

*Elizabeth Claire Saylor & Lily Pearl Balloffet*

EDITORIAL FOREWORD



MASHRIQ & MAHJAR TODAY: MIGRATION STUDIES AT A  
CROSSROADS

When *Mashriq & Mahjar* came into being in 2013, it advocated “an alternative, diasporic vision” for the field of Middle East Studies.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, the journal has remained faithful to this aim. Its pages have become a hub for scholars who wander, and for research that does not fit neatly within clear-cut disciplinary boundaries. Refusing to be restricted by the pervasive “methodological regionalism” that continues to dominate the academy today, the work contained here hovers over the interstices of various disciplinary and regional specializations.<sup>2</sup> To accommodate these broad landscapes, the journal’s content spans disciplinary perspectives ranging from history, anthropology, sociology, and political science, to cultural studies and literary criticism. As globalization, technological innovation, and political conflicts dramatically increase the flow of people, information, goods, services, and resources across national and regional boundaries, a scholarly approach with a commensurately global vision is necessary. By examining the world “through diasporic eyes,” the work featured in this journal endeavors to move beyond narrow ways of thinking about peoples and cultures, languages and economies, faith and politics.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach enables its authors to ask new questions, to perceive and forge new connections. Thus, *Mashriq & Mahjar* has become a home for scholars who explore the lives and histories of diverse populations and their myriad representations, whether material, social, or imaginary.

Since its inception, *Mashriq & Mahjar* has featured research on numerous diasporic populations worldwide. Its articles have tracked the peregrinations of Lebanese and Syrian populations throughout the Americas, West Africa, Australia, and the Philippines. Other contributions have shone new light on the historical legacies and lived realities of Armenian, Bahraini, Egyptian, Sephardi, Somali, and

Tunisian diasporic communities. Side-by-side we have presented studies of Iranians in Texas juxtaposed with the political activism of Egyptian women in Paris, the philanthropic networks of rural Arab-Argentine women, and the complex cultural and institutional dynamics of communities of Arab Presbyterians in Canada. Beside new explorations into socio-cultural and political linkages between Arab American and African American communities in the United States, *Mashriq & Mahjar* features research on Armenian genocide memorials in North America, and migrants in Ottoman-era Bethlehem. An emphasis on mobility links these disparate areas of inquiry. Their common lack of geographic fixity renders opportunities for interdisciplinary conversation to arise. In the past four years, this journal has showcased research that pays attention to the networks of interconnection that span shifting geopolitical and sociocultural landscapes. Ultimately, the scholarly works that appear in this journal have ventured to understand human movement by conceiving of individual and collective identities as an “alternative cartography of social space.”<sup>4</sup>

*Mashriq & Mahjar* also embraces the increasingly transnational, trans-regional, and trans-linguistic character of a “world in motion”<sup>5</sup> through its inclusion of literature from multiple languages, notably Spanish, Portuguese, and French. By making scholarly and creative literature originally written in several languages available to scholars who work primarily in English, the journal has affirmed its commitment to an inclusive, global vision of the world today. The journal has also contributed to the field by highlighting contemporary literary and artistic production of the Middle Eastern and North African diaspora. Through a focus on individual creative expressions of experience and memory, *Mashriq & Mahjar* invites readers to approach transnational processes and the effects of globalization on individual human beings through creativity, imagination, and aesthetics.

Never before has inclusivity and connection been more urgent than now, in the wake of the United States’ vitriolic presidential campaign, and in the early days of a presidency that we fear will continue to be defined by a poisonous rhetoric of division, separatism, and an unapologetic hostility toward “others” – especially those from the Arabo-Islamic World. We condemn this rhetoric. Likewise, we denounce the increased Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment that we see gaining ground in the aftermath of the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote. At this fraught time, *Mashriq & Mahjar* reaffirms its

commitment to being a source of factual information and up-to-date research on immigrants, displaced peoples, and the worlds that they make. At this global moment, our mission in this regard is urgent.

Moving forward, *Mashriq & Mahjar* will continue to support scholarship that highlights the kaleidoscopic plurality that characterizes the countries, religions and diverse cultures that make up the Middle East–North Africa region and its diasporas. Now, more than ever, these stories must be heard. The question now becomes: how do we, as an academic community, take this wealth and diversity of viewpoints and mobilize it toward a greater good? How can we venture outside of our comfort zones and use our influence to reach a wider audience? One tack we might consider is to explore avenues for public engagement such as public history, including the curation of museum exhibitions. We can work to promote the nexus of academia and activism by publishing editorial pieces, contributing to radio segments, and producing translations (literary and otherwise) to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers. We can venture outside of the academy and speak to students at the elementary and secondary levels. The possibilities for new directions of engagement are vast, and the benefits to the scholarly community from these new ventures are assured.

Meanwhile, the scholarly enterprise of *Mashriq & Mahjar: The Journal of Middle Eastern and North African Migration Studies* will continue to represent a powerful counter-narrative that complicates the tired borders of a bygone era of area studies. And it will continue to act as a polestar for the energies and innovations of the dedicated individuals who are driving forward the field of migration and diaspora studies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, "On Forgotten Shores: Migration in Middle East Studies and the Middle East in Migration Studies," *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Arsan et al, "On Forgotten Shores," 3.

<sup>3</sup> Engseng Ho, "Empire through Diasporic Eyes," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004): 210–46.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 12.

<sup>5</sup> 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), 61.