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ON FORGOTTEN SHORES: MIGRATION IN MIDDLE EAST
STUDIES, AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN MIGRATION
STUDIES¹



For all their apparent differences, the colonial and nationalist discourses of the twentieth century shared a vision of the world as an aggregate of discrete bundles of land and people, hermetic units sealed off from one another and defined by their particularities. Whether they spoke in terms of nations or empires, regions or civilizations, they worked to produce the reality they described—one of bounded territories and populations, each one neatly delineated and differentiated from the next. In so doing, they created truncated histories, narrowed-down narratives shorn of wider connections. In the following pages, we will address the implications of such schemes for Middle Eastern studies, and propose an alternative, diasporic vision of this field. A consideration of the population movements that have marked the modern history of the “Middle East” can open up new avenues and approaches for research, and put into question the implicit stress upon fixity and enclosure which still underpins scholarship on the region.

The area studies that came of age in the Anglo-American academy in the wake of the Second World War rested on two complementary assumptions. As has often been remarked, these disciplinary amalgams construed particular populations through unchanging specificities of language, faith, social, economic, and political organization. These tropes, such as the “Arab mind,” the “Islamic city,” “Oriental despotism,” or the “Asian mode of production,” have become all too familiar. However, these efforts at civilizational taxonomy existed in a mutually constitutive relationship with an exercise in the ordering of space, which divided the world into a series of clearly defined areas. Just as an enumeration of the inherent particularities of its peoples served to define “the Middle East”, the

study of “Middle Eastern languages and cultures” depended upon a fixed understanding of this region. In the eyes of the progenitors of area studies, Western modernity could—indeed, had to—transcend its initial confines, coming to serve as a universal panacea as it reached out across the globe. Tradition, meanwhile, was nothing if not local, fated to remain firmly rooted in place until it finally faded away.

Over the past three decades, postcolonial scholarship has deconstructed these narratives of stasis. A vast body of work in history, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, and geography has unpacked the discourses of monolithic difference that underpinned area studies. Postcolonial theorists have offered in their stead sophisticated accounts of the constructed and historically contingent nature of categories whose meanings scholars had previously taken to be fixed and self-evident—whether seemingly universal keywords like “gender,” “culture,” or “race,” or labels of alterity like “the tribe” or “the caste.” This line of thinking has been accompanied, in many instances, by a desire to break out of the bounds of what we might call “methodological regionalism,”² and to question the “assumed isomorphism of space, place and culture” which long blinkered scholars.³

Indeed, this “transnational turn” is now more than twenty years old, if we trace it to the foundation of the journal *Diaspora*, and the influential statements of Nina Glick Schiller, James Clifford, Arjun Appadurai, and Stuart Hall.⁴ A veritable flood of transnational and transregional histories and ethnographies have followed in their wake. To be sure, not all have drawn direct inspiration from these theoretical manifestos. The parallel explosion of interest in global or world history has been equally influential.⁵ Nor has this been a consensual, cohesive project. Scholars of diaspora have consciously striven to unsettle regional definitions and demarcations, if not to overturn them.⁶ Oceanic historians, meanwhile, have viewed the seascapes they examine as microcosms, bounded entities of a kind—though ones altogether more amphibious, and less hermetic, than the regions of old.⁷ But all have shared a commitment to tracking long-distance connections and cross-border circulations, crafting tales in motion that stand in stark contrast to the still lives of an earlier generation of area studies.

It is striking, however, that Middle Eastern studies has witnessed no such thoroughgoing attempts to reconsider regional boundaries and to conceive of alternative, less static, visions of the relation between people and territory. Since the publication of Edward

Said's Orientalism – if not earlier – scholars of the region have actively participated in efforts to pull apart the webs of representation that cast various parts of the world out of historical time, depicting them as standing-by, stock-still, while “the West” marched relentlessly on. These works persuasively argued that, far from remaining immured in irredeemable difference, “the Middle East” was subject to the push and pull of history. Their approach, however, has largely been chronocentric: in focusing upon the stakes of time, they have all too often lost sight of space, and the ways in which it can be constructed and construed. Even as they acknowledged that the very term “the Middle East” is a relatively recent product of geopolitical concerns, few sought to discard it, or to question prevailing cartographic visions.⁸ As a consequence, Middle Eastern studies have adopted a markedly staid notion of space and place. Their analytical focus, on the whole, has remained resolutely trained upon a single spot of the map; historical actors may move back and forth across the boundaries, coming into or drifting out of view, but the lens rarely pans away to track their peregrinations – or to consider the latter's implications.

Nowhere is this analytical stillness, and the circumscribed geography that underpins it, more apparent than in the continuing disregard that scholars of “the Middle East” have for migration and the worlds that migrants make. It often seems that those who left the region's confines are seen as passing out of the realm of “Middle Eastern studies,” and coming under the purview of other scholars, more familiar with the lay of the lands these men and women have moved on to. Such “methodological regionalism” seems untenable when one considers the regularity with which people – migrants, sojourners, travelers, pilgrims or refugees, scholars and merchants, servants and slaves, soldiers and missionaries, cultivators and craftsmen – ideas, and things traversed the conventional geographical bounds of “the Middle East.”

To be sure, there has been an upsurge of interest in diaspora in recent years, as scholars have begun to trace the manifold trajectories of Middle Eastern migrants, and the frequently ambivalent positions they took up in the societies they come to inhabit.⁹ However, much of this recent scholarship is the work of historians, social scientists, and literary scholars trained in American, Latin American, African or Australian studies. Other scholars stand awkwardly at the intersections of different regional specializations, keeping one foot in Middle Eastern studies while attempting to breach its territorial bounds. Indeed, the task of tracking moving targets is not easy. Not

only were generations of specialists trained to drill deep into the Middle East's specificities. They were also conditioned to consider the region's entanglements with the world beyond through the grand rubrics of imperialism, international relations, geopolitical alliances and political economy. Rather than surrendering migrants to others, reducing them to footnotes in seemingly grander narratives, or simply giving up on them as lost to "the Middle East," much remains to be done to integrate such out-of-place subjects into the field.

The oversight of migration in Middle Eastern studies is dwarfed by the neglect that historians of migration have shown for the region and its mobile subjects. This can be seen in Dirk Hoerder's magisterial, though by no means unproblematic, account of movement in world history. It is inevitable that scholars of this or that part of the world will quibble with omissions and generalizations in a work of such ambition and encyclopedic scale.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we contend that the almost complete omission of "the Middle East" from Hoerder's account of the "great age of migration" is significant. Not only does Hoerder ignore the movements of Palestinian and Syrian townspeople, and Anatolian and Lebanese cultivators; he also explicitly characterizes this region as distinct from the rest of the world. Only Balkan Ottoman subjects, he believes, participated in the "new migration" towards the Americas – that great surge of Mediterranean peoples into the Atlantic from the 1880s to the outbreak of the First World War; "east of that line, separate migration systems began, and only occasionally would particularly hard-pressed groups, for example the Armenians, enter the westward migration routes."¹¹ The picture Hoerder paints of the Middle East is one of almost unremitting turmoil and tragedy – of refugees and displaced peoples, Armenians and Greeks, Balkan Muslims and European Jews, whose successive waves were both a sign of the disintegration of older norms of conviviality and comity, and portents of new ethnic conflicts.

We do not seek to diminish the importance of these population displacements; on the contrary, they form a significant part of the region's history. But to focus exclusively upon them, at the expense of other modes and moments of movement, can lead us to construe the migrations of the Middle East's inhabitants as little more than trails of suffering, and relegate the region to a zone of perennial discord and disarray, outside the bounds of a broader history of global processes. That the men and women who travelled away from the region were firmly part of such a broader history can be glimpsed in the aged, torn reams of ships' registers and naturalization records scattered in

archives through the diaspora, which record the names of thousands of migrants from "Syria" alongside those of others from Italy, Armenia, Greece, Austria-Hungary and elsewhere.

The launch of this journal is motivated by these parallel absences in Middle East and migration studies. *Mashriq & Mahjar* is dedicated to telling the tales, and reconstructing the trajectories and travails, of the millions of men and women who migrated from, to, and through the Middle East since 1700. To fill these lacunae in two distinct fields is in itself an important task. Much more, however, is at stake here than a desire for historical recovery and comprehensiveness. Writing migration into our understanding of the lands we now call "the Middle East" can help us to unpack and disaggregate this seemingly monolithic mass, and to trace with greater precision the making of its contours. Of equal consequence, it can help us to steer a new course through the fraught arguments concerning the nature, and chronology, of the region's entanglement with the world beyond. Past accounts of the ways in which the inhabitants of the Middle East came to take on the trappings of modernity, to be sure, dealt with the circulation of men and women, credit, goods, and ideas. However, they often considered them only as auxiliary conduits for the transmission of external, "Western," forces into the region.

Movement and displacement are not incidental aspects of the past and present of the Middle East; they are at the center of its history. Moving people are everywhere to be found in the region's history: the migrants from Mount Lebanon, Hums, Hama, and Aleppo, who, since the eighteenth century, forged far-flung networks of trade, kin, friendship and intellectual interchange across Egypt and, later, the Americas, Africa, and Australasia; the Hadhrami sayyid-s and Omani merchants who dispersed through the Indian ocean and into South-East Asia; the Egyptian oil-workers of 1980s Iraq; the Palestinian refugees of Yarmuk and 'Ain al-Helweh; the Ashkenazi or Mizrahi inhabitants of Tel Aviv or West Jerusalem; the Circassian citizens of Jordan; the Nepalese and Sri Lankan domestic workers of bourgeois Beirut homes; or the Filipino technicians, Syrian hairdressers, and Pakistani and Bangladeshi construction workers and taxi drivers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Such movements, of course, do not stand in opposition to fixity. On the contrary, they are bound together in a dialectic that has helped to make the Middle East as we now understand it, even as it disrupts notions of the region as a bounded space.

Moreover, looking at the history of the region “through diasporic eyes” may open up new methodological perspectives.¹² From this vantage, the biography of a person or the history of a community is no longer simply a passage through time; it is also a map, made up of the constellation of points and routes that have shaped and given meaning to individual lives. This geography, made up of particular locations, refracted memories, powerful imaginaries, and traces of other locales in the practices and objects of everyday life, is both real and intangible. And it is one that simultaneously confounds and confirms the imperatives of distance, for the connections forged by migrants both collapse vast expanses and serve as reminders of the enduring disjuncture between their own lives and those of friends, relatives, and partners elsewhere. These diasporic cartographies do not simply remind us that “mapping” is a “set of shifting and contested practices of ... remaking the world’; they can also lead us to reconfigure neatly demarcated “regional maps into weird patterns of discontinuous and broken lines.”¹³ The Middle East, under this angle, is less a clear territorial package than a set of networks holding together, and held together by, people and things, places and practices. It can be found in Dakar and New York City, Buenos Aires and Mumbai, Paris and Penang, São Paulo, Sydney, and Singapore as well as in Cairo, Beirut, Ramallah or Riyadh; it is there in migrants’ newspapers and book collections, their television and computer screens, kitchens, living rooms, cultural clubs, restaurants, and places of worship. These palimpsests of diaspora, bearing the traces of displacement, remind us in a myriad of ways of the presence of the Middle East in the world, and the world in the Middle East.

NOTES

¹ In writing this editorial the authors are deeply indebted to all those who attended the Mashriq-Mahjar conference in April 2012 at North Carolina State University. The papers and conversations created a rich intellectual brew that provided us with invaluable insights and helped crystallize some of our reflections into focused thoughts. Thus, This editorial is in many ways the distillation of the collective scholarship and musings of the following colleagues: Dalia Abdelhady, Reem Bailony, Lina Baydoun, Stacy Fahrenthold, Silvia Ferreira, Donna Gabaccia Sarah Gualtieri, Lirio Gutiérrez, Guita Hourani, Sally Howell, Steven Hyland, Simon Jackson, Randa Kayyali, Maria Logroño-Narbona, Xerxes Malki, Anne Monsour, Jacob Norris, Camila

Pastor, Paulo Pinto, Laura Robson, Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, Rita Stephan and David Wrisely.

² We paraphrase here Andrew Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2 (2002), 301–334.

³ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7 (1992), 7.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology," in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 191–210; James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994), 302–338; Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645 (1992), 1–24; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–38.

⁵ C.A Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); A.G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002).

⁶ Arif Dirlik, ed., *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1994); José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁷ David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in Armitage, ed., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11–27; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁸ Michael Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper, eds., *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Roderic Davison, 'Where Is the Middle East?', *Foreign Affairs* 38 (1960), 665–75; C.R. Koppes, "Captain Mahan, General Gordon and the Origin of the term 'Middle East'," *Middle East Studies* 12 (1976), 95–8; James Renton, "Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient: Britain and the Invention of the Middle East," *Historical Journal* 50 (2007), 645–77; Thomas Scheffler, "'Fertile Crescent', 'Orient', 'Middle East': The Changing Mental Maps of Southwest Asia," *European Review of History* 10 (1993), 253–72.

⁹ Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2013); Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Steven Hyland Jr., "'Arise from Deep Slumber:' Transnational Politics and Competing Nationalisms among Syrian Immigrants in Argentina, 1920–1922," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 43 (2011), 547–74; John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007); Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrants in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Dirk Hoerder, "Migration in the Atlantic Economies: Regional European Origins and Worldwide Expansion," in Hoerder and Leslie Page Moch, eds., *European Migrants: Global and Local Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press), 36.

¹² Engseng Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004), 210–46.

¹³ Vicente Rafael, "Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency," *American Historical Review* 104 (1999), 1210.