

**David Joseph Wrisley**

METAFICTION MEETS MIGRATION: ART  
FROM THE ARCHIVES IN RABEE JABER'S  
AMERIKA

**Abstract**

The subject of this article is Rabee Jaber's novel *Amerika* (2009) recounting the migration of a group of Syro-Lebanese to the United States on the eve of the First World War. It demonstrates how metafictional techniques—ironic narrator figures, flashbacks, dream-like scenes—allow Jaber to address the fine, yet shifting, line between fiction and history in the accounts of Arab migrations to the Americas. The article explores the creative rewriting of an essential intertext for Jaber, Kafka's *Amerika* (*The Man Who Disappeared*) and asserts that the novel's reflective uncertainty pervades both the way that a historical past can be represented and the way that the past is presented to a contemporary Lebanese audience. The article concludes by suggesting that the contrast between the two main characters, Martā Ḥaddād and Ali Jabir, is not only indicative of distinct kinds of migration, but, more abstractly, points to contrasting ideas about reading and writing the past.



Rabee Jaber is a prolific, Arabic-language Lebanese writer and *Amerika* is his sixteenth novel.<sup>1</sup> Written in four parts and 126 short chapters, *Amerika* is set on the eve of the First World War at the moment of the so-called First Wave of the Syro-Lebanese migration from Mount Lebanon to the United States. *Amerika* is only one of Jaber's historical novels written in the first decade of the twentieth-first century to feature characters in motion, leaving their birth land and settling into lives in faraway places. In a country for which migration has been a constituent part of its complex identity for nearly two centuries, Jaber's literary production stages for a contemporary Lebanese readership a number of fascinating paradoxes about the relationship between circulation and identity, transnational communities and the homeland, as well as the very nature of the production of the past in the present. Jaber uses numerous metafictional techniques—ironic narrator figures, flashbacks, dream-like scenes—to address the fine, yet shifting, line between fiction and history in the accounts of Arab migrations to, and mobility within, the mahjar. The narration of the novel *Amerika* poses a number of questions for

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those who study the representations of human migration: What do we actually know about the past? How have we come to know it? What is our relationship in the present to such a past?

Rabee Jaber is also a journalist, editing the *Afāq* cultural supplement of the pan-Arab daily *al-Ḥayat* since 2001.<sup>2</sup> He is married to another Lebanese novelist, Renée Hayek. He graduated from the American University of Beirut with a degree in physics in 1992, the same year his first novel *Master of Darkness* appeared. Not only has Jaber ambitiously produced almost one novel a year since 1992, but he has also steadily published pieces of criticism, creative non-fiction and fiction in the Arabic-language press. One theme that stands out among the many literary topics he treats is that of the distress and alienation of people amid the fateful workings of human history. A memorable piece exemplifying this theme was published during the July 2006 war under the name “A Diary of a Million Refugees: Group Migration under a Sky of Planes and Clouds.”<sup>3</sup> Even though Jaber’s writing style imaginatively engages both a Lebanese present and past, he rarely appears in the public, literary world; what we know about him is basically limited to what he writes. Journalists have dubbed him the “shy author [*al-kātib al-khajūl*]” or the “secluded author [*al-kātib al-mu’tazil*],” ostensibly because he chooses to engage neither with the press nor with the academic world. In 2012, when Jaber was awarded the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (the Arabic Booker) for *The Druze of Belgrade*, for which he was the youngest ever recipient, he shocked audiences when he reluctantly joined the stage to utter but one short sentence of thanks. Following the ceremony, he provoked the indignation of journalists by refusing to attend a press conference.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the awkwardness of such moments in the spotlight, Jaber has given a few rare interviews in which he provides some insight both into the process, and meaning, of writing for him. In the Abu Dhabi daily *al-Ittihād*’s culture section, at the very moment when *Amerika* was short-listed for the Arabic Booker in 2010, Jaber explained how his novels crystallize at moments in a lifetime of self-engagement with both family and national history. He described ancestors whose fragmentary or obscure pasts haunt him, despite his attempts to write those stories down—particularly Alī Jābir from *Amerika*—in whose case, the author’s attempts to form a character had repeatedly failed. In that interview, the journalist Alī al-Maqrī invited Jaber to speak about his own life, in response to which he explained how he had to make up an elaborate lie to get a visa to travel to the United States, and he insisted how that trip, like his other travels, led him to points in his own state of mind in which he was able to imagine people, places and moments for new novels.<sup>5</sup> Jaber fashions himself here, as in his novels, doing intense archival research in libraries, in the Special Collections department in the basement of Jafet Library at the American University of Beirut, or in the case of this interview, at the New York Public Library. Short of asking Jaber himself, of

course, we have no way of being sure of the veracity of his story about the visa and his American travels. Could it be that Jaber is using the cultural page of a daily newspaper—a genre with which he is very familiar after years of writing at *al-Hayat*—as a playful performance to experiment with the line between fiction and reality? Is the lie to get an American visa, yet again, the ironic insignia of Jaber’s fictional style? One might expect so given the journalist’s ironic headline in the interview, “I was a liar [Kuntu kâthiban],” a play on the title of Jaber’s sixth novel *I was a Prince* [Kuntu amīran] (1997).

To date, critical attention to Jaber’s works has been limited to a few literary scholars focused on his earlier novels.<sup>6</sup> The most incisive comments that speak directly to Jaber’s imaginative treatment of the past have come from Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi. In a review article of *Youssef the Englishman* (1998), a novel about the Druze Jaber family in the ‘Urqub region of the Chouf, Salibi points to the “baffling” amount of “historical knowledge” that went into the making of the novel.<sup>7</sup> We read the late Lebanese historian entranced by Jaber’s twofold genius—his use of narrative and his command of intricate historical detail—calling it “a study of the subtle complexities of the social character of the Druze mountains ... tersely sketched out in elegant parables and vignettes”.<sup>8</sup> In his short essay *Beirut and the Past* (2009), Salibi elaborates on the desire to see the present in the past, and vice versa, comparing Jaber’s narrative art to Lavoisier’s law of the conservation of mass: nothing of the past is gained or lost, rather everything is always changing.<sup>9</sup> Salibi describes how “Jaber roams [*yatajawwul*] through the Beirut of the present and the past, coming and going, unencumbered”.<sup>10</sup> He concludes by arguing that Jaber’s “past-present (or present-past)” is a space in which the imaginative dimension of narrative combined with the “scientific discipline” [*al-inḍibāṭ al-‘ilimyy*] characteristic of a historian exist in constant tension. In the end, however, Salibi concedes that perhaps the creativity of the novelist, and not that of the historian, produces the most eloquent form of expression.<sup>11</sup>

Salibi’s comments on the complex relation of fiction and history in Jaber come almost as an afterthought in both of his essays, neither of which concerns *Amerika*. The present article expands on Jaber’s deep concern with history, the ways that he constructs narratives about the past, and simultaneously deconstructs them, pointing to a strong ambivalence about the power of historical narrative in the present. On the one hand, digging into the archive for tales of a national past is fascinating to Jaber. On the other, his novel *Amerika* is permeated with a reflective uncertainty about narrating migration. Jaber follows in step with numerous European artists of the twentieth century who turned to a key text for critically imagining migration to the New World: Kafka’s *Amerika* (*The Man Who Disappeared*). Seen from afar, Jaber’s oeuvre might be the closest to epic found in the literary landscape of contemporary Lebanon; in Balzac-like fashion,

characters, themes, and narrative practices overlap across the novels, and his writing is marked with detailed, multi-scalar depictions of the geographies of Mount Lebanon. For all that *Amerika* adds to that oeuvre, by bringing the scope of Lebanese experience in the mahjar to it, the novel resists the temptation of an epic triumphalism of personal and national achievement.

Jaber's novels explicitly treating migration include his three-part *Beirut: City of the World* (2003-2007), the main protagonist of which, Abd al-Jawwād al-Bārūdī, flees Damascus to settle in early nineteenth-century Beirut, finding work and founding a family. The novel *The Druze of Belgrade: The Story of Ḥannā Ya'qūb* (2011) also follows the migration of one man, Ḥannā Ya'qūb, from the Chouf to the Balkans in the 1860s. The subject of the present article, the novel *Amerika* (2009), is essentially focused on two migrating figures, Martā Ḥaddād, a young woman who travels to the United States in search of her husband, and who ends up creating a new life there, and Alī Jābir whom Martā later marries. Whereas the inward migration of al-Bārūdī in *Beirut: City of the World* facilitates the construction of a complex portrait of the cosmopolitanism of an expanding nineteenth-century Beirut, in *Amerika* and in *The Druze of Belgrade*, Jaber delves into the history of the Syro-Lebanese scattered throughout the world in the twentieth century, using characters modeled on members of his own family and re-created through fragmentary family documents. Jaber's works dealing with migration, since they are written from the Mashriq, and not from the diaspora, represent an important counterpoint to the growing discussion about the concept of the *shatāt* in contemporary Arabic literary production.<sup>12</sup>

The novel *Amerika* begins with Martā Ḥaddād, a young Maronite woman from Btater who initially comes to New York in search of her cousin, and husband, Khalīl (Joe) Haddad. On the same ship headed for New York, we also find Alī Jābir, who begins a saga that will lead him from the Northeast to the southern hemisphere and back to the United States towards the end of his life. Khalīl, the first major character of the novel to have made it to the United States, is expelled from the story when he is enlisted in the army and eventually dies in action in France. These three historical figures are explored through the pages of *Amerika*, although the characterization of Martā and Alī are considerably richer than that of Khalīl, and overall, Martā features most prominently in the narrative economy. After Martā's traumatic experience of discovering her husband in Louisiana with another woman, the novel shifts to describing her precarious movement across the American Northeast and Midwest as a pack peddler, until she settles first in Philadelphia and slowly begins to accumulate wealth and stability, living through some of the grimmest moments of early twentieth-century United States history, including the deadly "Spanish" flu and the Great Depression. After his far-flung wanderings in South America, Alī returns back to Illinois where Martā is living, only to leave again to the Texas-Mexico border to work as a

trafficker during Prohibition. The two finally are married and they move to Pasadena, California where they have purchased farm land. When Alī passes away, the story shifts to the dense network of Martā's family and friends that surround her in the last years of her life. The novel *Amerika* sketches out a dizzying geography of the Americas over a period of some sixty years, and the circulation of a few central protagonists in that space whose lives intersect with the destinies of thousands of Syro-Lebanese across the continent.

With all its historical detail, *Amerika* does not answer in analytical fashion, however, the question of why and how people migrate, as do scholars of migration who view the contours of human mobility as historical process. As a literary construct with many of the traits of postmodern writing, rather than creating knowledge as sociological or "historical narrative subject to factual verification," the novel *Amerika* uses a pre-national past of the circulating peoples of the Middle East as a space for postnational, metafictional reflection. Leslie Adelson asserts the need for a "new critical grammar of migration" that views the literary production about migration as possessing a transformative quality for its readership.<sup>13</sup> Literary texts rework the cultural matter that historians use to create historical narrative, and in the case of literatures of migration, this means imagining new, even deterritorialized, written spaces of belonging. Adelson argues that

literary narratives provoke us to ponder the historical intelligibility of our time, to become more historically literate by reading against the grain of existing categories, concepts, and statistics of migration in order to ask what worlds we inhabit as the millennium turns.<sup>14</sup>

The halting complexity of a fragmented and scattered Lebanese past and its transformation into literature are clearly articulated in Jaber's oeuvre, but nowhere more clearly than in the narrative frame of *Beirut: City of the World*. The narrator figure of that work interviews the old Count Suleiman de Bustros, just before his death. Stymied with beginning the novel itself, the narrator is faced with all the collected materials he received after the count died (papers, wills, letters, cards, inventories, and sundry artifacts). He even despairs that he will never be able to put order into this labyrinth of detail.<sup>15</sup> The objects that lay strewn [*muba'thira*] in front of the narrator stand metaphorically for an individual's life path, but also metonymically for the contemporary reader as the possibility of an interconnected, global history of people of Lebanese descent.

Although *Amerika* has no such narrative frame, it is nonetheless making art from an archive. It is hard to be sure of the real existence of the documents that Jaber inserts into his novel, yet they impress upon the work a kind of "scientific" historical rigor of the sort that impressed Salibi. Chapter two gives the text of Alī Jābir's will.<sup>16</sup> The reader finds numerous letters exchanged back and forth with family in Lebanon. Small snippets of

documents ostensibly found in Martā Ḥaddād's home in Pasadena also form a core of one chapter.<sup>17</sup> Jaber even includes a document reporting on the state of Syrian immigrants to America at the time.<sup>18</sup> Darraj has employed the expression the "power of the archive" to refer to Jaber's peculiar use of historical research and the insertion of real documents into his earlier novels.<sup>19</sup> Instead of the archival document inserted into the narrative for creating a simple effect of verisimilitude, *Amerika* arranges the fragments of archives into the backbone of narrative, deeply blending the historical and the fictional. The reader senses these archival objects like nodes in a network. At very first glance, *Amerika* might seem to rehearse familiar Levantine immigrant narratives of the sort collected and analyzed by Naff: a woman moves alone from the Middle East via France to New York and her westerly migration in the United States parallels her slow social and economic integration into a new nation.<sup>20</sup> This article argues that Jaber's view of migration, like his view of history itself, is highly ambivalent. An individual's integration into a place, just as the elements of narrative into a unified whole, is always an incomplete process. From this perspective, Jaber's novels do more than Adelson's notion of provoking the imagination of a postnational space. They also go beyond Salibi's notion of a creative expansion of the archive, since they accompany such imaginative storytelling with a sophisticated, self-reflexive skepticism about the nature of historical narration itself.

At the same time that his works are full of half-archival, half-imagined figures, like Martā Ḥaddād, each and every novel begins with the fictional disclaimer:

this novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance between its characters, events and places with real-life characters, events and places is purely coincidental and unintentional (7).

Such a disclaimer comes off as a playful wink, provoking a readerly double take when we discover later that the narrator is directly related to the characters of the novel. This inscription of such personal detail in *Amerika* is rather typical of Jaber; he takes a keen interest in the fictionality of both self and world. Other early works, such as *Black Tea* (1995) and *Berytus: Underground City* (2005) go so far as to feature *doppelgänger* narrator figures or author lookalikes who intrude into the novel with playful regularity. Critics do not agree fully, however, about the purpose of such novelistic innovation. Anton Shammas has compared this mischievous technique in Jaber's third novel *The Last House* (1996) to Borges and Proust when the fictitious narrator, known as "K"

inserts himself into the novels of the Lebanese writer Yousef Habshi al-Ashqar and invents a fictitious identity for himself, from within his Proustian, cork-tiled apartment in Beirut ... Cervantes, Borges, Cortazar and Auster, to name a few, insert themselves as well into Jaber's narrative,

not as precursors and writers of ‘previous texts,’ or as a variation of intertextuality, but as a significant narrative presence.<sup>21</sup>

Soubhi Boustani, on the other hand, argues for the centrality of “intertextuality” in Jaber’s literary technique, particularly linking Jaber’s novel *Ralf Rizkallah in the Mirror* with Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. It is perhaps Boustani’s rather restricted notion of intertextuality as the tight relationship of one text with another that leads him to depict Jaber’s fiction as hermetic and elitist; he makes the odd claim that his fiction is a kind of “chrysalis” or “refuge [foyer]” inside of which Jaber can establish his own “intimate domain [*empire intime*].”<sup>22</sup> The narrative presence of other texts in postmodern fiction, *pace* Boustani, serves more to open up the text than to close it down to a hermetic set of meanings.<sup>23</sup> The same can be said of Jaber’s production of historical fiction; it opens up a past—an unstable past that haunts the unstable present—allowing it to circulate amongst contemporary readers keen to make sense of twentieth-century Lebanon.

While the metafictional moves of the narrative voice may be said to have a complex, layered quality in the earlier works, in the migration novels they play a different, and even didactic role, challenging today’s reader to think twice about the reality of past human experience produced by story.<sup>24</sup> Linda Hutcheon claims that postmodern fiction:

suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological.<sup>25</sup>

The novel *Amerika* seems to grow out of an impulse towards reconstructing a not-so-distant family, but the result is not a text for private, familial consumption, rather one open to present reflection of contemporary readers. *Amerika* exhibits a self-reflexivity that draws attention to the artifice—with all of its gaps and paradoxes—of the family saga. In a word, in *Amerika* the metafictional meets migration. Philippe Gasperini characterizes metafiction with the following elegant, yet capacious description: “a space of aesthetic uncertainty which is also a space of reflection.”<sup>26</sup> This notion of the metafictional as a literary reflective uncertainty is helpful for understanding the way that Jaber deals with the past. Hutcheon has coined the useful term “historiographic metafiction” in an attempt to expand, and to historicize, the definition of self-reflexive literary production to include the variety that deals with real, historical figures:

[h]istoriographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the “world” and literature.

By parody here, Hutcheon means postmodern parody, an ironic stance on the text that makes a significant commentary on representation, and importantly, one that is accompanied by a deep awareness of examples of such irony in literature. Jaber's self-reflexivity is by no means superficially dismissive or cynical, rather it borrows from, and reshapes, literary material from masters of pre-modern and modern irony: Cervantes, Melville, Garcia Marquez, among others. As Salibi noted, Jaber's fiction also exhibits a remarkable integrity vis-à-vis the historical record; its grasp of detail impresses the reader, and makes the documents from family archives mingle in complex ways both with other documents and with the larger events of history.

Speaking about his novel *The Druze of Belgrade* that won the Booker Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2012, a year in which the focus of the prize had to do with displaced people, Jaber commented on the main character Ḥannā Ya'qūb whose arrival in a new land is marred with miscomprehension and suffering. He said:

The novel addresses a number of issues. The main question is the question of identity. 'Who is Ḥannā Ya'qūb? and why did this happen to him? And where is the justice in this happening to him?' The other question is: 'In a tough world like ours, yesterday or today, how much can a human being endure?' I write in Arabic. However, I see myself more as a reader than a writer. [Even though] I have written seventeen or eighteen novels, you might write one novel in your life and this might be sufficient. For me reading, similarly to writing, is almost my only way to make sure that I exist [and] for me to feel psychologically balanced. We live amongst seven billion other lives. However, how many of those lives actually really influence us, influence our character, the way we look at the world and our feelings, like the influence of Anna Karenina or Ursula Buendia, or Lord Jim or Lady Macbeth?<sup>27</sup>

Without explicit mention of the term metafiction, Jaber captures here one of its main tenets—the tight, almost existential, circle of reflection about reading and writing. He also brings up one of the classic goals of prose literature, the development of universally meaningful main characters. But how can a character be developed given the apparent contradiction between the desire for sufficient historical fidelity and the very fragmentary nature of the human past? This appears to be Jaber's main challenge in the novels on migration.

I would argue that embedded in the seemingly assimilationist narrative of Martā—from pack peddler, to dry goods shopkeeper, and to farm owner—is a deep uncertainty about migration either as a linear phenomenon or as a full integration of self into nation. The non-linear characterization of Alī provides a needed counterpoint to Martā in this respect. He is the brother of the Rabee Jaber's grandfather, and is the very same man that in the interview

with *al-Ittiḥād* in 2010 the author said he had so much difficulty transforming into a character. The marriage of Martā and Alī —perhaps the first between a Druze and a Maronite in the United States, the narrator suggests—weaves together two gendered life paths. If Martā’s life path is marked, beginning in Part two, by a slow sedentarization in the United States, Alī’s is one of significant precarity and vagrancy throughout the Americas. When they buy a farm in Pasadena, California in the interwar period, Rabee Jaber’s exploration of the two paths of Lebanese migration merges if only for a short while. His metafictional technique finds expression in the contrasts and the intersections between of these two characters, as well as in their short-lived union.



Jaber uses an unmistakable intertext, creatively reworking Kafka’s *Amerika* (*The Man Who Disappeared*) as the entry point of his novel.<sup>28</sup> Whereas Kafka’s *Amerika* breaks off without a clear narrative closure, Jaber’s *Amerika* works towards such conclusion, and brings us to the death of both of the emigrating protagonists Martā and Alī in California. Jaber’s use of Kafka’s *Amerika* portrays neither a mythical America, nor a Kafkian “exploded Bohemia” as a space of pure alienation from the homeland, but rather as a way of asserting the century-old, complex interconnectedness of Mount Lebanon and the mahjar.<sup>29</sup> As in Kafka’s *Amerika*, a general westward migration provides the axis of movement. Both begin with scenes of boats of immigrants entering New York Harbor with the Statue of Liberty as prominent signifier.<sup>30</sup> As attention shifts to the skyscrapers of Manhattan, Jaber portrays New York City, through the eyes of Martā, as a gloomy, cold landscape, not unlike the one experienced by Kafka’s Karl Roßmann. Most of the first two parts of Jaber’s novel focus on Martā’s alienation, beginning with her fear of failing the medical examination at Ellis Island. Jaber’s second protagonist Alī Jābir, on the other hand, simply jumps ship to swim across New York Harbor, entering the United States, not through a legal border, but boldly and independently. This double entry into America of Martā and Alī, the ordered and the untidy, and the intertwined stories of their lives cleaves Kafka’s complex anti-hero in two.

The family drama found in Kafka, namely that Karl has been banished to America after getting a young maidservant pregnant, is displaced in Jaber’s novel onto the slow, painful discovery of Martā’s own marital trauma; she left Mount Lebanon in search of her husband with whom she had lost epistolary contact, only to discover that he had moved in with another woman in New Orleans. A variety of other motifs, objects and spaces allows the reader both to feel the presence of Kafkian antecedents in Jaber’s novel, and to distinguish the latter from the former. Martā’s hasty departure from the

dehumanizing factory work is reminiscent of the alienation of Karl's employment at the cavernous Hotel Occidental. The reader comes to feel Martā's own distinct alienation as she sits in her room and stares out the window in a long passage describing the icy landscape over Jersey City. Both protagonists Martā and Karl are forced to replay the drama of their separation from the homeland, but with an important difference; Martā's memory continually drifts back to images of a village life to which she cannot really return since her village population had dwindled due to migration, whereas Karl continually remembers his expulsion and imagines eventually returning home to make an important career. Dalia Said Mostafa has argued how trauma translates into Jaber's narrative space non-linearly, in the form of flashbacks.<sup>31</sup> Martā will have her own traumatic flashbacks with dwindling regularity across the novel once she discovers the truth of her husband's infidelity.

Kafka's novel breaks off with the invitation for Karl to head west on the train and join the Nature Theater of Oklahoma to become an artist. Martā's trip to New Orleans to find her husband at the end of Part one takes the place of the truncated Oklahoma scene. Returning on the train to Philadelphia, not knowing quite what to do next, Martā stares out the window: "[t]he darkness seemed to extend out never-ending. She saw a face reflected in the glass. It was yellow, shattered" (11). After her existential crisis of New Orleans, the novel pushes further and deeper into the complex, interconnected lives of the Syro-Lebanese in North America.

Michael Hofmann mentions how Hartmut Binder in his *Kafka Kommentar* argues that Kafka's *Amerika* is "actually extremely tightly and purposefully composed, full of careful echoes," and that in it "objects and relationships are not haphazard, but more like deformed replicas of one another."<sup>32</sup> In an uncanny echo of Binder, Jaber claimed in the 2010 interview with *al-Ittiḥād* that "[a] tightly connected [*mutamāsik*] novelistic world insures the fascination of readers."<sup>33</sup> Unlike Binder's interpretation that material repetition is a sign of impending doom, Jaber's novel structures sets of repeated motifs throughout, beginning with objects—the material remainder of human circulation in the world—that serve as reminders of the difficult experiences of the characters moving around in search of a new life. Repeated motifs (trains, mirrors, small windows, burlap bags) in the initial parts of Jaber's *Amerika* gradually disappear in favor of others (the cuckoo clock, the large shopfront window, silk kimonos), signposting the evolution of the characters' lives and keeping the reader "fascinated" by their interconnectedness.

Part of Jaber's literary inheritance includes the cramped spaces of Kafka. Alain Cozic has argued that such spaces in Kafka's *Amerika* shape an itinerary which makes it impossible for Karl to progress, lending him a

“tautological existence.”<sup>34</sup> The fictional world of Jaber also begins in literal labyrinths. Take, for example, the old walled Ottoman city in *Beirut: City of the World*. It serves as the setting for the precarious existence of al-Bārūdī in Beirut in the 1820s. As he creates his family and begins to settle down, he takes a house spatially separated from that cramped center of the city. Or take the spaces of Part one of *Amerika*: the streets of lower Manhattan, the below-deck spaces of the steam-liner sailing from Le Havre and Martā’s transient hotel. The labyrinth is an invitation into a novelistic world in Jaber, but not a web in which characters become totally entangled, get lost or even disappear as in Kafka. Narrative progression allows the lives of Jaber’s characters to re-emerge from such confines of space, and they do so, not redeemed by freedom or transcendence, but rather into that “tightly connected novelistic world” whose hallmarks are repetition, flashback, flash-forward and other gestures of literary artifice. That world imitates the vagrancy of human memory, employing the metafictional tone to draw attention to the inability of the novel to capture fully human experience and render it as flatly historical, instead linking it with imaginative, dream-like experience.

The image of the train at the end of Kafka’s *Amerika* is a motif that Jaber’s *Amerika* also retains and expands upon throughout the novel. Martā Ḥaddād’s web-like train travel around the eastern half of the United States, and her peddling around the Midwest, portray an improbable geography. In Chapter fifty, on one page alone, we find her in Utah, Colorado, Illinois, and Wisconsin working as a peddler. In Chapter fifty-one, for example, we find her in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan all within the narrative space of three pages, with descriptions of landscapes “from here to the end of the earth” (174). She even crosses through a small rural community in Michigan dubbed “Little Hasbaya” where of all places she finds an entire Syro-Lebanese mining community (176). In this respect, it is hard to see this novel, as some critics saw Kafka’s *Amerika*, as a critique of America, either as a place or an idea. *Amerika*, although it uses a historical timeline spanning some sixty years of historical events in the West, does not really sketch an alternative history of the United States. Instead, the United States is the geographical setting for the history of Lebanese, “opened up for the present” so that modern-day Lebanon might reflect on itself refracted in time and space.

One of the primary means for representing the confrontation with a fragmentary historical record is use of the different narrative voices. Beginning with Part two, *Amerika* makes gestures towards a new affection, intimacy and stability developing in Martā’s life. The doubting narrator steps in, just pages later at the beginning of Chapter forty-four (“What Happened?”) to question that very fact of Martā’s stability:

How did Martā Haddād change in four years? Did she even change? How can we point to stations in our lives that have changed who we are or that have altered something in our personalities or that moved us from one stage to another? When we sit at the end of an era and we try to remember, to contemplate, to work out if we have reached the real essence or if we have “imagined” [*natawwahim*] that we reached the essence? Do we know our lives? Is knowledge possible? Life passes by quickly and understanding comes slowly. Before we get there, before contemplating, we have to talk together about what happened (145).

Not only do these comments by the narrator cast an enigmatic shadow on what he can possibly know about Martā, but that profound skepticism veers towards much larger issues including the ability of writing to reach reality, to understand and even to know what happens to human beings. These moments are often very simply marked in the novel by strings of interrogative sentences. They also give rise, as mentioned above, to a presentist tone of the narrator, and a willingness to use fictional moments of the Lebanese past to nudge his local readership, an educated readership—neither inert to the traumas of the Lebanon’s past nor plagued with amnesia—to engage in some memory work about the sufferings and trauma in their own lifetime, and to do that by “[talking] together about what happened” (145).

In addition to the narrator’s skeptical interrogative voice in the text, Jaber’s prose is full of markers of the uncertainty of landscapes. Often we find the narrator telling us the setting was “as if a dream” (175) and the protagonist “felt as if she were not herself, as if she were living the life of another person” (176). Jaber’s narrators often describe how the characters experience feelings of being outside of their own bodies, or being transported to other realities. Narrative interjection, of the sort found above, often accompanies the drift into the imagination about human history. An illustrative example can be found in Chapter forty-eight (“The Night at the Station”) when Martā goes to rural Pennsylvania, between Philadelphia and Allentown, in search of work. This scene simultaneously underscores the historical importance of the train lines as the sites of early Syro-Lebanese settlement, and uses that setting as a self-reflexive literary scenario. Wadia’, the daughter of the salesman she is visiting, was supposed to meet her at the train station but does not show up. This provokes a considerable amount of anxiety as Martā is forced to wait outside by the tracks in the dark:

It wasn’t her mother and it wasn’t her sister, so why was she waiting for them? What will she do? I could see her walking alongside the tracks. Did she feel sleepy after a while? Can she ring a bell – any bell – and ask for a room to sleep somewhere nearby? Maybe a family made up of a father and a mother and four children will take her in. A German family lives here. The father has a store on the edge of town. The mother is a housewife and she bakes bread and sweets, and boils milk and makes cheese. The children all

surround her. The youngest daughter's blond hair is tied up in a red barrette. Dozing off, almost asleep at the table, the father tells her "Come in." Before that he looked at his wife, and his darling wife brought a chair so that Martā could sit down at the table inside. They brought her fresh bread and a bowl of soup. ...

But all of this is not real, and it did not happen. Martā did not leave her spot next to the tracks (164).

The modulation between the first and the third person, as well as the free association of detail and interrogatives, portray both anxiety about where she is and fantasy of the comfort she would love to have. The narrator allows Martā to find strangers, a German family, who take her in, a scenario which turns out to be pure digressive fantasy, suddenly undercut by the admission that it "did not happen" (164). Such a negating refrain is found in other parts of the novel. After the narrator proclaims the imagination unreal in this passage, he then proceeds to even more extravagant flights of fantasy. Many strange things subsequently appeared that night, and are described in detail, including the cryptic man walking between two trains, the red-faced lantern-carrying signal operator, and finally the hunchback woman leading the huge cow:

The red signal light glows and the frogs don't stop croaking. She saw something move in the dark and figured it must be Wadia'. In fact, it was a woman, but she was a hunchback and she was dragging behind her on a short leash a huge white cow: the biggest cow Martā had seen in her life. The woman looked at Martā and took away her indistinguishable little glance. Martā felt as though the woman was looking through her, as if the glance pierced through her very flesh and bone collected together inside her sweater. There wasn't more than one glance and then the woman continued on her way. The cow did not even move its head: maybe it was moving and it was asleep. Martā did not see the cow's eye. Perhaps it was sound asleep (163-164).

The parodic "narrative presence of others," as Darraj called it, or what Hutcheon would call postmodern parody, shines through in this chapter.<sup>35</sup> The complex texture of the prose switches from present to past, from the linear to the recursive. The general path set out for Martā in *Amerika* is one toward self-determination, and yet she continues to feel as if she is invisible, present in the scenes of the novel, but translucent in the eyes of others. From the perspective of the plot, this evening spent waiting by the train station is a key moment in Part two, ushering Martā into a new phase of her life; it is a node in a network of migration before she reaches Spring Valley, Illinois and before she becomes a shopkeeper. Further research on Jaber should focus on the narratological and intertextual character of such out-of-body scenes present throughout Jaber's oeuvre. The stories of sedentarization of the immigrant are haunted with a mounting tension, through questions

repeatedly being asked about how the historical type—the shopkeeper, the peddler, the factory worker—feels *viscerally* in the midst of his/her own experience of integration, a process which dislocates its inevitable linearity. Another notable passage of this sort occurs at the beginning of Part three, when Martā finally learns her husband Khalil was killed in action in France in 1918.<sup>36</sup> In subsequent detailed pages about the deadly influenza pandemic (the “Spanish” flu) that hit the United States in the same year, the reader senses that Martā, materially successful but emotionally distraught, may finally be able to move beyond the difficult trauma of her marriage.

In Part four, Alī and Martā have been married for some time after the end of the First World War and peacefulness comes to inhabit their life, even though they grow increasingly separate from family back in Lebanon. Although initially belonging to two different sects invokes some anxiety for the couple, it quickly fades. Martā begins to drink mate, a drink typically consumed within the Druze community in Lebanon, and one that the narrator explains Alī Jābir started to drink in Argentina. She even reaches out to the Muslim migrant communities to do business. The scenes of marital life are initially set against a calm prosperity and then a lucky escape from economic disaster in the late 1920s. The re-union of Martā and Alī is depicted as a blissful moment of imagined post-confessionalism, where linguistic, familial, and regional identity bonds the characters more closely than religion. Between 1922 and 1934, their quality of life is good, and both become famous in their respective communities.

In comparison with the other three parts of the novel, historical time unfolds at a dizzying pace in Part Four; some fifty years unfold in only fifty pages. Had Salibi read this novel, it is doubtful that he would have found in Part four such a convincing social portrait of America as he found in *Youssef the Englishman*. The reader feels that the historical timeline in this section is but an artificial backdrop, and one that begins to detach itself from Martā and Alī’s life. The lifestyle Martā had been maintaining—a shopkeeper and agent, known as “Queen Martā” to the various regional peddlers—is negatively impacted by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression. Whereas the era of the pack peddler had faded after the First World War, post-crash hard times ushered back a new “less glorious” version. Martā is able to avoid personal disaster, since she has been investing in land for some time, and on a trip to California, she buys a farm in Pasadena. The family decides to move west, but soon after their arrival, Alī falls victim to lung cancer, leaving Martā a widow again. The extent of their combined acquaintances becomes obvious when letters of condolence for Alī’s death begin to arrive—from the many people Alī had met during his travels around the Americas and from the various peddlers Martā had helped over the years—so many the narrator says, that Martā could not remember the faces behind all the names. In this moment, the interconnected world of

the Lebanese scattered throughout the hemisphere overtakes the thin artifice of American history, foregrounding the presence of home in a new world.

Following the death of her husband, the blissful moment of home, family, and garden comes to an abrupt halt. Martā suffers the shock of witnessing the suicide of a woman who threw herself under a moving train. Whereas the description of the suicide takes only a few cold sentences at the end of Chapter 116, the following chapter describes her scurrying off in shock to the local cemetery, more specifically a gravesite nestled in a grove of giant Sequoia trees. Jaber's approximate geography, off by a few hundred kilometers, similar to his telescoped Midwest mentioned above, indeed reminds us of the kind of American space created by Kafka who never went across the sea. The scene gives a remarkably imaginative description of one of Martā's mystical experiences.<sup>37</sup> Coming into the forest she was exhausted, felt lost and suddenly, the giant sequoias reached out with their roots as if to pull her down. She pushed them away and then:

[w]hile she cleaned around the grave, she felt that she was recovering a force that she had lost. That was exactly the way that she felt: that her lost energy was returning to her. Like all oppressive sensations it lasted a moment and then dissipated. It was a moment of Sufi ecstasy that words could simply not describe. But the memory of it would not go away; even when she went back home that night, the dreadful scene of the woman came back to her. The memory would not go away. The wheels of the train lifted her up and threw her body forward, slicing her in two, ripping her jacket and her clothes... Her shoes were red, she simply could not forget that! But other feelings took her over: she was clearing the yellow flowery vine from the tombstone and the giant cold sequoias retreated, a rush of warm air came through and Martā felt an angel pass.

It was a brief moment. But in that moment Martā experienced the Lord. She wasn't alone (401).

Not unlike a series of similar scenes in the novels—the scene beside the train tracks in Pennsylvania or of the mass mortality from the Spanish flu—Martā experiences another deep transformation that the narrator describes as a form of mystical annihilation: her “stone armour shattered into small pieces, into tiny fragments and into dust” (402). This annihilation does not translate into the death or disappearance of Martā as a character, but rather the opposite. The narrator becomes increasingly focused on consolidating her memory and her experience from within the world she has built for herself. After her convalescence from this traumatic moment, her daughter Jenny, at this point a medical doctor, offers to take Martā on a trip to a convention in Philadelphia and in Chapter 122, they take the train together to the East. As the train cuts back through landscapes of the Midwest, the narrator tells us that they were “like a dream” and Martā has flashback-like sensations, “as if she had seen these [sights] before” (416). In the quickly

passing historical time, the story of Martā Ḥaddād revisits fragmentary past experiences. In a passage ironically reminiscent of the *Candide* garden scene, the novel ends with the elderly Martā in the grove she planted in Pasadena, watering her apple trees. The novel has rehearsed a partially redemptive ending, one in which Martā has constructed a little Lebanon—a large farm surrounded by red American cedars she had imported from North Dakota—where she has attempted to fill her loneliness with the company of her extended family, but the narrator’s tone in the last pages is no less ambiguous about the potential uncertainty of the scene’s composed happiness. By the closing chapters of the novel, Martā’s experience of home and her new life have been transformed into a hazy nostalgia, mitigated by her material success in the face of difficult economic days, as she retells—clearly for the n<sup>th</sup> time—the story of her escape from her previous life to build her American family.

The uncertainty presented through the portrait of Martā points to the persistent consequences of human displacement, one of the major themes in Rabee Jaber’s literary production. The second protagonist Alī Jābir makes a significantly smaller appearance in the novel (largely in Chapters 16, 54, 65, 67-68 and then from Chapter 100-113 he joins Martā until his death) and yet his story, in all of its far-flung circularity, points to similar patterns of the disturbance of human life. In Chapter sixteen, we read about the supposed condition of the literary production of the novel. The narrator describes how he did research at Ellis Island on the character of Alī Jābir (perhaps during his trip to America described in the *al-Ittiḥād* interview?). The archival research about Alī’s life, from the onset, revealed problems—multiple documents bearing the same name but clearly referring to different people, uncertainty about the date and point of his departure—each of which make Alī a problem from the perspective of historical specificity. Only one fact seems clear—instead of entering the United States legally, he jumped off the boat to swim to shore “fleeing authority and control” (58). The narrator speculates that perhaps he too had a burning sensation in his left eye, and he might have been afraid of the health exams at Ellis Island, but then equivocates ironically: “Is there some other reason we don’t know about? A murky reason that he couldn’t divulge? (A murky reason? But why?) What would that change in the end?” (59).

Alī resurfaces in the novel in Chapter fifty-four when he is living in squalor on Long Island working in a malodorous leather factory, living next to a cemetery, and contemplating a further migration to Buenos Aires. The narrator insists Alī’s “life is full of gaps” (185) and he is the type who “loved adventure” and could bear hardships with a smile on his face (58). Then again, in Chapter sixty-five, the narrator recounts how Alī returns from South America disappointed that all he found were manual labor jobs, and that the adventure of land ownership was nothing but a false promise.

Hearing that in California it is possible to lease land, he decides to leave and re-enters the United States by land across the Rio Grande, again attempting to escape authority. He meets some Syrian peddlers and joins them in their work, which brings him eventually to Spring Valley, Illinois where Martā lives.

Although the novel at an early point hints that Martā could be the one to capture Ali's heart, he ends up leaving again, back to Oklahoma and Texas trafficking illegal whiskey across the Mexican border. The sparse, and unfortunate, details of this life story—hard labor, failure to secure land, illegal trafficking—stand in counter-distinction to the relative commercial success and sedentarization of Martā. On the one hand, if we are to understand characters of historical fiction as a blend of the general and the specific, Ali could be seen to represent the other side of Arab migration in the twentieth century, not an American success story, but adventurer moving around the Americas: halted, itinerant, precarious. On the other hand, the difficulty of creating Ali's story is no doubt linked to the general problem of narrating the unknown, and is therefore, more valuable to the metafictional nature of the novel. By valuable I mean that the character of Ali is male and a blood relation of the author, and as such, could be a closer mirroring of authorial self. To state it in a bolder way, Ali Jābir's life, even more than Martā's, cannot be shaped into a smooth narrative of national integration, and it provides a more radical pole of uncertainty for what it means to write historiographic metafiction.



*Amerika*, as other examples of highly self-reflexive fiction that precede it, suggests that writing history and literature from the archives is, at best, highly problematic. As suggested above, the Kafkian character of Karl is split in two by Jaber, one part embodied in Martā and the other in Ali, but in neither of them, alone or combined, do we find a perspective that can fully represent the past. *Amerika* enacts metafiction in a Lebanese context and its rich descriptions and archival detail are accompanied by reflective uncertainty that has the potential to enrich the critical discussion of nearly two centuries of migration from the Levant to the Americas. It addresses the fine, yet shifting, line between fiction and historical narrative, bearing witness to both the complexity and intimacy of human experience within such massive patterns of migration. While *Amerika* is not a novel about sectarian tension in Lebanon, we are certainly prompted to reflect on one of its more striking features—the post-confessional love story achieved between Martā and Ali. Their union reminds us that the historical record, like human memory itself,

contains both the linear and the circular. The union of these two characters, rather than resolving the complexities of history, generates a more complex, kaleidoscopic view on human experience. Might their union also be seen as a writerly experiment in hybrid styles—say, Kafkian alienation interwoven with a picaresque rogue—itsself generative of new textual space in which to represent the past in the present? Other Arabic-language authors have been studied from the critical perspective of metafiction, and yet analysis of Jaber's remarkable body of work goes practically unmentioned. This study expresses the hope that his other writings will be studied in a more robust way through the many challenging paradoxes posed by postmodern literature and criticism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rabea Jaber, *Amrikā* (Beirut – Casablanca: Dār al-ādāb – al-Markaz al-thaqāfi al-‘arabī, 2009). I have adopted the orthography Amerika, not only to underscore the intertextuality with Kafka, but also in accordance with how Jaber’s literary agent Pierre Astier et Associés spells the book in English <http://www.pierreastier.com/> (accessed 27 February 2010). A portion of *Banipal* 17 (Summer 2003) was dedicated to his work, and includes translations of some excerpts into English. A segment of *Amerika* also appeared in English in Samuel Shimon, ed., *Beirut 39: New Writing from the Arab World* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010), 204-14. His first novel to appear in English translation is *The Mehli Report*, tr. Kareem James Abu-Zeid (New York: New Directions, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> International Prize for Arabic Fiction, <http://www.arabicfiction.org/author/14.html> (accessed 10 September 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in *Al-Hayat* (London, UK), 25 July 2006, the English translation done by the author’s sister, Ghada Jaber, is archived in the blog “Gyanoprobha,” 21 October 2006 <http://gyanoprobha.typepad.com/gyanoprobha/2006/10/index.html> (accessed 10 September 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Mariām Abdullah, “Rabī Jābir: al-rūwā’ī al-khajūl allathī arbaka ‘Booker’ [Rabea Jaber: the Shy Author Who Nonplussed the ‘Booker’]” *al-Akhbar* (Beirut, Lebanon), 29 March 2012, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/61169> (accessed 10 September 2013). All translations of Arabic sources in this article are my own except as noted.

<sup>5</sup> Ali al-Maqrī, “Rabī Jābir: Ikhtalaqtu qissa min ajli ta’shira ila Amrikā” [Rabea Jaber: I Invented a Story to Get an American Visa] *al-Ittihād* (Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.), 24 February 2010, <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=10960&y=2010> (accessed 28 February 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Some notable studies include Kamal Salibi, *Bayrūt wa-l-zaman: qirā’a fī thulāthiyyat Rabī Jābir Bayrūt madīnat al-‘ālam* (Beirut: Dar Nelson, 2009) [Beirut and Historical Time: A Reading of Rabea Jaber’s Trilogy *Beirut: City of the World*]; Dalia Said Mostafa, “Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabī Jābir” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40 (2009), 208-236; Soubhi Boustani, “Intertexte et mémoire dans l’écriture romanesque de Rabī Jābir: essai sur le roman Ralph Rizqallah fī al-mir’āt” in Dehevels, Michalak-Pikulska and Starkey, eds., *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature Since 1967* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 83-101; Stefan Meyer, “Redefining the Future: Questions of Artistic Choice” in *The Experimental Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany, NY: State University University Press, 2001), 175-192; and Ken Seigneurie, “Limits of Elegy in Berytus: *Madina taht al-Ard* (Berytus: City Underground)” in *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 80-94.

<sup>7</sup> Kamal Salibi, “Rabie Jaber and Yusuf al-Inglizi,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 4 (July 2009), 673.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 680.

<sup>9</sup> Salibi, *Bayrūt wa-l-zaman*, 77.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> The topic of the Arab diaspora has, perhaps not surprisingly, been explored more extensively in literatures other than Arabic. For the Anglophone situation see Leila Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Amsterdam – New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009) and Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Wail Hassan has argued that postcolonial theory and its perspectives on the diaspora have much to offer scholars of literature written in Arabic. See his “Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Application,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 33, no. 1 (2002), 45-64 as well as Muhsin al-Musawi, “Engaging Globalization in Modern Arabic Literature: Appropriation and Resistance,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2007), 305-32. For an exploration of the *shatāt* in Arabic literature, see the essays in Salhi and Netton, eds., *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream* (Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Towards a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Adelson, *The Turkish Turn*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Rabee Jaber, *Bayrūt madīnat al-‘ālam* (3 vols., Beirut – Casablanca: Dār al-ādāb – al-Markaz al-thaqāfi al-‘arabī, 2003-2007), i, 16-18.

<sup>16</sup> Jaber, *Amerika*, 14-16.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 50-52.

<sup>19</sup> Faisal Darraj, “The Voice of Writing and the Dawn of History,” *Banipal* 17 (summer 2003), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: the Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1985), *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Anton Shammas, “The Ropes of Rabee Jaber,” *Banipal* 17 (summer 2003), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Boustani, “Intertexte et mémoire,” 101.

<sup>23</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 127. Hutcheon understands the postmodern with the notion of “parody as opening the text up, rather than closing it down ... among the many things that postmodern intertextuality challenges are both closure and single, centralized meaning.”

<sup>24</sup> Metafictional technique in the context of twentieth- and twentieth-first century Arabic literature writing has been addressed by a number of important studies. The

work of writers like Elias Khoury, Muhammad Berrada and others is often studied, whereas Rabee Jaber's goes unmentioned. See Fabio Caiani, "Metafiction," in *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu* (Routledge: London – New York, NY, 2007), 96-119 and the various essays in Neuwirth, Pflitsch, and Winckler, eds., *Arabic Literature. Postmodern Perspectives*. (London – Beirut, Dar Saqi: London, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 110

<sup>26</sup> Philippe Gasperini, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 7. The term "autofiction," coined by Serge Boudrovsky in 1977, rather than pointing to metafictional technique stemming from autobiography, instead signals a complex nexus of authorial persona(e), narrator and protagonists found in postmodern fiction that has long since surpassed the classical Lejeunian autobiographic pact. Gasperini later on lists the proliferation of critical terms that seek to address the metafictional phenomena: *transfiction*, *parafiction*, *superfiction*, *surfiction*, *critifiction*, in which lineage autofiction definitely belongs.

<sup>27</sup> "The International Prize for Arabic Fiction: Shortlist (Rabee Jaber)" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ob-t-gPmtN0> 19 September 2012 (accessed 15 April 2013). The text is adapted from the subtitles found in this clip.

<sup>28</sup> Franz Kafka, *Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*, tr. Michael Hofmann (London – New York, NY: Penguin Modern Classics, 2007). I would like to acknowledge Robert Myers for first asking me about the connection between Jaber and Kafka.

<sup>29</sup> Hofmann, "Introduction," xiii.

<sup>30</sup> Jaber, *Amerika*, 136.

<sup>31</sup> Mostafa, "Literary Representations of Trauma," 13.

<sup>32</sup> Hofmann, "Introduction," x.

<sup>33</sup> Alī al-Maqrī, "*Rabī' Jābir: Ikhtalaqtu qissa*"

<sup>34</sup> Alain Cozic, "Spirales, impasses et autres dédales les figures répétitives du labyrinthe dans l'itinéraire américain de Karl Rossmann" in *Frank Kafka: Der Verschollene Le Disparu/ L'Amérique – Ecritures d'un nouveau monde ?* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1997), 78. A similar claim is made by another essay in the same volume, namely that the primary character Karl is held in relatively closed spaces, limiting his freedom of movement. See Jeanne Benay's "De la secondarité romanesque chez Franz Kafka," 54.

<sup>35</sup> Darraj, "The Voice of Writing", 4 and Hutcheon "The Poetics of Postmodernism", passim.

<sup>36</sup> Jaber, *Amerika*, 295.

<sup>37</sup> The giant Sequoia forests are, more precisely, located on the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, some hundreds of kilometers away from Pasadena.