Waleed F. Mahdi

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

MENA MIGRANTS AND DIASPORAS IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MEDIA

The first two decades of the twenty-first century put the 1990s accounts of globalization, multiculturalism, clash of civilizations, and transnational mobility of peoples and ideas through the rigorous tests of the 9/11 attacks and the global war on terror, the information revolution, the Arab uprisings, the "migration crisis," and the COVID-19 pandemic. The result has been an array of experiences shaped by evolving global stress on the securitization of borders, the increasing appeal of populism, and a rising sense of global Islamophobia and xenophobia. These have occurred amidst waves of disruption to identity and community life, forced and voluntary displacement, and the imposition of growing challenges to mobility in a globalized yet heavily policed world. In this context of change and struggle, how are voluntary and involuntary migrants and diasporas of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) represented in twenty-first-century media? How do representational modes of identity, mobility, and belonging engage these pressing realities? What do these representations reveal about agency and resistance against institutionalized forms of exclusion and violence? And how do migrant and diasporic media and representations themselves constitute counter-narratives to institutional meanings of identity and belonging?

This special issue of *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* engages with these questions through six original essays. The contributions advance thought-provoking arguments and rigorous analyses in multiple local, national, and transnational contexts, both in the global South and North. To make this possible, the issue defines its key terms "MENA" and "media" in ways that allow for variety in inquiries and expositions of narratives and voices, forging analyses of underrepresented topics and communities. The issue defines MENA migrants and diasporas

*Waleed F. Mahdi is Associate Professor of US-Arab cultural politics at the
University of Oklahoma. Email:* wfm@ou.edu

broadly to include peoples who originate from, claim lineage to, or identify with the Middle East, the Sahel and West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The examined communities in this issue include South Asian migrant laborers in the Arab Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Syrian refugees in Turkey, Iranian immigrants outside Iran, Somali diasporas in the United States and the United Kingdom, North African immigrants in France, and descendants of Arab immigrants in the United States. Meanwhile, the issue broadly defines media to include print media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, novels, comics); broadcast media (e.g., radio, television, film); transit media (e.g., billboards, banners, posters); and digital media (e.g., blogs, websites, social media). The breadth of such a definition allows for inclusive examinations of a variety of media scopes that move beyond the field of journalism and cross the boundaries of literature, visual culture, and art. The contributions in this special issue deal with various media produced in the first two decades of the twenty-first century: social media videos, newspapers, films, poetry, fictional and nonfictional writing, performance, visual art, and graphic novels. Therefore, the special issue features six critical interventions in their respective areas of inquiry. These scholarly works critically engage with the special issue's stated questions and deliver depth into different contexts, resulting in a multilayered examination of twenty-first-century media outlets and representations.

Three essays deal with representations of migrants and migration in several Muslim-majority countries in the global South: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Turkey, and Iran. Nadeen Dakkak's "'Ana Mafi Khouf Min Kafeel': Counter-Narratives in Comedic Video Representations of Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf States" examines several comedic representations of South Asian immigrant laborers in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, mediated through YouTube and Instagram. While some of the videos are made by local Arabs — be they Saudis as in the analyzed videos produced by Saudi-based *Telfaz11* or those made by the Bahraini comedian Ahmed Sharif — other videos involve self-representations by South Asian immigrant laborers, as in the analyzed videos of the Pakistani actor Faez Choudhary in the *Khalli Walli Show*. This essay immediately fills a scholarly gap in recent scholarship on social media and online popular cultural production in the Arab world. Scholars have covered such media extensively in Arab sociopolitics, whether in Arab Spring revolutionary spheres during 2011 as in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, or 2019 as in Algeria and Sudan.[1] Little has been written about the dynamics of such media

productions in nonrevolutionary contexts, especially one that deals with immigrant labor in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Additionally, the essay accentuates the importance of the "cultural" in addition to the economic, social, and political layers that have received much of the attention of contemporary scholarship examining South Asian labor in the GCC.[2]

Dakkak situates these comedic videos within a disruptive sociopolitical milieu that may readily seem to engage the *kafeel* (sponsor) image as the site for the laborers' experiences with hardship but simultaneously draws attention to the subtlety of these engagements in critiquing state-level institutionalization of anti-immigrant (mis)treatment. More importantly, the essay offers a penetrating account of the aesthetics employed in these cultural productions, often reappropriating popular Bollywood music, as it teases out the relationship between humor and change from below. In this context, Dakkak's primary contribution demonstrates how such performances are part of broader online cultural production on migration in the Gulf, which deserve further analyses to reveal their roles in unsettling societal narratives and conditions that enable, and often justify, the structural exclusion of South Asian labor migrants. Foregrounding these contestations further emphasizes the agency of such migrants and the importance of their agency in countering dismissive, if not offensive, mainstream narratives of their lives and experiences.

Dalia Abdelhady and Fatmanur Delioğlu move to the Turkish context in their essay "Human Interest Stories in the Coverage of Syrian Refugees: A Case Study from Turkey." The essay contributes to the growing scholarly interest in examining Syrian refugees and their politicized reception in host societies.[3] The essay stands out in its contribution to the topic in several ways. The choice to focus on the case study of *Zaman*, a Turkish mainstream opposition newspaper, is important. The newspaper faced the Turkish systemic forms of erasure of oppositional venues. The main corpus for analysis in this essay is content published between 2011 and 2015, which is no longer available. In a sense, the essay functions as an important source for this content and introduces nuance to representations of Syrian refugees, not immediately available in pro-government media outlets. Meanwhile, the analysis allows for a theorization of Syrian refugees not strictly as part of the usual frame of "self" and "other" that saturates media productions surrounding these refugees. It does so by examining portrayals of the refugees in *Zaman* that envision both the host society

and refugees as part of an inclusive discourse of "self and other." In this context, the refugees are not presented as unwelcomed foreigners but as a measure of Turkish hospitality and care.

Equally important**,** Abdelhady and Delioğlu document the transformation of the representation in *Zaman* from the themes of "gratitude," "benevolence," and heroism" to the themes of "victimization," "melancholy," and "trauma" toward the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. While the newspaper's earlier coverage of the Syrian refugee foregrounded Turkey's goodness and openness to the refugees, the coverage later changed to critiques of the Turkish government's failures to support these refugees, enhanced by constantly emphasizing the refugees' helplessness and vulnerability. Changing the narration from a focus on Turkish chivalry to a focus on Turkish governance, the authors argue, was associated with the changing nature of the Turkish government's restrictions on the newspaper as a venue for the opposition. The newspaper was eventually shut down for being associated with the Gülen movement, perceived as the archenemy of the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regime. The authors emphasize how the newspaper's transformation was no more than an attempt to weaponize the predicament of Syrian refugees as part of its opposition strategic tactics against the Turkish government. This weaponization, they further contend, is part of a cycle of misuse of the refugees that the Turkish government has also utilized in its negotiations with the European Union for more financial support.

As for the Iranian context, Babak Tabarraee's essay "Leaving Homeland: The Evolving Conceptualization of Migration in the Iranian Cinema of the 2010s" offers an important survey of Iranian cinema's representation patterns of Iranian migration to the *farang* (foreign but primarily Western countries). The essay's contribution to the analysis of Iranian cinema in relation to migration is significant in its focus on the domestic production of narratives and imagery instead of engaging Iranian diasporic films as prominently articulated in Hamid Naficy's work.[4] Therefore, this essay invites readers to delve deeper into the contours of Iranian filmmaking and learn about the various narrations of the West that have reflected and shaped the Iranian collective memory, albeit in popularized and often simplified terms. It starts with an insightful overview of Iranian filmmakers' representation of emigration to the *farang* in utopic and dystopic terms. It ends with a critical analysis of a paradigm shift in such representations in ways that render cinematic representations of emigration as "a natural, self-evident, and righteous choice," to put it in the author's words. Of the

543 Iranian films released between 2011 and 2018, Tabarraee stresses that at least 103 domestic films screened in Iranian movie theaters dealt with the theme of migration out of Iran, whether temporary or permanent. While some of the films recycle representation patterns of migration that construct "self" versus "other" within a binary framework that conceives *farangistan* (foreign but mostly Western lands) and *Iranshahr* (the land of Iranians) as stark opposites, the author traces a new trend of representation that normalizes migration to the *farang* and does not invest in demonizing or idealizing it.

Tabarraee starts by detailing several representation strategies that Iranian filmmakers have utilized in depicting the *farang* in a highly negative light. One strategy is the negative presentation of *mustafrang* characters as Westoxicated in works like *Fifty Kilos of Sour Cherry* (2016). Another strategy is the fixation with failed romantic relationships between Iranians and foreigners as in *The Past* (2013) and *Azar, Shahdokht, Parviz and Others* (2014). Filmmakers also rebuke the forbidden pleasures of the *farang* in films like *I Am Not Salvador* (2016). They also present immigrants leaving Iran as traitors in *Refugee* (1994) or cowards in *Four Isfahanis in Baghdad* (2017). The second section explores how Iranian filmmakers have presented the *farang* as a site of civilization and progress as in *Canaan* (2007) and *Zard* (2017). Filmmakers have also presented it as a socioeconomic refuge from Iran's legal and cultural limitations, as in *Facing Mirrors* (2014) and *Oxidant* (2017). Then, Tabarraee underlines new strategies of representation that conceive migration as a natural and individual right that does not need to be explained. Films such as *A Separation* (2011), *Mr. Yusef* (2011), *Giti's Problem* (2016), *Where Are My Shoes?* (2016), and *Gita* (2016), among many others, exhibit characters that are not migrating either to a more civilized or more terrible destination than Iran. In these films, there is a sense of normalcy attached to migration that is less invested in judgment about one's position, attitude, or belonging to the homeland or newly settled spaces that may not be "too foreign" or "too idealized."

In addition to featuring these experiences with migration representation in the global South, the special issue features three other accounts of MENA migrants and diasporas in the global North, primarily in the United States and Europe. Danielle Haque's "Blessed and Banned: Surveillance and Refusal in Somali Diasporic Art & Literature" examines an array of literary, visual, and performance works produced by prominent Somali diaspora writers and artists in the United States and the United Kingdom, mainly works of Warsan

Shire, Diriye Osman, Ladan Osman, and Ifrah Mansour. The essay is a timely continuation of recent studies of Somali diaspora and media, especially contributions in the special issue "Somali Diaspora and Digital Practices."[5] What contributes to the originality of this work is Haque's theoretical investment in the transnational black struggle for agency that forcefully advances at once in capturing postcolonial iterations of a Somali home haunted by violent colonial legacies and of contemporary experiences of Somali identity distressed by traumas associated with anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and anti-black sentiments of racism wrapped in Islamophobia discourses in the West. Not only does the author capture these transnational articulations in the formation of a Somali diasporic consciousness of nostalgia and being, of family and clan, and home and belonging, but Haque also trace the influence of works like Shire's poetry in US-based protests of President Donald Trump's 2017 Executive orders—known as the "Muslim Travel Ban"—and in African American pop star Beyoncé's celebration of blackness in her albums *Lemonade* (2016) and *Black is King* (2020).

Haque's focus on contemporary Somali diasporic cultural production is refreshing in its exhibition of a growing body of literature and art that registers communities that have been at the margins of Middle East Studies, American Studies, and Arab and Muslim American Studies. The essay's analysis of three poems—Shire's "Home," Ladan Osman's "Not Safe for Work," and Ifrah Mansour's "I am a Refugee"—foreground Somali resilience in the face of violence. This is further traced through references to Ladan Osman's poetry collections *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony* (2015) and *Exiles of Eden* (2019), Diriye Osman's story collection *Fairytales for Lost Children* (2013), and Mansour's art installations *My Aqal, Banned and Blessed* (2018) and *Can I Touch It* (2018) in addition to Mansour's one-person, multimedia play, *How to Have Fun in a Civil War* (2020), as well as the Minnesota-based Soomaal House of Art exhibition *Anomalous Expansion* (2016).

Sheila Petty invites readers to consider the importance of diasporic self-representation in French-language films in the essay "'Interstitial Spaces and Sites of Struggle': Displacement, Identity, and Belonging in Contemporary French Accented Cinema." Petty draws from Naficy's conception of exilic and diasporic cinema as "accented" to make sense of films produced by descendants of immigrants in France who have grappled with meanings of Frenchness within a context of anti-immigrant sentiments of alienation and estrangement.[6] The essay explores three specific films—among others—by French of

Moroccan, Mauritanian, and Tunisian backgrounds that engage with such sentiments. These films, Petty argues, constitute counter-narratives to French colonial and postcolonial realities of racism and provide layered meanings to the phrase *chez soi* (at home) in a society torn between ideals of liberty, equality, and freedom and hard-lived experiences that relegate immigrants—particularly from Africa—to its spatial and social racialized enclaves. Central to the essay's analytical frame is demonstrating how these analyzed films zoom into specific and real moments of resistance that immigrants and descendants of immigrants organized to articulate their agency and identity, and in tracing how such films also intermingle the autobiographical, performative, fictional, and documentary aspects of filmmaking.

The first film, Nabil Ben Yadir's *The Marchers* (2013), zooms into the 1983 "La Marche Pour l'Egalité et Contre le Racisme (The March for Equality and Against Racism), a 500-mile march from Marseilles to Paris, which Laura Reeck described as France's "longest and largest demonstration march."[7] The film celebrates the resilience of the marchers in how they projected their identity pride as descendants of the Franco-Maghrebi community as they foregrounded France's failing promises to immigrants to access cultural citizenship and by reminding their fellow citizens that "we are all French." The second film, Med Hondo's *Watani: A World Without Sorrow* (1998), features the "affaire des sans-papiers" (1996), a tragic moment of state violence against African immigrants whose residence paperwork expired and who sought refuge in Saint-Bernard de la Chapelle Church only to be violated by some 1,500 police officers. The spectacle of the Sans-Papiers vulnerability and police violence reveals an us-vs-them contrast that questions and cuts into the essence of Frenchness. The third film, Hicham Ayouch's *Fevers* (2013), draws from the 2007 *Qui fait la France?* (Who makes France?) collective of banlieue writers and artists who rejected bearing witness to the suffering of the fragile members of the French society. It does so by featuring intersecting French, Maghrebi, and African lives and narratives and paying homage to the complexity of identity in ways that defy neat binary narrations. These films, which Petty prescribes as part of the "migration turn" genre in Francophone cinema, feature marginalized voices and stories wrestling with questions of identity and belonging in a French society that promotes inclusion and democracy but has historically exhibited moments that undermine these notions. More importantly, the films constitute a contemporary mode of diasporic agency that also defies any nationalist

narrations of France as disconnected from its colonial history and fragmented present.

Similarly, Natalie El-Eid engages with diasporic cultural productions in the United States and contributes to growing scholarship on visual culture in Arab American studies.[8] In "Visual Hakawatis: Drawing Resistance in Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* and Malaka Gharib's *I Was Their American Dream*," El-Eid draws attention to the importance of the graphic novel in "bearing witness" to realities shaped by trauma and resistance.[9] The graphic novel genre has emerged as an exciting venue for self-representation and molding Arab and Arab American traditions, aesthetics, and experiences into more accessible works. The author introduces the conception of "visual hakawati" to make sense of a specific type of Arab and Arab American artists who rely on this genre to narrate their stories to introduce their histories and memories in appealing linkages of images and words. In this sense, the "visual hakawati" is an individual performer that moves beyond storytelling to feature the interconnection of the narrator's personal and community experiences in generating imagery of resistance against nationalist articulations of otherness. While the essay recognizes the critical contributions of global Arab artists such as Lamia Zaidé, Riad Sattouf, and Zeina Abirached, and Arab American artists such as Iasmin Omar Ata, Toufic El Rassi, Sherine Hamdy, and Coleman Nye, it examines two specific Arab American graphic novels by Leila Abdelrazaq and Malaka Gharib. While Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* (2015) and Gharib's *I Was Their American Dream: A Graphic Memoir* (2019) may be different in their nuanced engagement with past and present, they both constitute meaningful contemporary narrations of what it means to have a transnational sense of Arab American identity and to belong in the twenty-first century. That children of immigrants produced these works is significant since they should be considered critical self-representations that render the voices of Arab Americans and their engagement with America and their ancestral stories ever more present and urgent.

The two works exemplify an emerging Arab American diversity in agency. In *Baddawi*, Abdelrazaq turns to her father's history as a Palestinian growing up in a refugee camp in Lebanon, the author reads, to render visible her erased history and the history of her community. This act of clinging to the ancestral history of displacement and exile, traced through the emphasis on the story of the grandparents' forced migration from Palestine to Lebanon in 1984, is a form of reconstruction of a past that is not so much disconnected from

the Arab consciousness of falling victim to institutionalized violence. In this case, the "visual hakawati" is not merely recounting one's story for pleasurable consumption but emphasizing verbally and visually how telling this history is itself an act of resistance. In *I Was Their American Dream*, Gharib similarly engages with her parents' story of immigration to the United States and makes sense of the interracial relationship of her Egyptian father and Filipina mother as she explores meanings of authenticity and ethnicity and how to reconcile intersections of her American, Arab, and Filipino identities. The story proceeds while Gharib also delivers reflections on her interracial marriage to a white American in an autobiographical fashion. The "visual hakawati" in this case provides verbal and visual cues to readers about the interconnectedness of her past and present in shaping her own story, which complicates binaries written into Americanness, Arabness, Filipinoness, and Whiteness, and provides a social commentary on meanings of the American dream in such a context. Therefore, El-Eid argues that the two works underscore critical accounts of witnessing and resistance while pointing to the diversity of Arab American positionalities. The "visual hakawati" adds a vital contribution to Arab and Arab American storytelling by tying it to transnational forms of resistance to nationalist and hegemonic narratives of identity, history, and community.

This special issue, "MENA Migrants and Diasporas in Twenty-First-Century Media," invites readers and researchers alike to engage with the content of its thought-provoking essays, which constitute original contributions in their respective fields. The issue opens doors for researchers and educators to consider the possibilities of research and teaching representations of MENA migrants and diasporas in contemporary media. Such representations move beyond the negative perceptions and receptions of migrants and diasporas of this broad region and suggest the need to examine possibilities of countering institutional forms of discrimination and erasure, through critical representations and through self-representations. More research is needed to further examine how contemporary representations of MENA migrants and diasporas in the global South and North negotiate mobility vis-à-vis the friction and fracture of nationalism, and how they project their agency in such contexts. There is also a growing need for works that move beyond a specific local context and provide comparative and transnational analytical frameworks. This special issue is not meant to be comprehensive, and the examined contexts are certainly not exhaustive. Consider, for instance, the need to explore the

Arab refugees' predicament along the Ukraine-Poland border, the East African laborers' blackness in Lebanon and Israel, and the formations of Yemeni diasporic circuits in the Indian Ocean societies. There is demand more than ever for further inquiries, analyses, and discussions not only because of the current nature of human movements — particularly pertaining to MENA migrants and diasporas — but also because of the reactions surrounding such movements and what they underline about claims of one's identity and the state of our "postcolonial" world order as we continue to live in globalized yet heavily policed and populist environments.

NOTES

[1] See Eid Mohamed, Waleed F. Mahdi, and Hamid Dabashi, "The Aesthetics of Dissent: Culture and Politics of Transformation in the Arab World," in "The Aesthetics of Dissent," eds. Mohamed, Mahdi, and Dabashi, special issue, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (March 2020): 141–281; Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[2] See, for example, Miriam R. Lowi, "Identity, Community and Belonging in GCC States: Reflections on the Foreigner," *Sociology of Islam* 6 (2018): 401–28.

[3] See, for example, Tiffany A. Dykstra, "Assemblages of Syrian Suffering: Rhetorical Formations of Refugees in Western Media," *Language, Discourse & Society* 4, no. 1 (2016): 31–48.

[4] See Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). This is not to limit the scope of Naficy's expertise that has also led to the publications of three volumes on the history of Iranian cinema: *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 1, The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 2, The Industrializing Years, 1941–1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 3, The Islamicate period, 1978–1984* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For more on Iranian cinema, see Hamid Dabashi, *Close up: Iranian Cinema Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001).

[5] The Special Issue "Somali Diaspora and Digital Practices" is published in the *Journal of Global Diaspora & Media* 2, no. 1 (2021): 3–135. For more work on Somali diaspora representations, see Danielle Haque, "Collective Care and Human Rights Cinema: Musa Syeed's a Stray and Somali Minneapolis," *American Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (December 2021): 817–34.

[6] See Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*.

[7] Laura Reeck, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 5.

[8] See Waleed F. Mahdi, *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020).