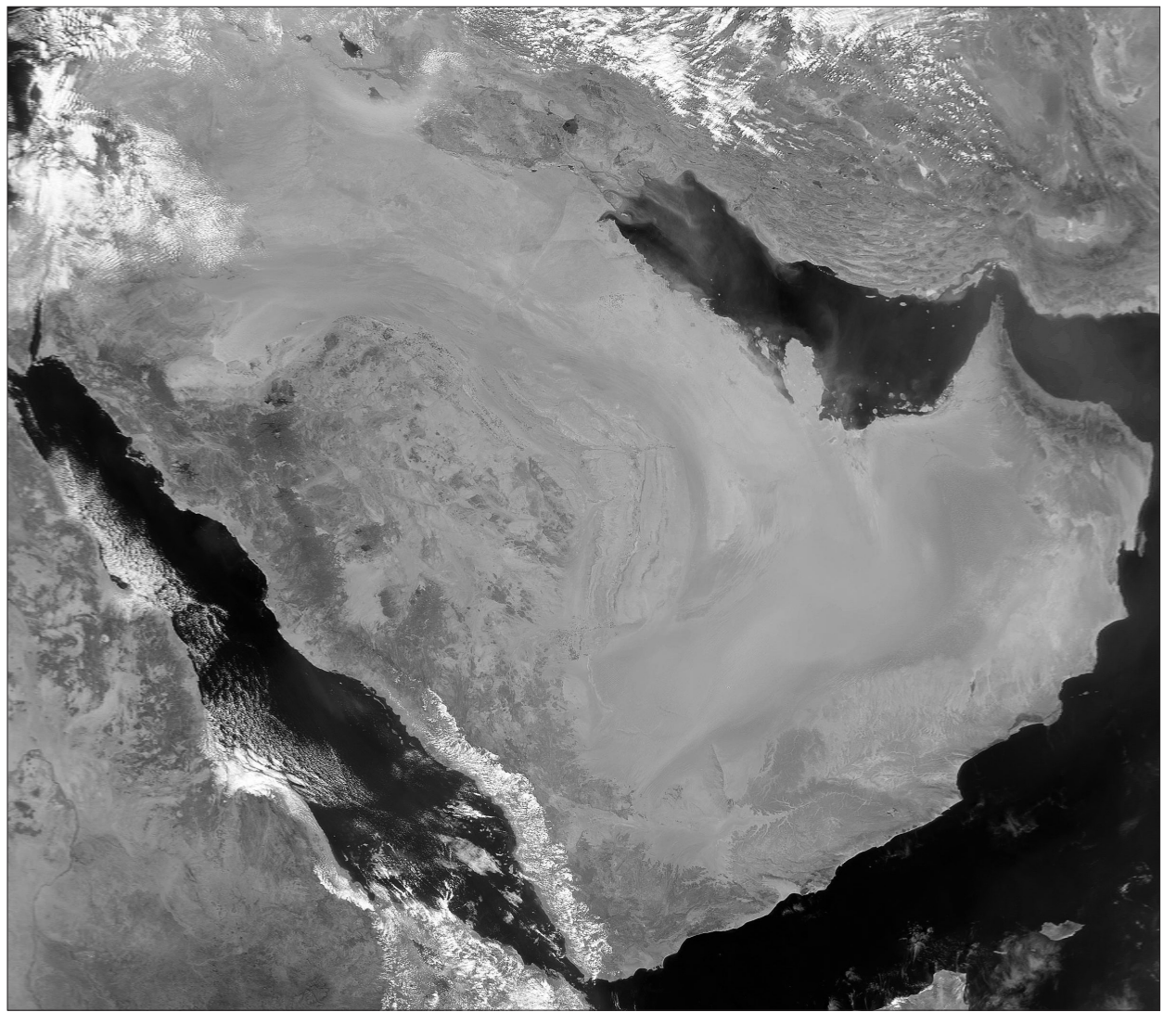


Special thanks to all the reviewers and essayists who came forward in short order to contribute to this focus on Arab-American literature. I did not solicit reviews on particular books or authors; instead, I let the writers choose what they felt was best. What they chose were among the most celebrated recent works, though many others could also have been included. This is a moment of remarkable and unprecedented literary production among Arab Americans, and this focus could not be timelier; this selection amply demonstrates the breadth and diversity of Arab-American literature—which would include not only multiple generations of Arab Americans, but also figures who have contributed voluminously to Arab literature through translation and their own poetry, such as Marilyn Hacker. Though it is standard practice to provide a précis of the reviews that comprise the focus, I have woven the names of the reviewed writers throughout this introduction rather than explicate the reviews individually since the essays (and the essayists) stand sturdily on their own.

In the very first Arab-American novel, the brilliant picaresque *The Book of Khalid* (1911), Ameen Rihani's eponymous character proclaims, "I am a citizen of two worlds—a citizen of the Universe; I owe allegiance to two kingdoms." It is the dash between these two utterances that most intrigues me, a marker of the extra-linguistic leap from the well-worn notion of the immigrant's dual identity (threaded and tugging between the Old Country and the New World) to the idea of the immigrant as a proto-cosmopolite, one whose travel explodes the very idea of identity tethered inextricably and ultimately to nation. Yet even here, despite his leap, the problem of allegiance returns in the next utterance. "Where and to whom do I belong?" are questions that haunt immigrant and ethnic writing, and with a particular intensity under the pressures of empire and colonialism so evident throughout the Middle East. Arab-American literature and culture are many things, and perhaps its multitudes trace back to the slow breakup of the Ottoman Empire, whose various peoples and languages and cultures and faiths echo the dazzling diversity of the new Arab-American literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

If the early heady cosmopolitanism of Ameen Rihani and Kahlil Gibran strategically employed and occasionally reinforced Orientalist ideas in American culture, the energy and vision of their *Ar Rabita al-Qalamiah* ("The Pen League") was not fully realized until nearly a century later with the full flowering of civil rights, national liberation, and ethnic pride movements in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. Arab Americans themselves—who legally had been considered "white" but who often faced discrimination based on immigrant status and religious/cultural difference—often chose the path of quiet assimilation. In the words of pioneering scholar Evelyn Shakir, "the first generation of Arab American writers (as might be expected of immigrants in an age of rampant xenophobia) dressed carefully for their encounter with the American public, putting on the guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters. They could not hide their foreignness, but they could make it respectable." For nearly fifty years, the best Arab-American writers (among them William Peter Blatty, the author of *The Exorcist* (1971), whose mother happened to be close friends with my Lebanese grandmother) only referred to their ethnicity in joking or minimizing ways (Blatty's memoir about



SeaWiFS image capture of the Arabian Peninsula (2000)

his early years and war experience is called *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* [1960]).

***"Where and to whom do I belong?"
are questions that haunt
immigrant and ethnic writing.***

It's emblematic, I think, that Arab-American poet D. H. Melhem focused her scholarship on Gwendolyn Brooks, whose career moved from the witty and empathic formalist portraits of Bronzeville residents to increasingly sympathetic poetic dialogues with Black Nationalism. Emboldened as well by the courageous work of Edward Said—whose landmark *Orientalism* was quickly followed by ground-breaking critiques of empire, Zionism, and representations of Islam—Arab-American writers such as Lawrence Joseph, Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sam Hazo, Elmaz Abinader, and others began to write Arab-American life in a way that began to get serious critical and public attention in the 1980s and 1990s.

Critic Steven Salaita has called the recent rise of Arab-American literature to be one of "exponential development," with a remarkably robust multiplicity of style and theme. In his words, "there is no such thing as diversity in Arab America; there are diversities. We do not adhere to a singular body politic: we engage in all sorts of politics. We do not occupy an Arab American culture: we belong to numerous cultures." Yet certain themes recur throughout the body of work, as he notes: not only immigration and assimilation, but also U.S. racism, xenophobia, and marginalization. And, more particularly, Arab-American literature returns to the paroxysm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, Islam, and patriarchy/homophobia—all themes exacerbated and irritated

by empire and the reactions to empire.

Read alongside Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of "minor literature" is a particularly useful lens through which to consider Arab-American literature. First, minor literature is marked by the deterritorialization of language by a minority (and polyglot) writer. Second, in minor literature, the "cramped space [of the writer's world] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it." This hyper-politicization is further pressurized by the ways in which the "minor" writer constantly writes not merely for herself but for a collective whose agency is compromised by its minoritarian status. Finally, in minor literature, an "individuated enunciation" cannot "be separated from a collective enunciation."

Considering Arab-American literature, I propose a slight reordering that emphasizes the problematics of reception and the politics of representation that complicate and often threaten to silence or domesticate Arab-American subjectivity. First, there is the politicization of all things Arab. This politicization is inextricably connected to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, driven by the geopolitical thirst for oil and desire to support Israel and the Gulf States at almost any cost. Nearly every articulation or representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must face the condemnatory force of Israel apologists and the smear of anti-Semitism employed in ways that silence dialogue and encourage silent complicity.

While readerly interest also peaked in the years after the 9/11 attacks—if sometimes only to

Metres continued on page 15

TRANSFER

Naomi Shihab Nye

BOA Editions, Ltd.

<http://www.boaeditions.org>

121 pages; cloth, \$23.00; paper, \$16.00

The inmost spirit of poetry...is at bottom...the voice of pain—and the physical body, so to speak, of poetry, is the treatment by which the poet tries to reconcile that pain with the world.

—Ted Hughes

The back cover holds the first telling clue to an understanding of this book. A picture of the poet, age 8, and her father, taken in one of those photo booths, shows them looking into the mirror. His fleshy hands and face embrace and protect her; her face is lit up with delight and surprise at what she sees. *Transfer* is about the loss of this father, Aziz Shihab—Palestinian, American—and his people's loss of Palestine. Aziz Shihab was a journalist and author of two memoirs (*Does the Land Remember Me?* [2007] and *A Taste of Palestine* [1993]). He was an exuberant man, greeting everyone as a friend (sometimes to the embarrassment of his children), singing loudly in the shower in two languages. His daughter recounts in the introduction her frustration at not having a dialogue with her father while he was alive. After his death, through this collection, she becomes his "anthem." The whole book is a eulogy to the man. "Missing him contains moments so intense I don't know how I will continue." An interview with the two may be seen on YouTube, conducted just months before his death from kidney and heart failure.

Aziz Shihab (1927–2007), expelled from his Jerusalem home in 1948, left Palestine in 1950 to study journalism in the U.S. He married an American, and Naomi was born in 1952. She grew up in a home that privileged "clear attention to language." She describes herself as a "wandering poet," one who goes all over the world to bring stories and poetry about peace, humanity, and the Palestinian cause to poetry workshops and to school children and their teachers. It is a mission her father engaged in, speaking to anyone or any group that would listen: Jews, Evangelicals, Muslims, people in shops and diners. "We were born to wander, to grieve / lost lineage, what we did to one another, / on a planet so wide open for doing."

In the poem "Scared, Scarred, Sacred," the poet remembers the time her father explained the need for a bus transfer. After his death, she finds stacks of pink transfer tags in his drawer, pulled off suitcases used on long flights. (An impressionistic image of a tag dominates the front cover.)

All your life you were flying back to
your lost life....
You kept the key, as Palestinians do.
You kept the doorknocker.
And now you are homeless for real.

Fire ate your body, you became as big as
the sky.

The poet is surely playing upon the other, sinister meaning of "transfer": the euphemism that Israeli leaders used in the late 1940s to describe the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their land and homes.

In a sequence of eleven poems ("Just Call Me Aziz"), Nye uses titles taken verbatim from his notebooks and composes poems written to the titles (she says they "emerged"), but in her father's voice. The voice is direct, generous, and unsophisticated. "Why was someone else's need for a house / greater than our need for our own homes / we were already living in?" Here, however, is the nub of the Israeli-Palestinian (Jewish-Arab) conflict. Was it ever possible for a people afflicted over centuries by expulsions, pogroms, and a final genocide to find a safe haven, a homeland, without displacing some other population? That displacement is ongoing. For Palestinians, Nye writes, "it was like a person who had died in another country / and we never had been able to wash the body."

Nye writes in a conversational free verse and is a master of surprise endings and epiphanies.

Yet Aziz was not a bitter man. He hoped for peace; he prayed for and expected peace. In her eulogy at the end of the book ("Wavelength"), Nye repeats "his endless stubborn hope—someday there will be justice for Palestinians and Israelis living, somehow, together...as the cousins, or brother and sisters, they always were and still are."

In much of Nye's earlier works (see the fine assemblage of poetry from seven previous collections, *Tender Spot: Selected Poems* [2008]), the poet's persona embraces sweetness, a witness to nature, and faith in the essential goodness of people. As her father would surely say it, she wrote, "I'm not interested in / who suffered the most. / I'm interested in / people getting over it." But a terrible bitterness does spill out in the poem "The Only Democracy in the Middle East," where a disembodied Israeli soldier's voice snarls orders at Palestinians being expelled from their homes, the young men to be carted away and forbidden to hug or say goodbye: "Don't give us trouble." It's not a particularly good poem—unsubtle, polemic, the lines coming too easily. It was meant to disturb, and it does—to my ear, it is close to the Nazi language of an "Aktion."

A more compelling "voice of pain" comes out of the sorrow for loss of her father and his homeland. To cite a few examples:

- "Will You Still Love Me When I'm Dead?" expresses the all-too-common experience of not being there at the instant of death of a loved one, here in favor of checking email. "Who was I hoping to hear from? / You were right there. Cracking / thunder the moment you left. / We'll still love you when we're dead too."

- "Hello Palestine, For Aziz, Who Loved Jerusalem": "Now, a seven-pound box of ashes. After many months, we still / have not scattered or buried them. / They are not him, but I kiss the box."



- "Undone": "Mom cancelled your cell phone two days after you died. I could not believe this. What if you had called us?"

- "Ringing": "Every road, every sea, every beach by every sea, keeps lining up with what you loved— / Here's a line of silent palm trees. It's as if you answered the phone."

Nye writes in a conversational free verse, often without stanza breaks, and only occasionally does she play with the shape of the poem on the page, or allow words to chime against each other. She is, however, a master of surprise endings and epiphanies. The strongest poems work in metaphor. In "Later," for instance, a tunnel beneath our feet grows deeper as we toss into it wasted time, trivial pursuits, inattention to others: "Still, you love them, / these people on top of the tunnel, clutching little lists, plastic tubs of summer squash and tomatoes to share with the neighbors, or not." In "At the Block Island Ferry," a hurricane has made people stay on the island for three whole days. Her father never had a ferry to return to his birthplace again. "At the Block Island ferry I wept for / my father, Palestine, Iraq, millions / aching for passage home, / rarely honored in their pain, and their deaths before a ferry came." Even people on Charon's ferry are accorded more dignity.

Transfer contains the best work this much-honored poet has produced to date. Hers continues to be a voice of conscience and reconciliation.

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The Vernacular Home

Marwa Helal

Although Arab Americans have been contributing to the diverse landscape of American literature since the early 1900s—Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* (1923) and Amin al-Rehani’s *The Book of Khalid* (1911)—few have ventured into American vernacular literature. In this case, vernacular literature means literature that incorporates Arabic dialect with English. One prominent Arab American, Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad, is one of the first authors to create a body of work that does precisely this.

It’s hard to say why other Arab-American writers have not experimented with vernacular text in their work. Hammad has an advantage in that her chosen genre of poetry lends itself more easily to innovation in language, welcoming the playfulness and musicality of two or more languages merging. And Arabic being a poetic language in and of itself—a language with a vocabulary where single words often have meanings so dense that they require several words of another language, especially English, for accurate translation—makes it not surprising that Arab-American vernacular would first appear in poetry. Hammad has an added advantage in that her work lives on both the page and on the stage. An accomplished spoken word performer and part of the Tony Award-winning HBO *Def Poetry Jam* (2002–2007), she has succeeded at creating a space for her work in both places.

In a brief interview with Hammad after the release of *breaking poems* (2008), she said simply, “I wanted to write more like how I think and speak.” But on the page, Hammad risks alienating readers who do not understand Arabic, as well as exoticizing her work. But overall, her poetry not only attracts a diverse audience and sparks dialogue not just about language, poetry, music, national or ethnic origins, Palestine and Israel, but also hits home with Arab Americans of all backgrounds who hear the sounds of a language they grew up with or left behind dancing alongside the language they now live in.

As the author’s body of work has evolved, so has the fluidity of the voice and the use of vernacular. In *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (2010), the use of vernacular has more of an exotified feel

only because it stands out in italics as the text of “the other,” whereas in *breaking poems*, the Arabic transliterations sit equally alongside the English text. The repetition of words such as “*wa*” and “*ana*” also create a thread for the non-Arabic speaking reader to follow and can be understood from the context: for example, *wa*=and, *ana*=I.

In James Baldwin’s 1979 essay titled “If Black English isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?”, he writes: “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.” If that is the case, then Hammad has succeeded at refusing to be defined by the English language alone. Since her earliest works, *Zaatar Diva* (2006) and *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, she has always merged Arabic words with English ones in her collections. Baldwin goes on to write, “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged.)” While Baldwin wrote this well before Hammad’s time, this statement becomes an important theme to keep in mind as the poet becomes empowered through her use of language in retelling stories of Palestinian refugees, returning to the Middle East and Zionism. Baldwin, again: “It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity.” And it is in lines like the following that we see the inner-workings of Hammad’s mind and various identities through her dance between languages as she creates her own vernacular.

We as readers bear witness to a poet taking refuge in and creating a new home on the page.

Excerpts from *Born Palestinian, Born Black*. From “dedication”:

his heart transcending his body
he vowed to return to *phalasteen*
bil roh *bil dem*
with his life with his blood

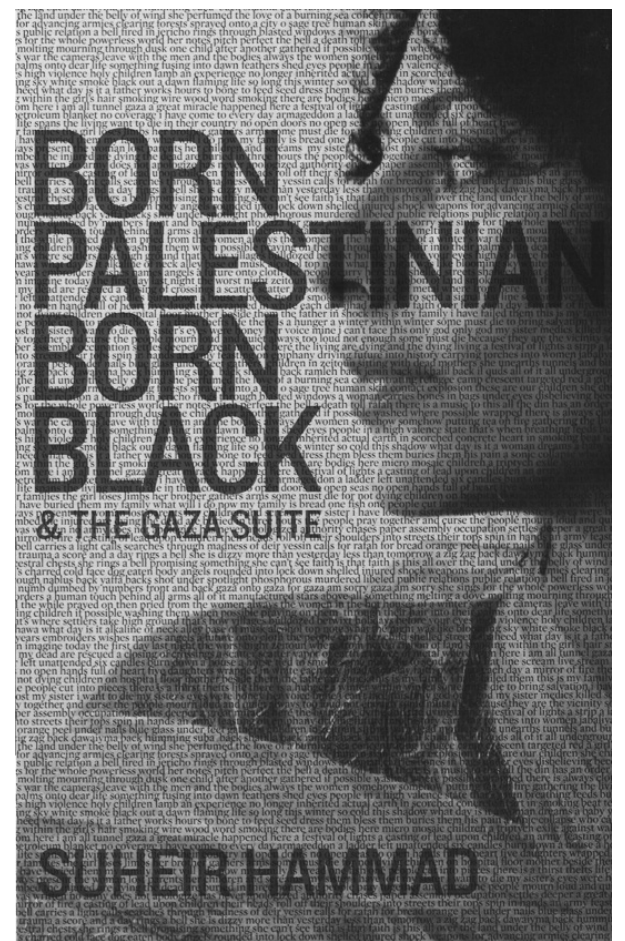
And from “argela remembrance”:

smoking the water pipe
pass the *argela*
head tipped down
to my father
inhaling strawberry tobacco

A close reading of the poet’s work reveals that in the first excerpt from the piece titled “dedication,” the poet transliterates the Arabic words according to the exact dialect pronunciation specific to Palestine. In the second excerpt from “argela remembrance,” the object, *argela*, in this case is explained (“smoking the water pipe”) before it is transliterated. And a translation of “*bil roh* *bil dem*” follows in the next line: “with his life with his blood.” In Hammad’s more recent work, we see her shift away from providing an explanation for her use of vernacular.

Excerpts from *breaking poems*. From “(wind) break (her)”:

habibi wants the moon



but the moon is far away
a city in exile
bi albe ana nar (translation: in my heart
i am [on] fire)

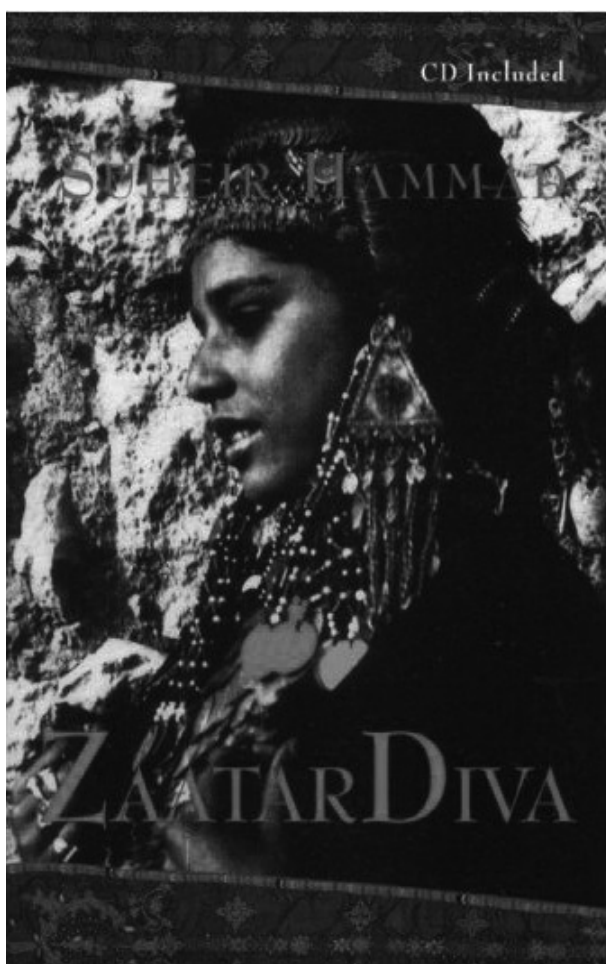
Or, from “break (word)”:

cumin kizbara a kiss bara (translation:
cumin cilantro a kiss outside)
herb quartz strung key feather door...
corner the cornich

The absence of italics calls for attention, for the reader to re-read and re-consider the poet’s intention. And the way the Arabic stands even leads the English become Hammad’s unique signature. The added musicality and alliteration in lines like “*kidbara a kiss bara*” show the author’s ability to make new meanings out of Arabic and English words because of their placement in a new context.

The form Hammad’s poems take on paper legitimize that hybrid half-English, half-Arabi “*Arabi mikasar*”—broken Arabic—that generations of Arab-Americans have come to speak in their newly adopted homes abroad. The vernacular holds up a mirror that reflects not only Hammad’s bilingual thought processes and natural code-switching, but our own. Surely, while some readers find comfort in this vernacular, others will be alienated by it. But what Hammad’s work does, no matter the audience, is open up a dialogue about language, home, being human, immigration, politics, Israel and Palestine, and, ultimately, it allows a space where we as readers bear witness to a poet taking refuge in and creating a new home on the page—a home that she invites us into through vernacular.

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TOCQUEVILLE

Khaled Mattawa

New Issues

<http://www.wmich.edu/~newissue>

71 pages; paper, \$15.00

FC_Emerson was looking for the Great Poet of America. I'm looking for the Great Poem of Globalization. The long poem "Tocqueville," in Khaled Mattawa's collection of the same title, is a draft of that poem. It is really a multi-genre piece, combining verse, prose passages, and dialogues; it is poem, essay, documentary, and dirge. Some portions are original to the author, while others come verbatim from disparate sources. It is also a montage, because it tells a story from various, simultaneous points of view in order to perceive the whole. And because the "story" of globalization is so large, the narratives that the poem weaves together are heterogeneous: first-person accounts of life and death in war zones in Sierra Leone and Somalia; a patient telling a therapist the story of a friend who turns out to be a banally evil Internet child pornographer; an ongoing dialogue between social critics, one of whom is probably a white American, the other, a person of color who came to the U.S. from another country; and "special operatives" who cynically recount "interventions" in impoverished nations on behalf of—well, somebody with money. Thus, the work implicitly asks how anyone can connect anything with anything when the "theater of operations" is the entire planet. The book ultimately leaves one to connect the stories oneself—or to take up the task.

In "Tocqueville," Mattawa depicts neoliberal globalization by bringing together the quotidian and the Big Events, the masses and the "players," American racial politics and the global politics/psychology of race. The portions that occur in the metropole tend to emphasize individual isolation—the kind Tocqueville warned us against: "Where are they? I mean when do you meet them, really, these fellow citizens? / On airplanes mainly.... It's fascinating, the quiet, the solitude." By stark contrast, the portions that occur in the global "periphery" are much more populated and sometimes include terrifying accounts of people fighting, killing, and exploiting one another.

This book marks a significant shift in Mattawa's poetics. As Philip Metres has noted, *Tocqueville*, "in contrast to his lyrically-driven previous work, pronounces that it no longer suffices to sing, even to sing of dark times." If *Amorisco* (2008) was cooked, *Tocqueville* is raw—and bloody. It is raw aesthetically—seams show, and Mattawa deliberately avoids the high polish of his earlier work. It is also raw in the sense that it doesn't pull punches, as in graphic accounts of unimaginable brutality, or in the (U.S.) poet's reflections:

A dream between us
fogging what we want to see...

A prison, but then everywhere else is a prison
...

Who ain't a slave, asks Ishmael. (46)

The poem situates Ishmael's statement—not

to mention Tocqueville's own observations—in a contemporary milieu unimaginable in the early nineteenth century. This book can be described as Arab-American literature, but it situates both the Arabic-speaking world and the U.S. in the context of a marketized, surveilled world dominated by a few corporations and nation-states, as when the poem notes:

the way the satellite eye zooms down
on your house, and then out and out (like in
the movies).

A scent grows in the mind then:

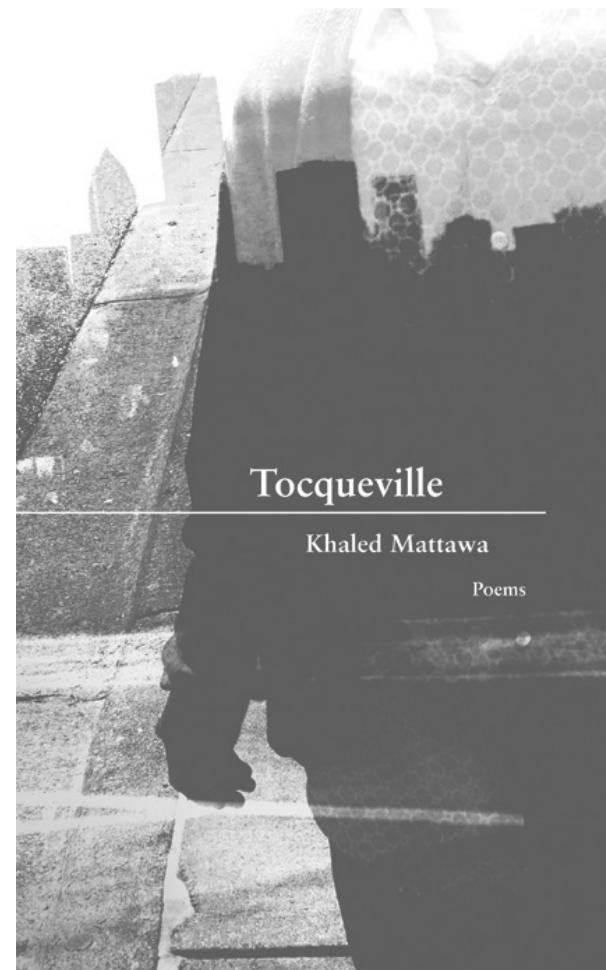
The fustiness, the ancient beard,
the house made from sun-baked bricks
and its salted sheepskins . . .
the breath of dried palm fronds in my
grandfather's house. (27)

The scene at the end sounds like Mattawa's recollections of his native Libya in previous books. But here it is seen via Google Earth—seen, that is, by someone with access to a computer and a good internet connection. Mattawa is intent upon zooming out and looking at both his natal and adopted countries in the light of the transnational networks that enmesh us all—not least of all the lyric poet: "Sometimes I want to call what I see / through the keyhole 'a flower.' / Then I see the clock racing, / the digits tumbling over themselves" (23). Flowers and erotic love can never quite get beyond the equation time=money in this book. "[L]yric resolution / demands an arrival into what does not suffice"—a turn away from the realities of terrorism and economic immiseration.

Tocqueville is raw—and bloody. Seams show, and Mattawa deliberately avoids the high polish of his earlier work.

Much of *Tocqueville* could be applicable to many different people or places: "Someone will resist . . . and a river will run between hands as they shake a doubtful peace." (22) Which resistance? Which treaty? Indeed, the big epistemological question the book raises—one essential to globalization—is the relation of the general to the particular. There is a danger in trying to "think globally": one can too easily revert to the famous photo of the earth from space—or seen from an airplane window—which is the view of the "transnational capitalist class" that speaks the language of "cost assessment charts, patent infringement, / distribution of affected populations, national origin . . ." (8) But "[h]ow to see it when you're not in it, or don't think you're in it?" (34), when "each particular just about erases the luminous clarity of a general ideal" (38) and "whatever is eternal is now / convertible to exchange . . ." (63). "Universals," historically the stuff of both lyric poetry and centralized policy making, are hard for the mind to maintain if one looks too closely at events on the ground. In the end, however, "the answer is always too large for the question," a situation which can either prevent the question from being asked or lead to a redoubled effort to understand and to act.

The title poem steals the show. But there are also some very accomplished shorter pieces in *Tocqueville*. And the book contains three other long poems, ironically titled "Power Point" I, II, and III, that are some of Mattawa's most experimental work,



containing film directions and tables, with multiple voices, sources, and styles juxtaposed. Throughout, *Tocqueville* unsettles because of its honesty, both in depiction and reflection. There is no pretense that this book is going to show the way forward. Rather, it might be called a self-critiquing political elegy. Too many have died, too many have failed, for one to have unalloyed optimism. Yet the moment is still unbearably painful, both the poet's personal losses and what he sees on his television set. On the one hand, it is hard to see what to do, hard not to see this era as anything but a tragic mess (hopeful new revolutions notwithstanding). On the other hand, the political elegy can become an easy, generalizing pessimism, a lament that one can connect nothing with nothing: "elegy as the devil's last kernel of regret" (63) or "a product consumed by a man alone in a hotel room" (64). The triumph of this poem and book is precisely in making us *feel* the nature of this dilemma in a way no journalistic account could. But who is "us"—"Which 'we' are you inserting yourself into now?" (44). This is a good question, and is particularly acute for an American poet who grew up in a country on the "business end" of U.S. foreign policy: do you see the world through the eye of the unmanned drone, or from the dusty ground level of most places in the world? Or both, by turns? *Tocqueville* is a bold attempt to work through this fundamental and urgent question.

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LOOM

Thérèse Soukhar Chehade

Syracuse University Press

<http://www.syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu>

182 pages; paper, \$19.95

FC_If contemporary Arab-American literature is “a *political* category, not a cultural or historical given,” as Steven Salaita writes in *Modern Arab Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (7), then it also is political in the sense that “the personal is political.” As Carole Hansich and other 1970s feminists defined this phrase, individual problems must be grappled with in the context of ongoing, collective political action.

Because Thérèse Soukhar Chehade’s finely rendered first novel, *Loom*, uses the Lebanese Civil War as the background to her story of a Maronite Christian immigrant family, it can be grouped thematically with novels such as Etel Adnan’s groundbreaking *Sitt Marie Rose*. Unlike Adnan’s Phalangist *chebabs*, however, the members of Chehade’s Christian militia, called “the party,” (68) are not symbols of a poetic, dangerously addictive hyper-masculinity but are rather examples of the banality of evil. Here is how Eva—the aptly named seductive Lebanese cousin whose impending Christmas visit to the aptly named Scarabee, Massachusetts looms over the novel—recalls her involvement in “the party” from the perspective of twenty years:

She liked some of them, the young ones, barely out of high school, eager to defend the cause and preserve the share of power negotiated in 1943. After dinner they helped her with the dishes and told her about the girls they were dating and those they planned to woo... When she was in a bad mood, they took over the cooking and shrugged off mocking jeers about doing women’s work... A few women, girlfriends and sisters, sometimes visited, bringing clean clothes and cigarettes... They rarely mentioned the war and left within an hour of their arrival, chattering nonstop on their way down, their arms full of dirty laundry (68-69).

Sectarian violence, the metaphorical dirty laundry, “lingered like a foul smell, threatening to erupt at any minute” (69)—but Eva becomes inured to it, her sensitivity another casualty of war. Even the novel’s most brutal incident—the display of the head of a murdered Muslim fighter to an obscenely excited crowd in a Maronite mountain village square—seems in Eva’s recollection like a ghastly movie. Walking home, she “stop[s] at the water fountain to wash her hands stained by the green skin of the [unripe] walnuts” she and her cousin Josephine have been eating (71). It takes the death in a freak bombing of Eva’s husband—a militia member who “saw no contradiction in being a Christian Arab” and viewed “the enemy not [as] a lesser people but an adversary who had to be fought and coaxed into sharing power” (72)—to shock her into genuine mourning.

Eva’s is one of seven haunted voices that

narrate *Loom*, an overlapping narrative of loss and frustrated desires, of dreams deferred and revisited. Five of the other six voices also belong to members of the isolated Zaydan family—ironically, the name in Arabic means “enlarging”—who have been eking out an existence at a convenience store in Scarabee for eighteen years, their social contacts limited to the world of family and store, painful memories of their own war now merging with images of the U.S. war in Iraq glimpsed on television. The trope of the Arab-American merchant—simultaneously burdened and proud—is incarnated by Eva’s cousin George, whose moment of transcendent optimism occurs near the end of the novel:

He... sees before his eyes numbers neatly stacked in his favor, shelves emptied and replenished daily, walls freshly painted the humming of refrigerators like background music, and the cascade of the soda bottles in their chutes snatched by eager hands...(155)

George and his wife, Salma, have settled uneasily into middle age, gaining weight as if to anchor themselves in a harsh environment in which their dark skin and accented English mark them as eternal foreigners—either as Arabs who one day “will finally confess to being named Ali or Ahmed” (47) or as Mexicans—another ethnic group despised despite their Christianity and association with Western culture. When Salma is insulted as a “fucking spic” after accompanying her daughter to a local playground, her solution is to have George build a swing set in their yard so she never has to return. (In contrast, the Arab-American mother and daughter in Randa Jarrar’s 2008 novel *A Map of Home* handle being mistaken for Mexicans with humor and panache.)

*alskdfjl;adsjfl;asiffjasdfl;jal;fj;aljsdf;la
jdf;l;ajdf;l;jas;lfdkja;l;sdjfl;lasdjfl;kasjdf
;ljasd;l;ljfadlsfas*

Marie, George, and Salma’s eighteen-year-old daughter, whose conception during a lull in the fighting was the impetus for the family’s emigration from Beirut, is the voice of assimilation, secretly sleeping with her American boyfriend and tattooing a clover above her navel as a sign of rebellion and hope—a scar chosen rather than imposed upon her. Marie is plotting to escape the Massachusetts snow to study at Berkeley—California is the new golden land, as well as the American landscape most similar to the Lebanon she never has seen. Her red hair, attributed to a Turkish ancestor, is another sign of her difference.

Also different—because of their marginalized roles even within the protective circle of family—are George’s unmarried sister, Josephine, and their fragile widowed mother, Emilie. Josephine and Emilie are obsessed with their neighbor, an enigmatic American man that Marie nicknames “Loom.” The lonely Josephine—whose lifelong sense of unattractiveness has been intensified by life in Scarabee—develops a crush on him, while Emilie, who in her isolation decides to become mute, sneaks him Arabic food and is given small, beautifully carved animals in return. (Both are deceived in the exchange—the food is cooked by the fastidious Salma, who rarely lets her

mother-in-law into her kitchen, and the animals were carved by the man’s deceased wife.)

Loom—otherwise known as David Finch—is the novel’s seventh voice, a catalyst and a counterweight to the long-desired yet feared Eva. His own exile in Scarabee, like the Zaydans’s, is the product both of tragedy and energetic inertia. While Eva, marooned in a New York hotel by a heavily symbolic snowstorm, complains the New World is “like...the damned North Pole” (111), Finch feverishly builds an eccentric igloo in his yard, a massive yet impermanent monument to his son, killed in an accident.

Finch is a songbird nearly as mute as Emilie and more depressed than Salma, whose beautiful singing voice vanished after her immigration. His identity too is fragmented. He is described as both dark skinned and blue eyed; he had a Polish-Catholic mother who dragged him to Sunday Mass while his father—about whom little else is revealed—slept in; he once owned a thriving computer business but now lives like a monk on his savings.

It is unsurprising but oddly touching that only in Finch’s provisional space can the Zaydans—provoked by a crisis that for once ends happily—come together to enact for him, as much as for themselves, the domestic rituals of a peaceful family. These strangers in a strange land are somehow strengthened by their brief yet lingering encounter, although the past remains vividly present—as in Josephine’s imagination, Eva finally arrives via taxi at her cousins’ freshly shoveled sidewalk “in heels too high for the weather” (182).

Angele Ellis is the author of Arab on Radar (2008) and Spared (2011). Her poetry and prose have appeared in Mizna, Shine, Grey Sparrow, Grasslimb, and THEMA, among other publications.

BIRDS OF PARADISE

Diana Abu-Jaber

Norton

<http://books.wwnorton.com>

362 pages; cloth, \$25.95

FC_Through most of *Birds of Paradise*, there is nothing—save Diana Abu-Jaber’s name on the cover—to mark the book as “ethnic.” While the action takes place in melting-pot Miami, the ethnicities of the core characters are not flagged up. The central female characters are given slightly old-fashioned, British-sounding names: a grandmother Geraldine, a mother Avis, and the beautiful young Felice Muir. Felice’s father is Brian, her brother is Stanley, and the family doesn’t extend much further than that. Early in the book, when Avis asks about her father’s identity, she’s told, “don’t be tedious, dear.”

This is Abu-Jaber’s fourth novel, and her first without prominent Arab characters. It is a novel that feels highly architected—like a giant, complicated cake—with lovely sentences, a few too many layers, and pockets of rich, strongly felt emotions. It is also a novel that, at its outset, seems to eschew ethnicity, history, and heritage, preferring instead to focus on who the characters are *in America*, in this very moment, in their own skins. Forget where they come from. Let’s just see who they are.

The novel’s compelling central story is how Avis, who bakes complicated, high-end sweets, tries to reconnect with her runaway daughter. Felice is a beautiful girl on the edge of eighteen who occasionally models but mostly crashes with other teen runaways. This is the most satisfying and universal layer: a mother chases after a daughter as the daughter runs to escape her mistakes. Around this story, others are built: Avis’s failing marriage to the mundane Brian; Brian’s relationships to his work, his co-workers, and his personal ethics; Avis and Brian’s relationship with their son Stanley; Stanley’s foodie aspirations.

Where ethnicity enters, it is largely superficial: For instance, real-estate lawyer Brian finds it difficult to connect with his bicultural co-workers. His co-worker Javier, Brian thinks, “sees no division between himself and his kids.” Javier is thus more natural, more authentic, and a better father. However, in one of the weaker layers to the novel, Brian discovers that both he and Javier have hidden troubles with their families. There are no real differences between them.

Yet, although Arab-ness is not immediately apparent, there is an Arab character buried deep in the core layer of the book, revealed late in the story. Until we meet this young Arab girl, we know only that Felice has left her family—we are given no clear reason why. But, near the end, we learn that when Felice was thirteen, she had a friend named Hannah Joseph. This was a girl who “talked about her older brother Simon (Semir) who’d killed himself by drinking the cleaning fluids stored under the bathroom sink. She talked about it in a casual way, as if she were describing a shopping trip.”

At first, it’s unclear where Hannah and her twice-named brother have come from. When asked,

Hannah says “Litchfield.” After this, “Felice lifted her eyebrows: almost everyone in her school had started from someplace else—usually their parents’ country.” Hannah clarifies only that “Before Litchfield, other places.”

Hannah finally tells Felice that her real name is Hanan Yusef and that her family left Jerusalem when she was two. But it remains unclear whether she’s Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or atheist, and whether her family left for political or work reasons, or something else entirely. We don’t know what happened in this place called Jerusalem. Hannah/Hanan tells Felice that she’s glad to have a fake American name and, apropos of that, announces, “I hate Arabs. I hate Israelis. I hate soldiers. I hate Saddam Hussein. I hate George Bush. I hate politics, I hate words that begin with the letter *p*. So don’t ask me about any of it.”

There is a bubbling violence inside this young girl’s self-hatred that spreads like an infection to Felice. Hannah/Hanan’s behavior grows wilder and more self-destructive, and the other girls recoil. One day, Felice and her other friends decide that they don’t want to be tainted by this stranger, and they write a letter to the girl. They use cruel and hurtful wording, saying that they are tired of their erstwhile friend’s “weirdness.” Almost immediately after receiving the letter, Hannah/Hanan commits suicide. Felice, shocked at having been a cause of her friend’s death, descends into depression. This depression is why she leaves home.

The novel seems to eschew ethnicity, and where ethnicity enters, it is largely superficial.

Hannah/Hanan is thus the story’s unmoved mover: After this, Avis’s life is turned upside down, and she begins her endless, gut-wrenching search for her daughter. Brian loses touch with his wife and tries to bury himself in his work and co-workers. The elder child, Stanley, is successful but alienated. Felice uses her beauty and manages to skate around serious trouble until she is involved in a murder.

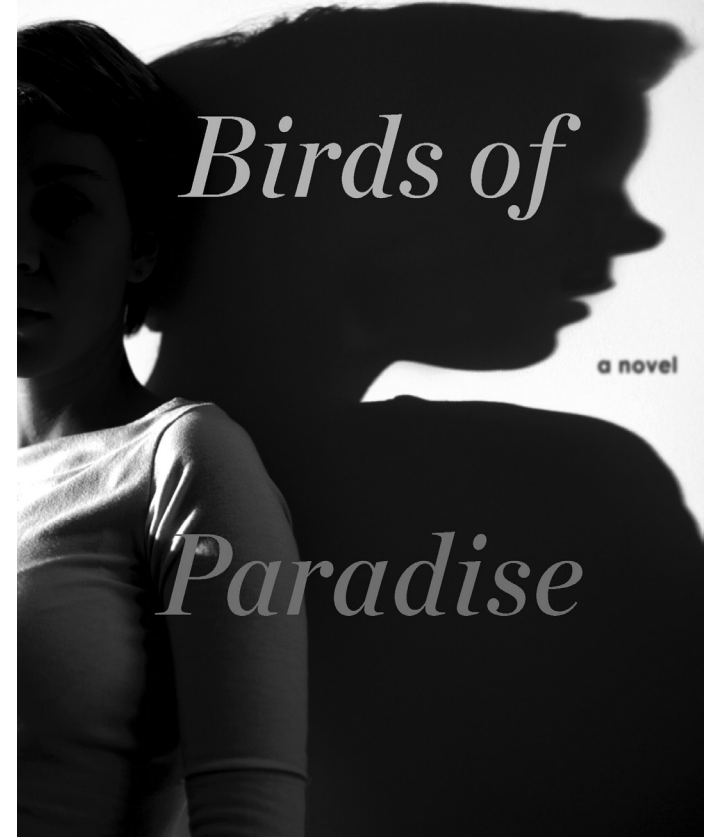
All this begins with the arrival of the mysterious Hanan Yusuf, who is afraid of loud noises and the smell of sulfur, and who came from multi-ethnic, multi-religious Jerusalem.

Thoughts of Hannah/Hanan return to Felice as she is being chased down by a gun-wielding thug in one of the final scenes. “For years, [Felice] thought there was a way to stay safe: when bad stuff happened to people, it was because they were crazy or stupid. She’d even thought that about Hannah.” But the bad things catch up with Felice, and she is almost killed. She is only saved, miraculously, by her boyfriend Emerson.

Here, the wild, nameless violence that begins with Hannah/Hanan’s arrival—and continues through the beaches and clubs—comes to a stop against the boyfriend’s chest. But, although the boyfriend is named for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Felice and her family are hardly saved by self-reliance, which had done them little good. Instead, they are saved by coming closer to one another.

After Felice’s rescue, things ease off. New loves bring both children back within the uneasy family

DIANA ABU-JABER



fold. The book’s ending is with new life, Stanley’s new baby, and Felice naming herself: “Hi baby.... Here I am. It’s Felice.”

Meanwhile, Hannah/Hanan is buried along with her brother Semir. For the core characters, there is a beautiful break in the darkness as “the clouds unravel over their heads.” But the Arab Hannah/Hanan is left behind. Her story is resolved for Felice, but not for itself. The violence of her history is never developed or explained. The tongues of violence simply reached out, lashing and wrapping around the core characters. Then, just as suddenly, they retreated.

Ultimately, the book traces how dangers can tear into a quiet, prosperous, educated American family. In the end, this is a sort of family coming-of-age novel. All of them realize that it just isn’t possible to “stay safe” by relying on themselves alone. At the end, these characters seem to have grown up a little and to have a better understanding of why people rely on one another.

M. Lynx Qualey was born in Minnesota, lives in Egypt, and temporarily resides in North Carolina. Wherever she is, she writes about Arabic literature. You can read her daily blog on the subject at <http://arablit.wordpress.com>.

Optimism in the Hood

Dale Smith

THIS ISA NICE NEIGHBORHOOD

Farid Matuk

Letter Machine Editions
<http://www.lettermachine.org>
138 pages; paper, \$10.00

“All poems are about money / speak and incarnate themselves / in the plain language of money,” announces Farid Matuk in “Do the Moth,” a poem from his first book-length collection, *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*. “The plain language of money” indeed shapes the concerns of the book, with a “plain” though richly evocative language that registers with the kind of alert and culturally perceptive ear established by Edward Dorn’s early lyric writing. No other poet I can think of in recent years so self-consciously adheres to that shock of lyric address, rehearsing subjective states at once self-critical and patiently steadfast amidst the violent upheaval of contemporary global culture.

Subjective positions are performed throughout the poems in brief lyrical narratives that are often beautifully harrowing. Like Dorn, Matuk’s moral inquiries are often unsettling and require the stamina of ongoing self-reflection in the process of reading. Along these lines, Matuk’s stakes are announced fairly early in the book, where he writes, “there / is no world there is / a world if / you stand at all / you stand against it.” Such a stance of incongruence rhetorically orients perspectives by establishing multi-layered relationships of identity and by comparing subjective experience to objective realities. In his evaluations of cultural phenomena (including class, race, gender, and transnational identity), Matuk wryly develops perspectives of incongruity to put forth competing orientations or worldviews that are detonated against a larger construction of “whiteness.” The metaphor of “whiteness” supposes a corrupt world based on histories of failed but often individually desirable transactions, and the poems are calibrated to assess relations of global dominance next to more fragile, local experiences. Dallas, Texas is reproduced as a locale of safe, domestic wagers, where “bank account[s] / keep...growing slow” and “the dog is safe, healthy.” While this Texas of slow growth provides social stability in a decaying empire, Matuk delicately pursues identity distinctions playfully and seamlessly to transcend the limited determinations of geographic placement.

“Tallying Song: As Far,” for instance, a serial poem composed of prose and broken-line verse, connects the social meanings of Hurricane Katrina next to racial configurations established in part by Hollywood and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Matuk produces an experience of democracy that is literally, intimately personal: “I take all of us, the entire possibility of a democratic republic, together in my sinuses to the Blockbuster to get a movie. Inside, a little girl corrals her baby sister away from the jawbreaker machine, pulls her by the hand to a framed poster of a white infant wearing headphones and looking surprised, jig-a-boo. A fancied object of terror.” From the democratic exchange and commodification of race projected by Blockbuster movie posters, Matuk invokes Cornel

West “about the niggerfication of Jim (Youtube [*sic*] it),” weaving a deceptively simple surface of day-book-like entries. Rumbling below, however, is a yearning to “affirm life” even as the author makes quick translations “into the language of Camrys.” An invocation of the Haitian deities—the Loa—further establishes incongruent ways of seeing the disaster of Katrina within a larger frame of racial and geographic identities. Matuk’s achievement is to bring the highs and lows together, to understand relations of commodity culture and historical religious orientations as part of the textures of every day.

Remarkably, despite an implicit critique of whiteness (and by whiteness I mean straight, over-determined social reflexes based on a rotting economic calculus), what’s at stake is a more far-ranging consideration of subjective desire. Cultural critique begins with an embrace of one’s implication in the systems of affect and desire that cohere as a self. Matuk constantly struggles toward a kind of self-objectification in order to look clearly at his participation in the unstable institutions of contemporary culture. He exposes the fraudulent forms of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism,” a discovery “that the world can no longer sustain one’s organizing fantasies of the good life.” The American Dream, one’s “job performance,” or other types of conditioned social and political transactions—these all suggest the range that “cruel optimism” takes in contemporary society. It is an optimism that works against the self, and Matuk largely addresses the hideous fracture to self such transactions induce.

Matuk’s moral inquiries are often unsettling and require ongoing self-reflection in the process of reading.

In “Poem in which Literature and the Market Show Me What There Is to Lose,” he writes:

Guy begging says I could
mesmerize you with words
low seep white
white clouds pass fast
over my last half taco—
sorry you’re so fucked

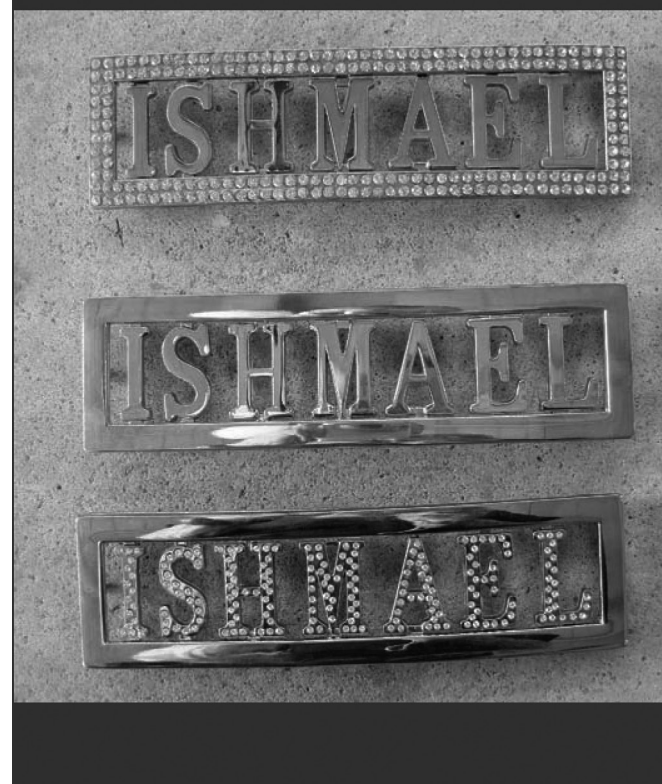
The invocation of whiteness, of poverty, and language interact to draw attention to a subjective optimism, the optimism of the beggar for a bite, or the taco eater for the easy purchase of a self-satisfied attitude. In such a world so eloquently constructed in these lyrically fragmented identities, immigrants discover the hushed violence of the American Dream:

It is the quiet
coming to them from under the hum of
the engines
they finally recognize as the quiet in their
chewing mouths
as the quiet air rising and falling below
the overpasses
and connector lanes vaulted above their
heads so much
like the gutted buildings of home that they
come to know
their lives in the first world are arriving
and still.

Landscapes are maximized by scale to reveal tiny human dramas at play in them. Matuk’s

This Isa Nice Neighborhood

Farid Matuk



masterful invocation of place (mostly the dry urban blanknesses of Texas and California) registers a spare but sensual vocabulary of conjunctive force. His lines are balanced with repetitions to show carefully

the blue twilight of rush-hour, past the sand-
brick soundwall
and into the canyon of their new city’s
sunken freeway
and into the canyon of rubbery leaves and
rubbery stems drawing
sustenance from sprinklers reclaiming
sewage water into the air
for the flowering of the greenbelt

The invocation of the canyon freeway drives produces yet another perspective of incongruence by which to observe and measure those larger internal human drives that are the preoccupations of his writing.

Matuk’s poems constantly shift perspectives to look through personal experience and through the various landscapes of California and Texas, and at times through immigrant eyes (the author is of Syrian and Peruvian ethnic background, and moved to Los Angeles when he was seven). “Tell me where you’re from,” he writes, “and I’ll place you in the parking lot / my brothers and I will dress / in grasses and the steady passing / of the cars will go dim and / we will be a wall of grass you face.” The writing is possessed of sympathy and fragility and addresses immigrant experience against “Hollywood without end / until it meant nothing and your home / was in our voice.” There is something Whitmanic here, something expansive and lyrical, but honestly self-exposed. Besides a fine mastery of the pace of the lyric line and all of that, it’s the generous quality of heart that gives the writing such accessible and impressive complexity. Matuk shows us how to be honest with who we are.

*lajdf;l;kajsdfl;kjasdl;kfjal;ksdjf;lksdjfl;kajds;lfjasd;
lfjkl;asdjkl;asdjkl;jasdl;fjasdl;jfl;asdjkl;asdjkl;ad
sif;lksdjkl;lajkds;l;jasdl:f*

A Lyric Voice in War Time

Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky

LIKE A STRAW BIRD IT FOLLOWS ME

Ghassan Zaqtan; Fady Joudah, trans.

Yale University Press

<http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/home.asp>

144 pages; cloth, \$26.00

FC_Fady Joudah is a poet gifted with duality of vision and a large empathic voice that is uncommon in American poetry. Like three other important poets of his generation, Nathalie Handal, Kazim Ali, and Khaled Mattawa, Joudah has translated tirelessly, and tried to expand our understanding of poetics of Middle-Eastern region by bringing new voices into English each year. These four poets, all of whom came out in early to mid-1990s, are doing a great deal to change American poetics: Handal's anthology, *The Poetry of Arab Women*, published over a decade ago, is still the classic of the genre. Mattawa is without a question one of the strongest translators of his generation, in any language. Ali's recent essays in *The American Poetry Review* (many of them collected in his volume *Orange Alert*) are as deeply moving as they were instructive.

Fady Joudah's first book was published after the other three poets have already been in print for some years, but he has gained momentum quickly, and his passionate voice and lyric attentiveness became quickly apparent to everyone. His most recent project, the translation from the Arabic of

Ghassan Zaqtan's *Like Bird It Follows Me and Other Poems*, is that rare occurrence in the poetry world: a documentary perspective of life in a time of war delivered through lyrical utterance. Zaqtan is not a documentary poet. But his lyric voice sketches in his notebook the bloody events of his country, and the policemen and gunshots become myths, become lyric fire.

Zaqtan in Joudah's versions gives us songs of the drowned, the betrayed.

Zaqtan in Joudah's versions gives us songs of the drowned, the betrayed: the first patrol, the camp prostitute, eleven brothers killing their only sister, and a house of cactus.

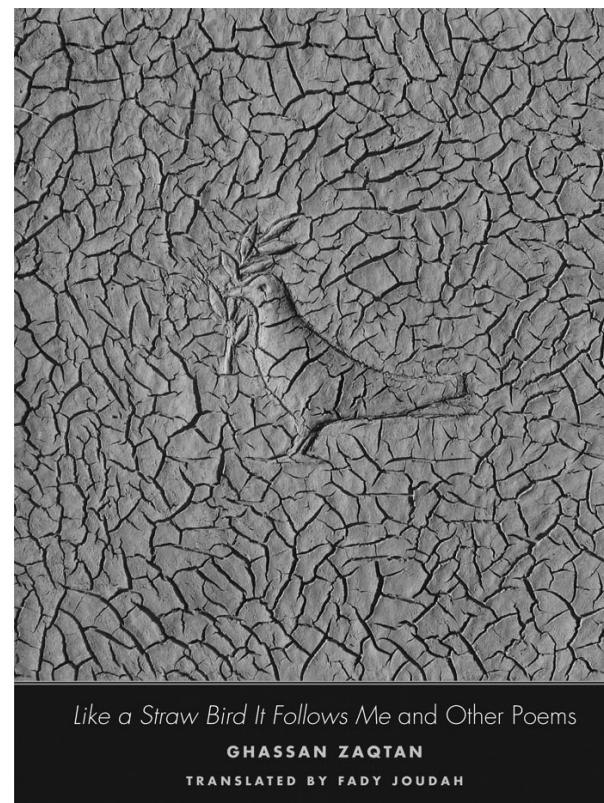
And what time is it? It is Beirut in August 1982 (where one "died in Wednesday raid"); it is Ramallah in 2000 (where the children "loot the night's narrators"). What time is it? "It is noon among the pots."

And where are we? We are in war time.

But the lyric poet sees that "the villages are fruits on the road," while in the slopes, the children "call out to their parents in village accents." Indeed, where are we? In "a narrow street / in the poor suburbs of war."

It is the rare gift to look at injustice and instead of simply pointing the finger write with lyric abandon: "And while we were plowing / they were laughing / and filling our pockets with dirt." For this bravery and lyric skill, I am grateful. And I am grateful, too, for heart-breaking simplicity of poems like "Where She used to Stand."

Reading these poems, one can't help but think of the poet/mythmakers of Eastern Europe, such as



Holan, Holub, and Popa, who also saw violence and wrote the dream-time of their nation. Like them, Zaqtan is unafraid to claim his roots and is able to see the "secret builders Cavafy had awakened / passing through the hills," digging by his pillow.

Katie Farris is the author of *BOYSGIRLS* (2011) and co-translator of Guy Jean's *If I Were Born in Prague* (2011). She teaches at San Diego State University.

Ilya Kaminsky is the author of *Dancing In Odessa* (2004) and co-editor of *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry* (2010).

Arab-American Poetry as Minor

Fady Joudah

To say "Arab-American poetry," to enter representation and nomenclature, is to risk, in the process of affirmation, narrowness and exclusion. Categorization as a form of recognition aids further marginalization and also invites conformity from within that marginalization as it seeks to shed the periphery off. This paradox of subjugation and generosity is a dialectic of power. The institution of poetry is democratically inclusive of the newcomer who is not really new, but by necessity of admission and admittance as such, is deemed nascent. Of course, this isn't unique to Arab-American poetry. Historical precedents, remote and recent, abound. The conflict of interest that faces the poetry establishment when confronting or "evaluating" Arab-American poetry is not dissimilar to the travails that poetries of women and blacks underwent and, to a lesser extent today, still undergo ("to a lesser extent" because a process of appropriation and repossession, while not complete, has become quite advanced; a reterritorialization against which any marginalized poetry must struggle). Typically, then, Arab-American poetry is currently assigned the role and voice that most nascent minority poetries are assigned: the political, the dissident who's also witness to tragedy; a tragedy, paradoxically, not unlinked to imperial American hegemony, in this particular case. From this conflict

of interest, then, both on the part of the poet and the evaluator of that poetry, follows the designation of victim. How and what kinds of poetry do victims write, and to what degree is the victim self-made and American made? While not total, the larger American cultural and political trickle-down effect into the world of poetry is neither miniscule nor imaginary.

Arab-American poetry must be critically seen beyond its subject matter, beyond the habitual will to define it.

Other relics in the mind concerning the newcomer are also added to the mix: notions of exoticism and mysticism, for example. Details may vary from one parvenue to another, but each is perceived to possess her own Dionysian or Zarathustrian brand that she is expected to fulfill or deliver. The point of reference of that delivery remains American or Eurocentric: the exotic or mystic in Arab-American poetry is set against the backdrop of surrealism or symbolism, things "tried and true" within Western aesthetics, if not outdated; or a Gibran, a Rumi, and FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859–1889), etc. as they relate

to Orientalist notions of the Arab and Arab American (and Muslim). The contemporary Arab American is, reductively, a dichotomy: sagacious, gracious victim of empire and other petty tyrannies, or refusenik and conscientious objector: subject and spirit. As it relates to the poet, the Arab American is antagonistic when his or her poetics disturb the miasmatic boundaries of what is accepted as political (and spiritual) discourse in American poetry's sense of self and other, according to a center of power whose boundaries are predictably vague and whose inflexibility is most palpable and visible when encountering its own sense of "tradition" vis-à-vis the other. This vagueness is both alibi and pretext to celebrate the human agency as well as its control. The complex history of European decadence and world wars, to which American culture sees itself as distant cousin, a non-heir, contrary to reality, is a big factor. The political and spiritual in Arab-American poetry are seen from the self-referential (mythic and national) scope of American history that is a remnant or a metamorphosis of European empire. The details of current American cultural hegemony differ, but (or because) the devil is in the details. A "new" poetry

————— Joudah continued on next page

within an established “greater” poetry draws out the sap of tradition and authenticity, the two-in-one catalysts that often hinder a culture’s capacity to truly other itself.

The Arab-American poet exists (or is placed) on a spectral chart whose opposite terminal ends are hard politics and soft spirituality (and the case is no different for Arab poets in translation). The middle class of this entrapment are the poets of witness and of imitative representative identity politics, of re-Oedipalization. Intimate embrace of these poets by the reterritorializing center depends on how much wisdom and grace they inject into their poetry, how much simultaneous recognition of victimhood and primitiveness they possess along with a sense of belonging to American and European literary traditions, a canonical loyalty test of sorts. This new hybrid poet (of us and them) must also contend with his or her implicitly inferior history of aesthetics: what has Arabic poetry offered to modern times? Unabashedly, this diabolical link between power and poetry is performed by none other than a literary centrality, a quasi-religious authority of “noninterference” (an eerie reification of the delusional separation of church and state), as Edward Said wrote in *Secular Criticism* (1983). Kafka also wrote, “A small nation’s memory is not smaller than the memory of a large one and so can digest the existing material more thoroughly.” And Darwish echoed, “No nation is smaller than its poem.”

In Wail Hassan’s wonderful recent study of Anglophone Arab literature, *Immigrant Narratives* (2011), the Arab-American writer, for a century now, has always had to negotiate his and her stance against and within Orientalism. One antagonizes it (a significant reach for a critical consciousness) or succumbs to it, buys into it, parasitically, inattentively, or out of sheer exhaustion. One is native informant or foreign expert within this process of “cultural translation,” a process that must cope with the preconditions that are set upon it toward sameness. Representation takes hold. The Arab-American poet of “balanced” witness, the

chronicler of women rights abuses, of “clarity” and “accessibility,” of sexual liberation, and mysticism with a sprinkle of Sufism, etc., are all (when within minimal critical consciousness) center-stage options. A ready-made reading of their poetry helps in presenting them as aspiration in opposition and contrast to the destabilizing poet whose place is the margin. The problem, then, is a topical and spatial one that must be surpassed. Arab-American poetry must be critically seen beyond its subject matter, beyond the habitual will to define it, to bind it within historically primordial reflexes of what poetry is or was inside and outside the gates.

If Arab-American poetry is caged within the problematic of representation as a minor, then perhaps it should be critically received as “a minor poetry” through the lens of “minor literature,” as posited by Deleuze and Guattari’s groundbreaking study of Kafka’s work. In minor literature, conditions for revolutionary aesthetics are ripe: Arab-American poetry as deterritorializing force within the constantly reterritorializing power of American poetry. A major poetry of “great and established” literature is no longer possible without the prerequisite minor poetry that infuses it with innovation and sobriety. A minor poetry is written in a major language that is affected, displaced by a minor language. The minor language consists of complex and variable linguistic and paralinguistic models, with vernacular, vehicular, referential and mythic components. For the Arab-American poet, the major language is English, but the minor is not exclusively Arabic. Some Arab American poets are polyglots, and not all Arab-American poets are bilingual or Arabic-speaking, and some are quasi-bilingual by way of cultural affectation from Arabic parents, or a patois of sorts. Accordingly, being an Arab-American poet, one does not necessarily write a minor poetry. And being a non-minority poet does not exclude one from writing a minor poetry. Minor poetry is not exclusive to minorities, and minorities are not its only guarantors. What is crucial here is the awareness and possession of linguistic vision and tools, beyond style, to deploy toward deterritorialization of a major language. But this is only one of three characteristics of a minor poetry.

Possessing political immediacy, where everything about minor poetry is political, is the second characteristic. The third is the expression of a collective enunciation, whether contemporaneously or in anticipation of one. Kafka wrote that “literature is less a concern of literary history, than of the people.” And while a minor poetry’s first characteristic is language-based, the rest of the “assemblage” of a minor poetry is complex, with much emphasis on anti-Oedipalization, expression that precedes and determines content (not the other way around), a perpetual sweeping up of form, the utilization of connectors and blocks, a private lexicon beyond symbolism and towards becoming and intensity, disjunctions and discontinuities, and so on: a toolbox that not only details the intricacies of a minor poetry but also safeguards it, as much as possible, from sliding into “the slime of bureaucracy” or the necrotic chronicity of affiliation. The language of a minor poetry has a “sober syntactical invention” (that does not exclude “incorrect syntax,” for example) and pushes the major language to its limits, to its “desert,” where “nothing remains but intensities.” This is more than styles of diction and technical aptitude whose “one single dream [is] to assume a major function in language...a sort of state language, an official language...a language of power,” of centrality.

Deterritorialization does not aim to become subject of psychoanalytical or capitalist reproduction and representation. The Arab-American poet who mistakes identity narratives for a minor poetry through mere mimicry of existing modes within

the major language is no different than the Arab-American poet who is able to affect English with a high coefficient of displacement without attaining a political immediacy and an assemblage of, or toward, a collective enunciation. In both cases, the revolutionary conditions for minor poetry are not complete. Perhaps the examples of a Hughes, a Rukeyser, a Beckett, a Celan, or a Césaire might help in understanding what linguistic deterritorialization and minor literature mean. Perhaps a closer, truly critical reading of Lawrence Joseph’s poetry in the light of a minor poetry is also needed, as well as critical readings of younger Arab-American poets such as Deema Shehabi, Farid Matuk, Hala Alyan, and Ladan Osman.

No doubt, the concept of minor literature, despite (and perhaps because of) its adaptability, is liable to being reterritorialized, co-opted (as pretext and alibi by Oedipal poetries and desires). The machinery of a minor poetry works within the binary of power, even if this machine aims at a transformation “by proliferating doubles until they become indefinite.” Thus its machinery risks entrapment within that binary as opposed to creating trajectories within “new lines of escape.” Be that as it may, here is a wonderful and mischievous passage from Deleuze and Guattari’s text in full. Not only does it address antecedence and power play, but it also illuminates the inescapability of the political and the collective in any literature worthwhile:

Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that “master” and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement. But above all else, because the collective or national consciousness [in a major language] is “often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,” literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means of another consciousness and another sensibility.

Arab-American poetry, as minor, should seek “something other than a literature of masters.” It should revel in its immense potentiality to remain in the margins (and the margins of margins) as a necessary criterion for its excellence and revolutionary, decentralizing force—to give new meaning to Emily Dickinson’s “Publication is the auction of the mind.”

Fady Joudah’s second poetry collection, *Alight*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press. His first collection was the recipient of a Yale Series for Younger Poets in 2007. His most recent translation is of the poetry of Ghassan Zaqtan, *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me* (2012). Joudah also received a PEN award and a Banipal award for his translations.

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN
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THIRTEEN DEPARTURES FROM THE MOON

Deema K. Shehabi

Press 53

<http://www.press53.com>

92 pages; \$12.00, paperback

*It is difficult to get the news from poems,
but men die miserably every day for the
lack of what is found there.*

—William Carlos Williams

If you want the news about Palestine, walk through the hall of distorting mirrors that is our media. If you want the truth about the Palestinian experience, read Deema Shehabi's debut poetry collection, *Thirteen Departures from the Moon*. Arresting every communicable feature of language, this poet sings the haunted songs of war, occupation, exile, and abiding love, imploring readers to remember, each moment, that the political is and always has been painfully personal.

Some of Shehabi's poems roll forward in linear narratives populated by gripping, resonant images, as in these lines from "Helwa's Stories":

I found the young soldier searching the
house;
he was merely a boy, but he leaned forward
with tethering eyes.
I locked him deep in the cellar and planted
the key

in the cavity between my breasts where no
hands dared
to tread. Ah the look of freedom as it flitted
desperately
from his eyes—he promised never again to
beat on our door

before dawn, never again before the tiny
orange thread
appeared in the sky. He spent a whole day
down there reciting
his dreams into ruins of rancid olive oil and
dried-up yoghurt.

More often, though, Shehabi's words float unmoored from linear narrative. Through an alchemy of metaphor, fragmentation, and repetition, these poems evoke the essence of exile: disorientation, loss, longing, and grief, spiked with fierce love. Take for example this excerpt from "Requiem for Arrival":

Promise never to tell
that this is only a dream,

a morning dream, clipped by leaf's
edge—
my mother leaning

against the balcony balustrade,

her hands migrating

toward a jasmine flower,

her fingers enfolding it
and bringing it slowly

to her freckled lips,

and she says: *Do not leave now that you
are here—*

*Stay, so the world may become itself
again.*

The world kept dwelling
in small rooms, dissonant sounds,

here below Mt. Diablo
where my child's eyes depose

the moon. In the valley,
he chases birds

through the lifts of hills,
and on certain nights,

I see another moonlit
refugee child

netting birds over
barbed-wire fences.

Barbed-wire inscribes the blight
on the Holy City at dawn,

the rotten-plum light scalding
the mouths of fallen houses,

the seven-year-old boy surrendering
his belongings under a soldier's

tightly stitched breath

Shehabi evokes a dream-like quality through jump cuts between past and present, between here and there.

Throughout this eight-section poem, the words that link each section's last and first lines, like "world" and "barbed-wire" here, suggest cohesion, a sense of wholeness, and yet everything in the poem is about breaking apart—the rending of country, household, and family.

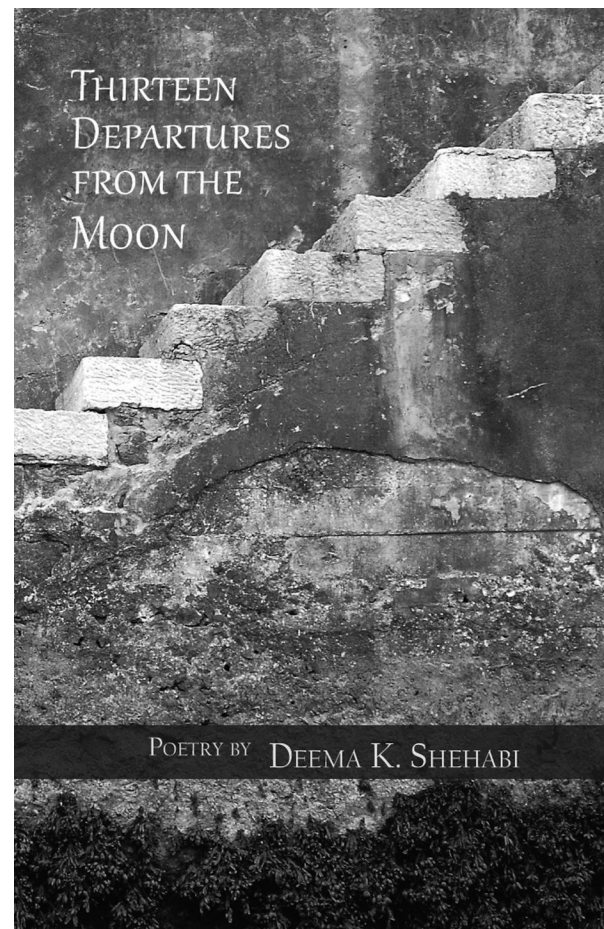
This kind of visceral tension—opposing forces insisting on their presence in the same poetic space—buzzes throughout the collection. In these lines from "Ghazal 2," the opposing forces take the form of "war" and "lilac":

The girl wails over her father's body on a
beach that hives
with warships as though she's dressed in
fireballs of lilac.

...

I will return one day, she says, to light the
lamp of my snuffed-
out country, to translate the original protocol
of lilac.

...



Shahid, how often did you "land on ashen
tarmacs"
landing—then flying—your feet hauled by
lilac?

....

If you don't let my son return to his mother,
says the father
to the interrogator, your body will be mauled
by lilac.

While many poems such as "Ghazal 2" depict battles between external forces, others wage wrestling matches of the psyche, as in these lines from "Legends of the Bee":

Body: be obedient in your yielding. I can't
tell you what this
rapture means.

....

What is death? A stained-glass jar where sun
meets gold.

....

Let's tell it like it is: I was never ready to lose
you, over and
over again.

....

Open the window to the orchard in the dis-
tance. I'm yielding
to the light.

No matter what kind of tension she is orchestrating, Shehabi allows no feeling to exist without its opposite. As a result, her poems, while importantly political, never fall into diatribe. Through her exquisitely detailed, fully embodied rendering, readers experience how the love of country is as deep as the anger over its loss, how the state of rootlessness is as potent as the roots once were strong, how a missing family member is as undeniably present as her absence is large, and how, when you spend enough time there, longing becomes a landscape unto itself.

To enter the landscape of these poems is to enter a state of lucid dreaming in which time collapses and all experiences—contrary and complimentary, personal and public, current and historical—are

————— Dumesnil continued on next page

happening right now. Shehabi evokes this dream-like quality through unexpected jump cuts between past and present, between here and there. She enhances this dream-state through the music of her language, which is a pure pleasure to read out loud, as in these lines from “Nahed”:

The muezzin gripped
the minaret’s head,
and dipped it into the sea

water in the submerged
prayer’s voice
rushed ahead

Deepening the dream effect, Shehabi uses recurring images, both within an individual poem and across the trajectory of the collection. For example, the “hands migrating / toward a jasmine

flower” that we encountered in “Requiem for Arrival” return in the poem “Thirteen Departures from the Moon”: “Pretend the jasmine between your fingers / is the key to a sovereign house / where only lovers of moon reside.” The jasmine, those fingers—the second time around they arrive as a visitation, like an image from a recurring dream.

In some circumstances, the repetition of images throughout a poetry collection might seem like a tic, but in this case, it is clear that Shehabi is in control of her artistry. Using inventive turns of phrase, she reshapes an image each time it appears. When she layers these repetitions, one upon another, she creates a palpable, otherworldly atmosphere in which mountains, houses, orchards, and the moon become witnesses, responding to all they see.

Frederico García Lorca’s *duende* ghosting through the terrain of Jonathan Keat’s “negative

capability”—that’s how Deema Shehabi’s poems read. *Thirteen Departures from the Moon* is a difficult dream to inhabit, but in it, readers are reassured over and over again, of the resilience of the human spirit. In the face of horrifying offenses, Shehabi threatens lilac. When her heart’s pieces scatter across disparate lands, they root deep in new soil, then reach back, impossibly, for wholeness, for home. Readers will find no release from the tension that seethes through these poems, but they can expect to encounter sustaining beauty in each line of the struggle.

Cheryl Dumesnil’s collection of poems, In Praise of Falling, won the 2008 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize. Her memoir, Love Song for Baby X: How I Stayed (Almost) Sane on the Rocky Road to Parenthood, is forthcoming in February 2013.

TITLE

M. Lynx Qualey

POET IN ANDALUCÍA

Nathalie Handal

University of Pittsburgh Press
http://www.upress.pitt.edu
144 pages; paper, \$16.95

FC_The verse of Gabriel Garcia Lorca, like that of other “27 Generation” poets, was colored by a relationship to Arab poetry. Lorca wrote: “When our [Spanish] songs reach the extremes of pain and love they come very close in expression to the magnificent verses of Arab and Persian poets. The truth is that the lines and features of far Arabia still remain in the air of Córdoba and Granada.”

It wasn’t just the air, of course, that brought Arabic verse to Lorca’s ears. It was also Emilio Garcia Gomez’s translations in *Poemas Arabigo-andaluces*. Lorca, in turn, became an inspiration to dozens of Arab poets. The two towering and sometimes opposing figures of contemporary Arabic poetry both listen and speak to Lorca: the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and the Syrian poet Adonis.

Thus Nathalie Handal, when she wrote *Poet in Andalucía*, was entering into a long relationship with the Spanish poet. She had not just Lorca as Lorca, but also as he had been heard and recreated by other poets. Handal has a particular familiarity with Darwish’s partner in exile, as when Darwish writes, “I’m the Adam of two Edens lost to me twice: / Expel me slowly. Kill me slowly / With Garcia Lorca / Under my olive tree.”

Poet in Andalucía, Handal’s fourth poetry collection, is a fresh conversation with Lorca, a recreation of his journey to New York, where he was inspired to write *Poeta en Nueva York*. But Handal’s journey does not take her to New York, where she had already lived for many years. One of things that drew her to *Poeta* was its obsession with otherness, so Handal’s was a journey away from familiar New York City, a journey “in reverse.” Lorca traveled from Andalucía to Manhattan in 1929–1930. Eighty years later, Handal went from Manhattan to Andalucía.

Lorca saw his work as a sort of portraiture of New York City. Handal’s collection also evokes a certain quality of Andalucían light, but it is not primarily focused on the present moment. Instead, Handal looks through time, collapsing it. Writers of the Spanish Golden Age—such as Ibn Zaydun, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn Faraj—find themselves in the same space as Lorca, Rafael Alberti, and Gerardo Diego: “there is no time between them.”

Handal is particularly drawn to the shadows of Andalucía’s joint Islamic, Judaic, and Christian history. In “Alhandal y las Murallas de Córdoba,” “The past is here / the song of the Arabs here, / the song of the Jews, / the Romans, / the Spaniards, / and the phantoms.” It is clear why: Palestine is not mentioned, but it is everywhere. Palestine is in Murcia, in Toledo, in Córdoba, and in a dozen other places. The narrator of “The Thing about Feathers” does not name a country, but it is hard not to see Palestine: “I am seven / it is the day before our departure, / the day my father / gives me a notebook, / and I tell him, / *this is where I’ll keep my country.*”

Palestine is not mentioned, but it is everywhere.

Palestine is also embedded in the trudging movement of words across space and time. Because of their shared history, a large number of Spanish words came from the Arabic, and Handal plays with these linguistic migrants. In her noteworthy “10 Qit’as,” or “10 Fragments,” each section begins with a Spanish word. The poems then shift into English. Finally, at the end of each stanza, the poem turns back to a definition of the originating Arabic term.

In the opening section of “10 Qit’as,” titled “Acitara,” Handal writes: “Can the sky recover after a bombing / can a house break into two cities, / and secrets hold the wall / between two bodies? / Tell me, what are borders? /// acitara: wall, from the Arabic *sitarah*, which means curtain.”

As the word *sitarah* moves from Arabic to Spanish, it becomes stronger, more impenetrable. It shifts from a word that merely obstructs a view to a word that prevents movement. But although this word migrated from North Africa into Spain, it is impossible not to see Palestine in the line, “Tell me, what are borders?”

“10 Qit’as” ends with “Alafia”: “The doors are shut now— / the ghosts sit upright. /// alafia:

pardon or mercy, from Andalusí Arabic *al afya*, from classical Arabic *afiyah*, health.” The poem thus ends with a closed space, but it also ends with one of Handal’s core concerns: mercy, which it equates with a certain kind of health.

The movement of these words follows large groups of others, but it also tracks the self. In the long poem “Alhandal y las Murallas de Córdoba,” Handal is confronted by her (Arab) name in Spanish. This is a different version of her surname but one with the same meaning: colocynth. The poem is a coming into contact with self just as it’s an inability to reach that self: “Everything we hear / is the echo of a voice we can’t hear, / everything we see / the reflection of something we can’t see.”

Handal writes in the “Notes and Memories” section at the back of her collection that she keeps a black and white photo of Lorca in a *djellaba* and turban; here, Lorca is both self and other. She quotes him: “We Latins want sharp profiles and visible mystery. Form and sensuality.” These, she says,

Qualey continued on next page

were also her goals. And she delivers, although with a deceptive gentleness and an even more deceptive mercy. Lorca may have found muscular ugliness in New York City; Handal, for the most part, foregrounds beauties.

Some of Handal's most enjoyable poems, even the sad ones, have an inviting, joyous rhythm. From the penultimate section, "Flight to Catalunya and Afternoons in Galicia," the opening to the poem "Waltz of a Dream":

There is a dream of dance
that we'll remember
there's ten windows

where shoulders lean on
there is a piece of sun
ten echoes roaming
where love lost
is a place that becomes

Dance yes come dance

There's a chair
where death sits
there's a mirror
there's a garden
that cuts hell into hills

There's a shadow
that runs through the mirror
and a window that opens
the world

Dance yes come dance

M. Lynx Qualey was born in Minnesota, lives in Egypt, and temporarily resides in North Carolina. Wherever she is, she writes about Arabic literature. You can read her daily blog on the subject at <http://arablit.wordpress.com>.

Writing Arabic Through French

Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky

WHERE ARE THE TREES GOING

Venus Khoury-Ghata; Marilyn Hacker, trans.

PRESS
WEB ADDY
BOOK INFO

FC_Born in Lebanon and currently living in Paris and writing in French, Venus Khoury-Ghata is a rare poet, one able to bring together the Western and Arabic imaginations, to not just extend boundaries of different literary traditions, but to begin one of her own, a complex tapestry of image-laden poetics where "women hunt down darkness with their dishtowels / children put their noises away in their pencil-cases," and fig trees are known for their "opulent hips" while "walls protect us from knowledge that whitens your hair."

So she creates the world, in which her craft rivals that of Vaska Popa and Edmond Jabes, two post-war European poets of *mythos*, of re-imagining the *Genesis*, and the poetics of place, in the face of very real political violence of our own moment.

She creates a language where "mother wanted us illiterate as a pebble" while "armies of dust raised by her broom ate our notebooks." Ghata here gives us a book-long sequence of almost epic proportions, where her mother becomes everyone's mother, while the focus and texture remain local, detail-oriented, and very sensual.

Ghata once said in an interview, "I write in Arabic through the French," and doing so, she builds a village recognizably Middle Eastern and yet also somehow all-embracing in its humanity, its depiction of natural elements ("a village rain that went barefoot") and familial connection ("the mother's skirt wiped away the soot of errors"). This is a village where "mother sprinkled the doorstep with soot...her kitchen utensils fled after teh last guest deserted her / I try to imagine that departure and find only lines crossed out in a notebook." The world of Chagall and the world of Arabic imagination are joined here: Western-style surrealism and the Middle-Eastern fable. But this is certainly not a mere dream world. The many examples of extreme poverty here are real: "They must have been very poor to come with a cart instead of a truch...bring with them only three mattresses bound together with a rope, as many pots, and a wooden cupboard grubby as a chicken-coop." This is a political poetry, yes. It is also a timeless fable that comes from far away and is unafraid to tell us the story of a world both real and metaphorical, where "the speech...is a pebble." In the center of this village, we see a powerful, magical figure of a woman: "the blue-hipped mother."

This is a timeless fable that comes from far away and tells us the story of a world both real and metaphorical.

Marilyn Hacker has translated Ghata's work for years, always with incredible attention to the sensual detail, and this translation continues to be extremely effective in bringing Ghata's delicate metaphorical structures and textures into English. Hacker, one of our best poets, is also (I can say this without any hesitation; I am sure many others would agree with me) probably *the* best translator at work in English at the present moment.

What Khoury-Ghata teaches us is that language is not separate from the sensual world, does not exist outside of the pain of our historical moment, is not located outside of the magical element of our daily existence. "Trees," in her work, "have opulent hips."

And so she attempts to remake the world—into a place of memory, yes, but also of imagination, where "women hunt darkness with their dishtowels."

Why? To bring us back to smells, images, sounds of the earth around us, to bring us back to Lorca's belief that "the poet is professor of five bodily senses." This is how the poet writing in "Arabic through French" re-freshens the Western tradition, expands it. She does so not through conceptual constructions which have become, for better or worse—but most likely for worse—the fashion in our literature, but through unmistakable passion and craft, through compassionate lines which capture human moments and make them into an art.

There is a great sense of empathy in her work. There is also, in the end, the ability to create an epic out of lyric fragments, asides, and portraits, an epic that gives us the creation of the world, its language, its people and villages, its wars, and its stories, that are very much our own.

Katie Farris is the author of BOYSGIRLS (2011) and co-translator of Guy Jean's If I Were Born in Prague (2011). She teaches at San Diego State University.

Ilya Kaminsky is the author of Dancing In Odessa (2004) and co-editor of The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry (2010).

HANGING QUOTES

Talking Book Arts,
Typography & Poetry



understand “why they hate us,” or to make sense of a place where thousands of Americans would now be stationed and fighting wars—it also placed added burdens on Arab-American and Middle-Eastern writers. This pressure in publishing is felt particularly (but not exclusively) by Arab women writers—as Amal Amireh has discussed in her work and on her “Improvisations” blog—who are expected to decry the patriarchy and homophobia of Arab culture, and also to remain mum about U.S. imperialism. The enormous popularity of *Honor Lost* (2003), a fallacious memoir about an honor killing that sold hundreds of thousands of copies, is suggestive of the thirst of readers to confirm their Orientalist views of the Middle East.

One artist recently remarked that perhaps the greatest damage that Israel has ever done to Palestinian culture was to make everything political. There is no life or art, it seems, without the spectre of politics. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “the political domain has contaminated every statement.” As a result of this political pressure, an Arab-American writer must “represent,” in the parlance of hip-hop culture, to choose either to be outed as Arab American or to be free of identity labels, and thus risk being set aside as irrelevant, assimilative, or traitorous to the community.

In addition to the problem of politicization, Arab-American writers face the danger of the commodification of culture, of reducing Arab culture to familiar and safe American tropes of food and family. Khaled Mattawa, in his essay “Freeways and Rest Houses” from the anthology *Post Gibran*, has called for a more complex Arab-American literature, one that moved beyond post-assimilation nostalgia and post-Gibran self-Orientalism. In his words, “the staples of grandmotherly aphorism, thickly accented patriarchal traditionalism, culinary nostalgia, religious dogma, belly dancing and adoration of Kahlil Gibran are meager nourishments for cultural identity, let alone a cultural revival and a subsequent engagement with the larger American culture.”

Apropos of such limited representations, Deleuze and Guattari propose a series of further stylistic elements of minor literature that suggest its connection to postmodern and poststructuralist modes of art. For them, not only is minor literature without “subject,” it is also “non-representative, deterritorializing sound “irrevocably, absolutely”; in this way, a “language of sense is traversed by a line of escape.” It is language at “its extremities or its limits.” If the language of the limit expresses the

horizon of minor literature, then one can say that Arab-American literature extends from mainstream modes all the way to that experimental horizon. In other words, some Arab-American writers employ the radically deconstructive modes of language-deterritorializing in an effort toward a globalist vision of literature—I’m thinking here of Etel Adnan and Rabih Alameddine in prose, and recent poetry by Mahmoud Darwish, Venus Khoury-Ghata, Nathalie Handal, Fady Joudah, Khaled Mattawa, Farid Matuk, and Ghassan Zaqtan. Fady Joudah’s essay in this selection evokes the paradigms of minor literature; see also Wail Hassan’s recent *Immigrant Narratives* (2011), which provides a particularly useful theoretical application of the notion of “minor literature” to Arab-Anglophone literatures.

Yet there are plenty of examples of strategic deployment of normative modes of genre, which should not be discounted as outré or “merely” mainstream. In poetry, the use of lyric and narrative by Naomi Shihab Nye, in her poignant elegies to her father Aziz, for example, or traditional forms, such as those by Deema Shehabi in her use of the ghazal, lay claim to what Marilyn Nelson calls “the master’s tools” (*pace* Audre Lorde). In prose, the use of traditional narrative by Diana Abu-Jaber and Thérèse Soukhar Chehade (not to mention Randa Jarrar, among others) confront directly the absence of richly drawn and textually humane portrayals of Arab and Arab-American life. Given the paucity of such representations in the mass media and in popular culture, Arab-American writers have a lot of work to do and ought to use “straight” and “queered” literary tactics—in short, *any means necessary*. At the same time, as Abu-Jaber’s recent novel proffers, Arab-American writers also lay claim to the ability to write beyond Arab-American life as subject.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab-American writers—both individually and collectively—spoke against the paranoia and fear-mongering in complex and clarifying ways. As the title of a Lawrence Joseph poem became the title of an anthology of Arab-American poetry edited by poet Hayan Charara, these writers were “inclined to speak.” “All our wars,” as Maxine Hong Kingston wrote after 9/11, “are civil wars,” since the U.S. contains peoples from every nation in the world. For Arab-American writers, the ongoing wars in the Middle East compel us to remind fellow Americans that humanity does not end at the national border and to interrogate all “comfort zones” in light of “conflict zones.” When Palestinian-American poet

Suheir Hammad began to appear on *Def Poetry Jam* just after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Arab-American literature and culture reached even wider audiences. The model of Black Nationalism embodied in progressive hip-hop melded with her experiences as an exile to produce a forceful articulation of the complexity of an Arab-American subjectivity marked by both allegiance to American ideals and solidarity with the Palestinian struggle (and indeed, the struggle of all oppressed peoples). Her role in popular culture marked a sea change from the narratives of self-Orientalism and assimilation and proposes that Arab American identity is by no means uncomplex.

In her article “Arab American Literature: Origins and Developments,” Lisa Suhair Majaj proposes that

Arab American authors increasingly demonstrate both the diversity of the Arab cultural roots on which they draw and the diverse ways in which these cultural roots play out in the U.S. For some, Arab American literature will always be about the narrative of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. For others, Arab American literature takes its place on a global canvas, as one component of a worldwide Arab diaspora in which cultural ties can be reinvigorated. Arab American authors may disagree whether the past is something to recover, or to recover from, as Khaled Mattawa has put it. But what is clear is that Arab American ethnicity and expression is a matter not just of the past, but of the present and future.

The cosmopolitanism that Rihani aimed for in the first salvo of Arab-American literature remains the direction toward which some of the best of Arab-American literature is now tending. But we must distinguish such globality or cosmopoetics from mere cheerleading for globalization, neoliberalism, and empire. On the contrary, critically engaged globalism does not reject the idea of the nation-state, nor does it accept the so-called Clash of Civilizations proffered by Samuel Huntington. Given the ongoing colonialism in Israel-Palestine, the tenuous post-revolutionary moments in Egypt and Libya, and the ongoing civil war in Syria, the literature of national liberation should not be conceived as merely residual, to use the parlance of Raymond Williams.

The following reviews suggest that the state of Arab-American literature has never been quite as strong as it is now. In every genre, Arab-American writers of real distinction have emerged to embody and represent the rich and complex textures of Arab-American and Arab life. With vibrant organizations like RAWI (Radius of Arab-American Writers), journals devoted to Arab-American arts and letters (such as *Mizna* and *Al-Jadid*), and presses like Interlink and Syracuse University Press, Arab-American literature continues to build bridges between Arab literary and cultural traditions and American ones (through translation and original poetry), and address the depredations of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Arab-American writers will continue to play a key role in braking (or least confronting) the imperial temperament, simply by constantly reminding us that the machinations of power are neither distant nor without consequence.

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