

“State Multiculturalism: Literary Studies and U.S. Public Diplomacy After 9/11”

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In this paper, I examine the U.S. State Department’s deployment of U.S. literary culture in the Arabic Book Program (1986-), the anthology *Writers on America* (2002), and, to a lesser extent, the children’s education initiative, *My Arabic Library* (2007-). While these variegated attempts at public diplomacy include a wide variety of authors and texts, a steady commitment to novels by contemporary writers of color (e.g., Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* [the Arabic Book Program] or books about historical figures from disadvantaged populations (children’s books about Louis Braille [My Arabic Library]) informs the State Department’s recent literary initiatives, particularly those directed toward the Middle East. In part, this emphasis on books by or about minority figures recalls the U.S. government’s fifty-year old strategy of deploying African American cultural ambassadors--jazz musician Louis Armstrong is perhaps the most famous--in an effort to curry favor with foreign populations sensitive to U.S. crimes of prejudice and disenfranchisement. But there is another story to tell here, one that has as much to do with recent changes in U.S. literary and cultural studies as it does with U.S. foreign policy. Those manifestations of contemporary state multiculturalism draw upon and to some degree support the academy’s post-1960s transformation of the U.S. literary canon. The State Department makes common cause with the Modern Language Association and the American Studies Association not to rethink dominant notions of literary value and political belonging, to be sure, but rather to promote a neoliberal world order that accommodate Middle Eastern peoples globally in much the same limited pluralist manner that anthologies and syllabi incorporate African Americans and Chicano/as nationally. The inclusion of such Arab-American writers as Elmaz Abinader and Naomi Shihab Nye in *Writers on America* makes particularly visible the way in which representative status in a new U.S. literary canon reflects and produces representative status in a new U.S.-controlled world order--without changing in real terms everyday life for disadvantaged populations in the Middle East. What I am after, in sum, is a better sense of how seemingly progressive transformations of U.S. humanities scholarship may inadvertently play a role in the formation of a new U.S. hegemony.