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EDITORIAL FOREWORD



ARABS IN AUSTRALIA: LOCAL CONCERNS AND  
TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

An important shift is taking place in the field of diaspora research with the emergence of Middle East migration studies, heretofore a neglected area of inquiry. A number of humanities and social science scholars have criticized this neglect, because, as they point out, it makes little sense given the scale of migration from the Arab world throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, notably with the current global Middle East migration crisis.<sup>1</sup> Arguing for the recognition and importance of the Middle East's diasporic history, recent work, including this special issue, stresses the political, cultural, and economic contributions of dispersed Arab communities, as well as the significant transnational connections between them. If researchers of Middle East studies have long viewed the region as a "neatly delineated, territorial package," they can no longer ignore the relevance of diaspora research for a greater, deeper, and more complicated understanding of the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this shift, various studies have been published which reflect the rapidly growing scholarly investment in Middle East migration research. These studies tend to be interdisciplinary, and draw on approaches from history, sociology and anthropology, as well as literary and cultural studies. Works range from focused studies of particular diasporas, such as the Lebanese by scholars like Andrew Arsan, Dalia Abdelhady, and Syrine Hout, to more broadly conceived research that examines the history and aesthetics of migration across the region, by researchers like Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian,

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Nouri Gana, and Layla Al Maleh.<sup>3</sup> While this research has enriched the field, its overall focus has not been evenly distributed. In the Anglophone sphere, much critical attention has been paid to Middle Eastern communities in North America, and in particular Arab communities in the United States, leaving the experience of Arab migration in other geographical locations, particularly Australia, underrepresented. Even the broader studies mentioned above have not substantially ameliorated this oversight. Where research of Arab-Australians has principally occurred is, unsurprisingly, in Australian-based scholarship and in response to discrete local events, like the infamous gang-rape case in 2000 and the Cronulla Riots in 2005, as well as the repercussions of more global events like September 11, 2001.<sup>4</sup> This scholarship sought principally to address the plight of Arabs in Australia, particularly in a context of rising racism and Islamophobia against Arabs.

The papers published in this special issue of *Mashriq & Mahjar* emerged from a conference held at the University of Sydney in March 2016 to address, in part, how Arabs in Australia respond to racism. But what also emerged from the discussion was an attempt to move beyond defining Arab-Australians simply in relation to the dominant culture that otherizes them and positions them as marginal. The assembled articles here reveal instead the extent to which cultural practitioners – performance artists, community activists, and writers – explore, enact, and narrate their experiences as Arab-Australians in their own voice and through their own craft. The articles selected in this special issue also include scholarly works that explore the history of Arabs in Australia and critically analyze literature produced by Arab-Australian authors.

Several interrelated themes emerge from these contributions. They include: the interplay between cultural production and the political, where culture is deployed as a kind of political activism; the recognition that the history of Arabs in Australia is an unfolding one, intimately bound with personal experience and the excavation of forgotten stories; and, not least, the impact of global events on our understanding of the Arab-Australian experience. Addressing these common themes, the following series of articles revisit the notion of “Arabs in Australia” from a perspective that does not eschew the reality of racism. Rather, they explore how cultural production might be an effective tool to imagine an Arab-Australian subjectivity and a lived experience that fashions a space for itself both in response to and in spite of that reality.

Anne Monsour's opening essay provides an early history of Arab migration to Australia, which stretches back to the latter decades of the 1800s through to the mid-1900s. During this period, as Monsour's research shows, Australia actively pursued a migration and settlement program that openly favored white Europeans. Various historical policies, collectively referred to as "the White Australia policy," specifically restricted Asian migration. This impacted Syrian/Lebanese migrants' capacity to settle in Australia because they were, under these policies, categorized as Asian. Nevertheless, some migrants mounted successful cases to remain in Australia and Monsour's careful archival research uncovers this largely undocumented history of Arab-Australians. She shows how Syrian-Lebanese migrants of that era worked within the confines of the requirements of various legislations, for instance by altering their name and birthplace on official documents to present a case that they should be classified as European. Such a history has had a great impact, Monsour reveals, on the personal lives and relations of many second- and third-generation Arab-Australians with regard to their own family history. Monsour's contribution sheds light on a still suppressed past of Arabs in the Australian context, broadening personal family histories and asserting the presence of Arabs during the highpoint of Australia's white, European past.

The following essay by David Joseph highlights the role of archives in one's personal life story. As author and sole performer of the play *Deceptive Threads*, Joseph stages the secret archives he unearthed about his two grandfathers. His play illustrates how his grandfathers' lives were deeply, even if indirectly, intertwined. Both men assumed false identities for opposite ends: Joseph's maternal Australian grandfather was employed by the state as a spy and worked "to uphold the hegemony of the White Australia policy," while his paternal Lebanese-migrant grandfather was compelled to alter birth records and assume a false European identity in order to be naturalized as an Australian. To further emphasize these linked deceptions, Joseph creates an aesthetic of deception on stage through the projections of images and strategically deployed sound from percussion instruments. The deceptions, Joseph points out, form an integral part of the Joseph family's forgotten and marginalized Lebanese heritage. In their race to assimilate within white Australia, the Josephs lost their Arabic language and their personal past. Joseph explains that this play, with its emphasis on archives, is a reclamation of his personal past, but one that is inextricably tied to the broader racist political history of Australia. The play draws a link, or thread, between Australia's current

heated debates about refugees and the “deceptive” and buried histories of his grandfathers. Included in this issue is a full copy of the script of *Deceptive Threads* and a link to one of the staged performances of the play by Joseph.

The next two essays, by literary critic Jumana Bayeh and critically acclaimed author Randa Abdel-Fattah, address, respectively, the local and transnational dynamics of Arab-Australian fiction, and the various constraints its authors face in the publishing industry. Bayeh’s paper responds to the curious neglect of Arab- Australian literature from both Australian literary studies and the burgeoning field of Arab diaspora writing. She argues that works by authors like Michael Mohammad Ahmad, Jad El Hage, Abbas El- Zein, and Loubna Haikal straddle the Australian and Arab diaspora literary fields. She points out that the key themes that are often perceived to define Australian letters, namely theft of land, attachment to land, indigeneity and identity, are also essential parts of Arab-Australian narratives. Her analysis of Arab-Australian texts as a form of Arab diaspora writing articulates a bold method attuned to the reciprocal transnational dynamics between literatures produced across various national spaces.

Abdel-Fattah, writing from the perspective of a well- published author, asks if she, as a Palestinian-Muslim female writer, can subvert the dominant paradigm within the publishing industry that consistently works to position her as a “native informant.” Abdel-Fattah outlines the offensive “Muslimsplainin’g” that she is subjected to from, in one example, celebrated author Geraldine Brooks, whose award-winning *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994) secured Brooks as an authority on Muslim women.<sup>5</sup> Abdel-Fattah’s study raises some important ethical questions on who gets to represent, and speak for and about marginalized communities. Reflecting on the infamous “Lionel Shriver affair” where Shriver, in her keynote address at the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival, argued in favor of cultural appropriation, and Helen Thurloe’s fictional account of a Pakistani-Muslim teenager’s arranged marriage in the novel *Promising Azra* (2016), Abdel-Fattah argues that writers need to be aware that they do not live in a post-racial world, and that representations of the “other” have manifold consequences that maintain the disadvantage of those represented.<sup>6</sup> Abdel-Fattah thus denounces the inconsistency of orientalist feminism that on the one hand gives license to white western feminists like Brooks and Thurloe to mediate experiences of the Muslim or Arab woman in their narratives, and that demands on the other hand that authors like Abdel-Fattah write as “native informants.”

The final essay, in the form of an interview with writer and community activist Paula Abood, further explores the issue of who is authorized to speak for Arabs in the community sector. Abood highlights the skepticism she often faces when “speaking up” or “speaking back” as an Arab feminist,<sup>7</sup> observing that even community advocacy groups replicate the same power structures that authorizes some people to speak while others are spoken for.<sup>8</sup> Alongside the interview with Abood, we have included a sample of her literary work, published here for the first time, which represents another aspect of her activism. These stories, like much of her other work, speak of the Arab diaspora and narrate the experiences of predominately Arab female characters. Her creative practice echoes and reflects, in a different form, her theoretical interests as well as her political and public activist work in the Arab-Australian scene.

Collectively, the papers assembled here shed new light on the Arab-Australian experience. They build on existing scholarship that has invariably, but understandably, focused on post-9/11 and post-Cronulla racism that Arab communities have faced in Australia. They urge us to reassess the cultural and political contributions of Arab-Australians and to examine their work in relation to other, better studied Arab diasporic communities. As the assembled contributions make clear, cultural productions afford Arab-Australians agency to narrate their own experiences and give voice to their own and the history of their broader community.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, 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): 1–8; Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and America: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Ghassan Hage, “The Everyday Aesthetics of the Lebanese Transnational Family,” ASA Firth Lecture, June 2012, <https://www.theasa.org/downloads/publications/firth/firth12.pdf>; Linda K. Jacobs, *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York City, 1880–1900* (New York: Kalimah Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The reference to the Middle East as a “neatly delineated, territorial package” is an adaptation of a phrase taken from Arsan et. al. (see pages 1 and 5). It relates to the authors’ astute observation that Middle East studies as a field has assessed the development of the region in geographical,

cultural and, to a certain extent, political isolation, ignoring the ongoing impact of the Arab migrant community. For further scholarship which illustrates the relevance of diaspora and transnationalism to Middle East research see Jumana Bayeh, *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); Sally Howell, "Cultural Interventions: Arab American Aesthetics between the Transnational and the Ethnic," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000): 59-82; Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For scholarship that deals specifically with Lebanese diaspora see Dalia Abdelhady, *The Lebanese Diaspora: The Arab Immigrant Experience in New York, Montreal and Paris* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Syrine Hout, *Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). For research that is broadly concerned with Middle Eastern or Arab diaspora see Laleh Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Nouri Gana, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arabic Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Anthony Gorman and Sossie Kasbarian, eds., *Diasporas of the Modern Middle East: Contextualising Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Paul Tabar, Greg Noble, and Scott Poynting, *Being Lebanese in Australia: Identity, Racism and the Ethnic Field* (Beirut: Institute for Migration Studies, 2010); Greg Noble, ed., *Lines in the Sand: The Cronulla Riots and the Limits of Australia* (Sydney: Institute of Criminology Press, 2009); Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar, and Jock Collins, *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other* (Sydney: Institute of Criminology Press, 2004); Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting, and Paul Tabar, *Kebabs, Kids, Cops & Crime: Youth Ethnicity and Crime* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2000); Ghassan Hage, ed., *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Brooks, "Sunday Book Review: Children's Books" *The New York Times*, 16 September 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/books/review/Brooks-t.html?r=0>.

<sup>6</sup> Lionel Shriver, "Lionel Shriver's Full Speech: 'I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad,'" *The Guardian*, 13 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>; Helen Thurloe, *Promising Azra* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Abood's work owes much to Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>8</sup> Similar observations are made by Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Voice, Representation and Resistance," in Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba, eds., *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 200–30.