

Lily Pearl Balloffet & Elizabeth Claire Saylor

DIASPORIC CARTOGRAPHIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH
NATHALIE HANDAL



The poet, playwright, travel writer, and intellectual Nathalie Handal is a true citizen of the world. Born to a Palestinian family from Bethlehem, Handal was raised between France, Latin America, and the Middle East, and educated in Asia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Handal's creative work reflects her nomadic upbringing and draws inspiration from multiple languages and cultures, making her one of the most important voices of the Arab Diaspora. Handal's *La Estrella Invisible (The Invisible Star)* (Valparaiso Ediciones, 2014) is the first contemporary collection of poetry that explores the city of Bethlehem and the lives of its exiles in the wider diaspora. As she states in the following interview, "although the atlas of my being is the globe, my gaze is always East."

Handal has enriched international literature through research and translation as editor of two landmark anthologies, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond* (W.W. Norton, 2008, eds. Handal, Tina Chang, and Ravi Shankar), and *The Poetry of Arab Women* (Interlink Books, 2001). By showcasing the work of eighty-three women poets from virtually every country in the Arabic-speaking world, *The Poetry of Arab Women* counteracts the invisibility of poets from marginalized groups. Handal's work has been translated into more than fifteen languages – fitting for an artist whose work so thoroughly embodies the migratory and diasporic experience, which the writer calls "displacement and its disturbances."

A weaver of words and cultures, and a wanderer among languages, landscapes, and art forms, Handal has said: "Movement is creativity." She currently teaches at Columbia University and lives in New York City, where millions of subway commuters daily read her poem "Lady Liberty," published as part of the Metropolitan Transit Authority's public poetry project, *Poetry in Motion*.

It is precisely this presence of mobility as a central axis in Handal's work that makes her writing an important part of the diasporic vision of the field of Middle East Studies that *Mashriq & Mahjar* looks to foster. Alongside our contributors from the fields of anthropology, literary and cultural studies, history, sociology, and political science, Handal's artistry adds to the mosaic of intellectual approaches that collectively counter the implicit stress upon fixity and stasis that is one of the main academic legacies of area studies. We believe that the following interview exemplifies many aspects of the core mission of *Mashriq & Mahjar*. After all, from its inception this journal set out to highlight scholarship that recognizes the centrality of movement and displacement in the history of the Middle East. We also affirm the notion that "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."¹ In this sense, for the migration studies scholar who comes to Handal's work as a first-time reader, this arrival may feel more akin to coming home. For those well familiar with her writing, we hope that this interview helps to raise new questions about the intersections between Handal's unique method of living and writing a life in motion, and the ever-evolving academic field of Middle East Migration Studies.

For more information about the poet, please visit: <http://www.nathaliehandal.com/>.

INTERVIEW WITH NATHALIE HANDAL

Elizabeth Claire Saylor (ES): How does your rich multilingual upbringing—between French, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Creole, and English, and the influences of Persian, Russian, Greek and Armenian—enter into your creative process?

Nathalie Handal (NH): It taught me the art of translation. Not only linguistic but cultural translation. Languages are openings that make visible the shadows and breaths of other places and people. But it's also this rich multilingual space that made me acutely aware of my displacement and its disturbances. In what language does an aspiring writer write if without a mother tongue? And if I was to choose from the four languages that roamed around me most—French, Spanish, Arabic and English—which dialect was I closest to, which accent did I inhabit more easily, which literary space would I belong to? My French

is a melange of Parisian, French Caribbean, Swiss and of le Midi (the South of France). My Spanish is infused with the cultures of Madrid and Andalucia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. My Arabic is a Levantine blend steeped in Bethlehemite colloquialism. My English is informed by American, British, and International School English—which has its own linguistic culture. Fortunately, I didn't have to make such a challenging choice. English came to me, and I greeted it. When I started publishing, I nurtured my American English because it allowed me to accommodate my other languages; house the various linguistic, cultural, and emotional worlds my poems and stories come from. Today, when a verse comes to me in Arabic, French, Italian, etc., it naturally translates itself into English on the page.

I continue to look for connections between languages—Arabic and Persian, Arabic and Spanish, Italian and French, and so forth. After all, no language is untouched, they all carry the remains of other civilizations and conquests. And it's in these connections that I am reminded of our global gathering.

Exile is an unsolvable grief. But with language my hyphenated mother tongues have found a way to create an original language.

Lily Pearl Balloffet (LB): Can you speak to the role of travel/mobility in your writing process?

NH: Life in motion is all I've known. I was conceived in Lausanne, Switzerland, my mother spent her pregnancy on the road in Europe namely France, Italy and ex-Yugoslavia, and somehow made her way to New York before having me in Haiti. I was raised in Latin America, France, and the Arab world, educated in the United States and the United Kingdom and have moved between cities in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and the United States most of my life. Most significantly, I've always divided my time between several cities. And although the atlas of my being is the globe, my gaze is always East.

I have been torn between two verses, one by Ibn 'Arabi, "If you engage in travel, you will arrive," and the other by the Cuban-raised Mexican-Lebanese writer Fayad Jamis, "*Mi alma es una gran bahia donde siempre hay un barco que se va*" (My soul is a large bay where there's always a boat leaving). What is arrival and departure? What is travel? What is loss? And where is the body and soul in these spaces? To arrive has mostly meant to discover. The farewell waves in exile have become symbolic of boats vanishing. These boats have become ships in

my imagination, every one of them representing a loved one and the immense void their absence has left inside of me. And I understand now, if we think we can achieve resolve with the question of displacement and identity, we will feel defeated. The aim is to maintain equipoise as if we were playing a dangerous sport.

Movement is creativity. It is in the imprecision of travel that I find the precision of language.

ES: As artist, academic, activist, and editor of the landmark anthology, *The Poetry of Arab Women* (2001), gender resides at the core of your work. How has your perspective on gender and feminism evolved over time, and what directions do envision for the future?

NH: There is no successful society without feminists, and feminists are men and women who believe in human rights, who acknowledge the inequality, injustice, and exclusion women endure, and participate in challenging and changing the system. There is no culture without our femininity and intellect, and yes, they are not mutually exclusive. Women are part of the equation not a shadow in it. Feminism is empathy, equality, evolution. It's the big beautiful beat to liberation for all of us.

As a child, I saw strength in the laughter, hum, humility, and grace of women; as a young girl, I found beauty in the word believe that women kept delivering to me; as a young writer, I met a woman who told me I can't be feminine, talented and intelligent, and then I met a thousand other women who taught me how to challenge the violence history has inflicted on the image of what a woman can and cannot be – as women are boundless; as a young adult, I witnessed daily what women made happen even if men got the credit; as a writer in the middle of my life, the bravest words and worlds I hear and experience are those women offer; as a woman, I am humbled by the simplicity, in other words, the widest range of beautiful complexity, that women offer me every day with their capacity to love and endure and build and be.

LB: To us, your writing seems to co-inhabit the worlds of art, cultural production, and the academy. Do you see your work as conversant with the interdisciplinary frameworks of diaspora/migration studies?

NH: Every action and motion, every word I have written has been a rumination of, a conversation with, has been etched in, the migratory and diasporic experience.



Letter from the Levant

There is no city behind the window. No place of worship. No stars between our stories. No gleaming meadow. The ruins we never named are endless. The survivors our scars. We have to believe God is the faint resonance inside, that silence will take eternity apart and hang it on death's small door. It's true, once we knew every stop on the Palestine Railway. Now from other windows, we still see the route to Baghdad, Homs to Tripoli, Baalbek to Beirut, Tyre to Acre, Haifa to Jaffa, Jerusalem to Gaza before Alexandria. Now from distant places we read postcards that say, *my hands are for my absence only*. We pretend not to believe. Where we come from the truth never disturbs the horse in our sleep. We close our hands to forget what we know and are unable to tell.

Declaration of Independence

Do you know anyone
who loves more than one country? Of course –

This isn't an opera.

You are right –
it's more folk or a litany.

Are you going to answer my question?

I did.

Let me ask again –
love isn't a lie, but a country is?

NOTES

¹ 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): 6.