

GHASSAN HAGE, *The Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). Pp. 220. \$95.00 cloth, \$27.50 paper. ISBN 9780226547060.

REVIEWED BY MICHELLE OBEID, Lecturer in Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, UK, email: michelle.obeid@manchester.ac.uk



What makes a Lebanese villager, who may have never traveled, come to see places like Venezuela, the United States, or Australia as inevitable destinations for a viable life? The premise of Ghassan Hage's *The Diasporic Condition* is that "it is impossible to think of a Lebanese life that is not always already diasporic" (23). The villager shares with the Lebanese across the globe a "diasporic culture," which, Hage argues, is the ultimate form that Lebanese capitalist modernity has taken. In this modernity, migration is a "transhistorical destiny" (42) — or, in the words of one physician, "a bug that pervades the social environment"; everyone catches it even if it affects people differently (23). Diasporic culture, then, is not just the culture of immigrants outside Lebanon but that of the Lebanese within Lebanon itself. By dissolving the analytical separation between "homeland" and "diaspora" that is prevalent in the migration literature, Hage is able to draw out the common features of a "general milieu" which different Lebanese inhabit and shape, in spite of the diversity of these subjects, their experiences, and social relations. This ambitious undertaking, to see transnational family and community as a "site" that is traceable empirically, is made possible by Hage's intimate knowledge of kinship networks that span three continents over the period of two decades, as well as his own positionality as a diasporic subject. Privileging phenomenological questions that focus on how people "define for themselves, and struggle to achieve, whatever they conceive as a viable life" (10), the book treats the reader to rich, and often moving, stories, views, and insights that build a persuasive argument about the common features of the Lebanese diasporic condition.

The book is implicitly divided into two parts. In the first part, Hage details the key features of the diasporic experience as he develops his theoretical argument: that the diasporic condition is defined by particular modes of existence—“anisogamic” and “lenticular”—entrenched in multiple realities. If these terms seem intimidating to the reader, Hage masterfully explains their value as he builds his argument over the first five chapters. He begins in chapter 1 by tracing the historical rise of Lebanon’s diasporic culture and what he calls the “internationalization of the space of viability” and, in chapter 2, charts the kinds of existential and physical investments made upon awareness of such a space. In chapter 3, Hage details how a comparative logic characterizes diasporic being and, in chapter 4, the manner in which the experience of opposing yearnings—to migrate and to stay at home—creates fragmented subjects, leading him to argue in chapter 5 that diasporic subjects come to inhabit multiple spaces and realities. In the second part of the book, four chapters zoom in on different and unrelated ethnographic cases that draw out the insights we can gain from his proposed analytical lens.

One of the most compelling aspects of the book is the way it invites us to rethink our conceptions of social reality. Hage maintains that it is possible to be situated in more than one space regardless of physical proximity or bodily presence. Lenticularity, the ontological condition of inhabiting and experiencing multiple realities, he suggests, is a key mode of existence that defines the diasporic condition. A lenticular photograph incorporates two images that coexist. They can be seen with different degrees of clarity from several angles. These images flicker as they “compete, intrude and dialogue with each other” (93). Such is Lebanese diasporic life. Its subjects are caught in “an entanglement of multiple realities that are continually present and that differ in the way they are inhabited, their affective quality, and their intensity” (7). This fresh reading successfully takes us away from ideas of “ambivalence” that see diasporic persons as being metaphorically “torn” between one place and another, an either/or kind of being. These subjects are fragmented, their selves split. They situate themselves in *both* realities and experience their “flickering” in their mundane acts and practices. A Lebanese woman in Brazil situates herself in Lebanon through the coffee she is drinking, the music she is listening to, and the photo of her Lebanese father. At that same moment, her daughter’s Portuguese Brazilian accent, the bills on the table, and the Brazilian cheese they are consuming position

her in Brazil. The two realities “are continuously refracting each other” (93).

The “multiple inhabitance” that Hage describes, however, is not always easy to manage. We are introduced to subjects who are unable to fragment themselves in ways that reconcile the gravitational pull of home with the demands of migration. George, for example, a man whose mother pushes him to migrate for the instrumental reason of making money, has a nervous breakdown in Venezuela and undergoes a traumatic event that leads him to retreat to the jungle. Diasporic subjects more agile than George are able to strategically intensify and de-intensify a particular lenticular reality according to their needs. A man who receives his visa to Australia after years of waiting intensifies his Australian reality before he even leaves Lebanon. While George’s story is an extreme case of diasporic nostalgia, he exemplifies the tension Hage describes between the “propelled-into-the-world” and “home-oriented” fragments. Diasporic subjects live in a permanent comparative state of existence. There is, Hage suggests, an “anisogamic” logic to their lenticular mode of existence. Anisogamy describes “any relation requiring a reciprocal exchange between people of unequal status” (52). In their multiple inhabitance, the Lebanese feel inferior in the world precisely because of their need for migration as the only means of viability. Feelings of loss and shame derive not from the loss of tradition and rich social relations left behind, or even the internalization of racism, but from a “primal diasporic injury” (57): that one’s country, rather like a mother who fails to care for her children, could not look after and keep its people. It is this anisogamic logic that prompts the over-valorization of the homeland as a way of compensation. Streets, objects, food, views, and situations in the diaspora become constantly “haunted” by comparisons of the same in Lebanon. The breathtaking views of the Grand Canyon become simply a reminder of what “we also have back home” – Qadisha Valley! Middle class returnees relish “in jouissance” the lack of order at home, subverting the presumed supremacy of exaggerated and sometimes oppressive regimes of order in Western societies.

The breadth of the ethnographic sites and diasporic situations covered in this book deepen our appreciation of lenticularity. Specifically, how people relate to news of Lebanon and what this reveals about their intentions to assimilate in chapter 6; a conflict over “responsibility” drawn out across four continents in one transnational family in chapter 7; a man’s understanding of his sexual viability in

light of his anisogamic yearnings in the diaspora in chapter 8; and middle class returnees' engagement with Lebanon's disorderly "freedoms" in chapter 9; together, the ethnographic details in these vignettes flesh out the workings of the Lebanese diasporic condition. At the same time, they highlight the plurality of this diaspora as we encounter people of different genders, ages, class backgrounds, and trajectories. Yet, in their multiplicity, they all share the "transnational lifeworld" of Lebanon's diasporic culture (183). While Hage is keen to tease out what is specific to the Lebanese in his analysis, his argument has universal resonance. Indeed, the novel perspectives that this book offers are sure to serve as precious theoretical tools with which to rethink diasporic experiences more broadly.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book is the reflexive and revisionist tone Hage employs to share with his reader the intellectual journey he has taken to arrive at his arguments. He dissects, builds on, and sometimes rejects his previous analysis of some of the material at hand. The detailing of his genealogies of thought and his dialogue with several intellectual ancestors is enriching and effective in carving out his creative and innovative take on "the less obvious modes of existing socially in the world" (185). *The Diasporic Condition* is a beautifully crafted book. Thoroughly enjoyable and evocative – not to mention incredibly resonant for Lebanese diasporic subjects and students of Lebanon – this thought-provoking book is sure to whet the intellectual appetite of a wide readership. It will particularly benefit those interested in questions of migration and diaspora, the ethnography of Lebanon, transnational kinship, and existential and ontological anthropologies.