshed Islam with *Dia de Finados* in Brazil, visiting the graves of the deceased “out of respect for the customs of the people who welcomed them” in the area. (p. 103) For those looking for examples of the translatability and hybridity of Islam in the Americas, they need look no further than such practices, which are brought on by a confluence of political, social, and cultural factors – including here a series of violent events in Argentina and their multi-decade aftermath.

Elsewhere, in Chapter 4: “Free Trade Security,” Karam extends his analysis of the simultaneously local, hemispheric, and broadly transregional nature of Arab lives in the Tri-Border Area by looking at how Mercusor – the Southern Common Market established by the Treaty of Asunción in 1991 and Protocol of Ouro Preto in 1994 – brought on a period of restrictive trade and after-effects for their businesses in the years to follow. Paying little heed for Arabs’ cross-border trading activities, the pact between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay (along with associate countries like Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, and Suriname) also created an “incipient security community” (p. 119) that was deployed to target Arabs through a system of “free trade” surveillance and suppression. In the process of enforcing Mercusor, Karam writes Arabs “were stripped of liberal democratic norms.” (p. 138) Whether it was the anxiety brought on by the Rede Brasil Operation (p. 139ff) or the abject fear following the killing of local Arab business leader Hussein Taijen in Ciudad del Este in November 1998 (pp. 142-143), Arabs felt unsafe and persecuted. Nonetheless, Karam shows how they “finessed and folded into this free trade agreement,” (118) with some using their cash flow to not invest in terror (as was suspected by security communities both within Mercusor and further afield in the U.S.), but projects like the Paraná Country Club in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay (p. 130).

This kind of careful and nuanced analysis of the local impacts of regional, hemispheric, and transnational social, economic, and political orders is what makes Karam’s book truly commendable. As is already evident to a community dedicated to

studying Islam and Muslim socialities in Latin America and the Caribbean, we understand the simultaneity of the local and global and the importance of paying attention to how various places, people, locales, movements, ideas, and technologies intersect and overlap in the American hemisphere. Karam's work represents the best of this kind of research and offers a rich, sagacious, and precise account of Arab lives at, across, and between borderlands of multiple forms, scales, and orders. His work in *Manifold Destiny* helps further de-center the U.S. in our understanding of Islam in the Americas, while at the same time remaining cognizant of the connections, exchanges, and radiating imperial power that the U.S. still exerts across the hemisphere and beyond. Moreover, and apropos to the U.S.'s (neo)imperial reach, Karam folds together Middle Eastern studies, American studies, Brazilian studies, and Latin American/Latinx studies to try and redirect our attention away from what Arabs did or did not do at the border "to what sorts of state exceptions they and others came to terms with, in a process not yet over." (p. 204) In other words, how do Arabs deal with the "ordinariness of extraordinary rule" (p. 211) in the context of the everyday and become circumstantial, yet consequential, protagonists "in nothing less than a novel understanding of the contemporary American hemisphere." (p. 202)

In the interview that follows, I ask Karam to further reflect on some of these points and address some questions that might be particularly relevant to the LACISA community.

**First, tell us a bit about how you would situate your work within the frame of this newsletter and its focus on Latin American and Caribbean Muslim communities, past and present?**

I think we work the same fields and reap different harvests. Depending on the given interlocutors, I sometimes introduce my field of study as being about Arabs and Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean. For me, this framing dovetails with the historic struggles in ethnic studies against non-recognition or misrecognition specifically. More so in the past, but still useful in the present-day, I think it is important to define intellectual agendas not only in disciplinary terms with universal allure but also as about particular peoples whose journeys have been either erased, truncated, or twisted. The

risk in doing so is that some may dismiss our lines of study as not sufficiently theoretical, but new interdisciplinary fields of inquiry have long since made claims regarding our particular difference and universal significance despite mainstream disregard. The larger numbers of scholars who come together in these and other ways can further legitimize our fields of study. Let me give a brief example that speaks to how little legitimacy our lines of inquiry garnered when I was writing up my dissertation, in 2002 or so. I was being introduced to the dean of a small liberal arts college in a small northeastern U.S. city, having applied for an adjunct job. After an interlocutor characterized my research as being about “Arabs in Brazil,” the dean looked at me and asked, “How many did you interview? 5 or 6?” I retorted that there are mainstream estimates in the millions. Things have improved since then, but only by building a critical mass through networks such as LACISA.

I began to think more widely about the Muslim past and present in/of Latin America and the Caribbean when Dr. Suad Joseph’s team had reached out and asked for an entry that appeared in the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* series that she founded. This was around 2005. Having specialized in Brazil, I had some familiarity with the African Muslim presence, mostly through the lens of the 1835 *malê* rebellion, but not much else. Because of the encyclopedia series founded by Dr. Joseph, I started to systematically read beyond Arab Muslim migrant trajectories that I focused on for my dissertation and first book. Shortly afterwards, I joined the Latin American and Latino Studies department at DePaul University, and my colleagues there welcomed my kind of transregional approach to the idea of Latin America. The then director of Latin American and Latino Studies, Dr. Lourdes Torres, welcomed courses on Arabs in the U.S. and across the Americas. And the then director of the Islamic World Studies program, Dr. Aminah McCloud, welcomed my cross-listed course on Muslim histories in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA, which fed into another article of mine as well as the volume I co-edited with María del Mar Logroño Narbona and Paulo Pinto. Now that I am at the University of Illinois, I have continued to redraw area and ethnic studies, but the service commitments on campus sometimes make it difficult to sustain connections with emerging scholars and networks across the world. For this reason, I cannot thank you enough for this opportunity to be featured in LACISA’s newsletter.

**You are obviously playing on the well-known phrase “Manifest Destiny” with your title and terminology, “Manifold Destiny.” Would you tell us a bit more about what this means and how this speaks to how Arabs have navigated multiple regimes of power and imperial machinations in the American hemisphere?**

There actually is a road trip cookbook with the same title, riffing off that part of an engine that airs and fuels the cylinders. With a completely separate intention from the cookbook, I use “Manifold Destiny” to refer to the “many” exceptional regimes of governance that Muslim Arabs “fold” into. The setting is what English-speakers usually call the tri-border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, a hemispheric crossroads historically famous for waterfalls and cheap electronics. If one googles, “Muslims at the tri-border” or “Arabs at the tri-border,” one finds numerous conspiracy theories about hemispheric threats or fifth columns with unfiltered bigotry and xenophobia. Far from being external or even antithetical to U.S.-Latin American relations, Arabs and Muslims have entered and have been conscripted in multiple state agendas that look east, north, south, and west in hemispheric coloniality. My book is as much about the cross-border trade and activism fostered by Muslim Arabs at the tri-border as it is about the state powers that have assailed and facilitated them.

Muslim Arabs mobilize their commercial and civic networks in ways that decenter U.S. American state expansionist ideologies, including “Manifest Destiny” as well as Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” that you critically point to. They cross borders amid the Brazilian state’s westward expansion in the *“marcha para o oeste”* (march toward the west) and the Paraguayan state’s *“marcha hacia el este”* (march toward the east). For decades, Muslim Arabs folded into many state-led expansionist visions, readily as well as reactively, in ways that are ignored, inadvertently or willfully, in the U.S. Against the sort of “spurious scholarship” that Edward Said criticized, my book examines Muslim Arabs as folding *within*, and not outside of, many exceptional state agendas. Muslim Arabs’ border commerce accommodated not only authoritarian Brazil’s rise over the once Argentine-dominated Paraguay, but also the counterterrorist imperatives of Mercosur and the U.S. The book reveals that Muslim Arabs fulfill a “manifold destiny” in the hemispheric past and present of exceptional rule.

## **What kinds of particular insights does studying Arab and/or Muslim communities at American borders/in the American borderlands bring?**

Muslim Arabs' border presence is at once geographical and historical, figurative and literal. Geographically, their trade and activism crisscross a frontier where Portuguese-dominant Brazil meets Spanish-dominant Paraguay and Argentina, and where the indigenous language of Guarani endures among others, marked by the legacy of the Treaty of Tordesilhas/Tordesillas in what Bartolomé Bennassar called the "first division of the world." Not as foreign interlopers but rather as insiders, their border-crossing tells us about the shifting geopolitics between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, as well as Mercosur and U.S. Their export/import businesses and civic organizing reflect Brazilian sway over the historically Argentine-dominated Paraguay as well as the fraught overlap between Mercosur and the U.S. In short, Muslim Arabs inhabit a hemispheric border where multiple states vie for influence.

Historically, Muslim Arabs inhabit the crossroads where the authoritarian past meets the counterterrorist present of this shared American hemisphere. Never put into the same frame of analysis, these two time periods are experienced as uninterrupted forms of exceptional rule by Muslim Arabs at this hemispheric border. Accusations of terrorism have an authoritarian legacy in much of South America, and were levied against neither Muslims nor Arabs, but instead in relation to anyone perceived to question the status quo. Under the authoritarian military regimes that ruled in Brazil (1964-1985), Paraguay (1955-1989), and Argentina (1976-1980), Muslim Arabs opened businesses and founded civic associations that accommodated reigning powers at the tri-border. But instead of experiencing democratic enfranchisement during the 1980s and 1990s, as had occurred elsewhere on the continent, they faced increasing counterterrorist surveillance led by democratizing, post-authoritarian member states of Mercosur as well as the U.S. After the still unresolved attacks against the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, in 1992, and the AMIA community center, in 1994, and more so following the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., in 2001, Muslim Arabs were investigated, again and again, but never absolved

by several state powers. My book casts Muslim Arabs as witnesses of this history of exceptional rule, from the authoritarian past to the counterterrorist present.

Muslim Arabs attest to the tenuousness of democratic aspirations in the hemisphere. All but silenced in apparently democratizing politics, Muslim Arabs at the tri-border point to a still-to-be-concluded illiberal experiment of this hemisphere. They are witness to this hemisphere's political arc of varying extraordinary measures that state powers enact for an indeterminate time. Instead of experiencing what specialists today diagnose as the backsliding of democracy, Muslim Arabs are accommodating more than six decades of exceptional rule.

**In my view, your work is part of a larger ground swell of work in the Americas calling center-periphery models into question and problematizing the politics of area-ization and the politically-informed-defining and scaling of localities, ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures that have long dominated various scholarly disciplines. Could you speak a bit to how your work highlights the flows, frictive intertwining and dialogic interdependence that define the contours of Arab/Muslim experience in the modern and late-modern eras?**

Muslim and Arab migrant trajectories tell us about “over here” across the Americas as well as “over there” in the Middle East, Muslim-majority states, and North Africa. By displacing Europe and the U.S. from the unmarked center in area studies, as critic Juan Poblete has urged, we can see global connections and detachments that have not garnered sufficient attention. In *Another Arabesque*, I focused on how Arabs won greater recognition in ways that animated Brazilian nation-making in a neoliberal world, neither entirely free from nor just derivative of Euro-American metropoles. In *Manifold Destiny*, I turned to how Arabs accommodated authoritarian and counterterrorist regimes through their cross-border trade and activism, folding within but denied full democratic enfranchisement by Euro-American hemispheric coloniality. In *Crescent Over Another Horizon*, we advanced what Arjun Appadurai called a “new architecture for area studies,” understanding that “the capability to imagine regions and worlds is … a globalized phenomenon.” In each of these undertakings, Middle Eastern and more generally Muslim migrant trajectories point to alternative possibilities of a globalizing world.

Influenced by Eric Wolf, Jean Comaroff, and others in historical anthropology, my own books explore the Middle Eastern migrant making of Latin American political economy. Arab and Muslim experiences reveal the greater plurality of global cultural and political economies that entangle with but extend beyond Euro-American power. This is as much about centering the periphery as it is about peripheralizing the center. In the case of Muslim Arab exchanges at and across the border where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet, this means looking at how their trade and activism consolidated shifting South American geopolitics as well as displacing/provincializing the U.S. as one of many state powers in hemispheric affairs.

If I were to locate my academic formation genealogically, I would consider myself to be an intellectual grandchild of Eric Wolf, as I was fortunate to be advised by the latter's student, the late John Burdick, who studied race and religion in Brazil. As Engseng Ho once remarked, Eric Wolf started but did not finish the need to rectify "large gaps in anthropological knowledge," in writing about peoples whose histories were denied, which in the case at hand are Arabs' and Muslims' histories in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Your analysis works in multiple "trans-" directions (up and down the American hemisphere, across the Atlantic, at, across, and between the Three Borders). How might others extend this analysis to other Arab/Muslim communities in the Americas? Elsewhere?**

The transnational or transregional turn in the humanities and social sciences often centers Europe or the U.S. as the starting or ending points. What I propose to do in *Manifold Destiny* is to employ the "trans-" of transnational Arab projects as the "trans-" of a "trans-American" hemispheric scale of analysis. In other words, what does a Muslim Arab transnational approach to the Americas look like? I draw upon an understanding of the "Middle East" as "sets of networks holding together, and held together by, people and things, places and practices," as Andrew Arsan, Akram Khater, and myself had written in the [Mashriq & Mahjar journal](#).

I want to also echo the historian Sarah Gualtieri's recent call for Arab American Studies, and one can add Muslim American Studies too, to borrow from and look toward Latin American Studies. It may not need to be noted that, as Walter Mignolo has written, Latin America is not an area, it is a perspective. LACISA members are well-positioned to contribute to this redrawing of area and ethnic studies as U.S.-framed work increasingly looks toward the south, beyond the Rio Bravo / Rio Grande or the Estrecho de la Florida / Florida Straight. Following the call made by Sarah Gualtieri, others may wish to study Arab and Muslim networks that extend beyond U.S. borders and shield our work against U.S. national encompassment.

**In a bit of a preview of the [colloquium on Muslim philanthropy](#), where you will be presenting, what kinds of philanthropic activities or civic engagement did you observe among the communities you worked in? How did this help — or hinder — their efforts at coming to terms with the “exceptional rules” you reference in your work?**

The working title of the paper that I intend to present at the colloquium is, "Muslim Beneficence at a Hemispheric Crossroads of Authoritarian and Counterterrorist Rule." Muslim Arab community fundraising at the border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina has been indulged or suspended by shifting exceptional orders. What has been a civil right for nearly any other group in civil society has functioned as a favor granted by authoritarian governments or denied by counterterrorist regimes. The presentation will explore how a mosque that Muslim Arabs fundraised to build during the authoritarian past came under counterterrorist suspicion in the post-authoritarian democratic present-day. Especially today, Muslims Arabs at the border think twice before making any donation in fear that they will be accused of fundraising for groups that are deemed terrorist. I am very much looking forward to meeting other presenters and participants in the colloquium. I think the colloquium is a testament to LACISA's networking, with the Freie Universität Berlin's Latin American and Caribbean Islamic Studies and Indiana University's Muslim Philanthropy Initiative.

**Anything else you want to share about your work?**

I'd like to say that an immense amount of research still needs to be undertaken, and whether our fields develop further will mostly depend upon the early career scholars

who have just begun their graduate studies, or are finishing their master or doctorate degrees, or are recently-minted Ph.Ds. I want to tell them to take heart, and if they ever feel discouraged, to remember that things are not going to change without their work. When I was finishing with my dissertation some twenty years ago, I feared that I would not get published or find a job because my work was somewhat “out of place,” especially in a U.S. academy that did not center Middle Eastern, Muslim, or North African peripheries, and tended to parochialize Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino U.S.A. as well. I think that is changing, but everything rests upon what younger scholars are doing, and how their intellectual vocations will fare.

### **What's next for you and your research?**

I have a few current book projects, the most advanced of which is “Arab Americana in Spanish and Portuguese: An Open Frontier.” It explores audio, print, and visual texts read as *árabe* (Arab) in Spanish and Portuguese that are occasionally translated to and from English. This cultural and literary transit in a multilingual *mahjar* (diaspora, in Arabic) defines what I am calling Arab Americana. I rethink the *mahjar* as “an open frontier,” drawing upon Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s insight regarding knowledge production about the Caribbean. How do *árabes* (Arabs) connect and part ways at the *frontera / fronteira* (frontier, in Spanish and Portuguese) with the U.S.? Drawing upon archival, ethnographic, and literary research underway in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Uruguay, my book will focus on the cultural and intellectual production of *árabes* which entangles and eludes counterparts and others in the U.S. Their frontier opens the transnational turn of Arab American Studies toward what Walter Mignolo calls “the idea of Latin America.” Three of the book’s chapters draw from previous articles and presentations. I am currently conducting research and expanding other previous presentations for the three other chapters of the book.