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FROM FORGOTTEN SHORES TO A PORT OF CALL: TEN
YEARS AT MASHRIQ & MAHJAR



Ten years ago, in the inaugural editorial foreword of *Mashriq & Mahjar*, the editors of this journal argued that Middle East studies had long ignored the stories of migrants to its own detriment. Most studies had remained resolutely fixated on studying the region as a bounded cartography, where “historical actors may move back and forth across the boundaries, coming into or drifting out of view, but the lens rarely pans away to track their peregrinations—or to consider the latter’s implications.” This meant that at the most basic level, the stories of millions of people who migrated or were displaced within and beyond the region were elided from scholarly writing, marginalized in their own narratives. Territorial determinism also left gaping holes in how scholars understood the region, reinforcing an imagined, Orientalized “East” despite the laudable efforts of two generations of scholars to create postcolonial narratives. Instead of this disciplinary myopia, the editors argued that “looking at the history of the region ‘through diasporic eyes’ may open up new methodological perspectives.” Particularly, the historical travels of migrants and refugees create a diasporic archive which reminds us “in a myriad of ways of the presence of the Middle East in the world, and the world in the Middle East.”¹

In the decade since these words launched *Mashriq & Mahjar*, a great deal has changed. On the one hand, this decade has been one where thinking about migration is ever more critical given the intensified politics surrounding human movement, particularly as states retreat from liberal humanitarian obligations of asylum, refugee assistance, and the right to move. Few examples suffice to illustrate this

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charged new environment and its discourses: the humanitarian crisis on the Mediterranean from 2015; the Trump administration's attempts to ban refugee admissions to the United States; Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repeated threats to "open the floodgates" and release Syrian refugees into the European Union; rising xenophobia toward refugees and migrant workers in Lebanon amid that country's catastrophic economic collapse; ongoing settler colonial evictions of Palestinians from East Jerusalem; Qatar's labor violations against migrant workers in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup. Collectively these events compel us to conclude that understanding both the local and geopolitics of migration—including the politics of invoking a "migration crisis"—demands deeper inquiry into displacement and dispossession as ongoing social processes. Moreover, they explain why and how the migrant has become "the political figure of our time."²

Perhaps in response to the turns of this decade, the field of Middle East studies has taken a much needed, albeit limited transnational turn. This became clear when the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) named its 2018 annual meeting theme, *Without Boundaries: The Global Middle East, Then and Now*. Echoing *Mashriq & Mahjar's* inaugural foreword, MESA's call for papers noted: "Many of the problems that concern scholars of the Middle East transcend national and regional boundaries. Contemporary concerns . . . both in their present and historical incarnations—can only be addressed fully if social scientists and humanists expand their vision beyond the constructed boundaries [of the Middle East] that have all too often constricted it."³ In that meeting and in subsequent MESA conferences, the number of panels and papers focused on migration, mobility, refugees, and diaspora has increased appreciably. The 2017 MESA Program, for example, featured only a dozen papers focused on these terms. In 2020, over sixty papers focused on some element of mobility within, into, and from the Middle East and North Africa.

This plethora of presentations reflects how the subfield of Middle East and North African migration studies is growing and taking methodological shape. Another measure is the rate of publication of articles and book reviews in *Mashriq & Mahjar*. Over the past ten years the journal has published over 100 articles (out of 255 submitted manuscripts) and even more book reviews. This data provides an aggregate, but certainly not comprehensive, view of the number of Middle East studies scholars who are actively engaging in some element of research into migration studies. What has also expanded is the geographic reach of some of this research. Using the

archive of this journal, we find topics ranging from early Arab immigrants to the Americas, to Middle East Christians in twentieth-century Europe, to contemporary Filipina workers in the Arab Gulf States. These expanded geographies of research are also accompanied by a growing set of research questions and topics. In looking at recent special issues of this journal, we find scholars working on food and migration, contemporary artists in the diaspora, migration and transnational governance, and MENA migrants and media representation.

Emerging scholars have expanded the scholarly ecosystem of migration studies considerably both through their embrace of new methodologies and by asking profound new questions that lead this field in exciting directions. Drawing from diaspora studies and transnationalism, for instance, scholars have long queried how class, gender, and race inflected the migratory experience, transforming both sending and receiving societies. But as more scholars grapple with and seriously integrate Black feminist studies to analytically link systems of power and domination, they frame their work at the intersections of race, class, and gender. This moves the field out of an old paradigm – borrowed from classical immigration studies – which prioritizes “the” immigration story, and only narrates what is generalizable of “all migrants” or “all refugees,” thus framing people solely in relation to their migration. Similarly, where classical diaspora studies relied on “roots-routes” models that imagined migrants as a singular group, new work in this field explores intradiasporic ties and tensions. New frameworks that take seriously processes of racialization, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, capitalist domination, and sectarianism/religion across transnational social fields have emerged. The days when only one MENA migration story was permissible have ended: there were then and are today many mahjars.

The multiplication of ways of doing MENA migration studies has also led scholars into new relationships with archives. The need to consult multiple archives and, in many cases, co-create new archival collections through ethnographic approaches has long been a central feature of migration and diaspora studies. As scholars grapple with the incomplete, fragmentary, often dehumanizing ways people who move are recorded in state records, they are prompted to acknowledge archival silences and interrogate them in a way that gives voice to previously marginalized groups and individuals. For others, co-curation or co-creation of diasporic counter-archives allows scholars to escape the state’s frameworks entirely, or critique its treatment of

migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The concurrent proliferation of digital archives makes this work even more pressing: the dissemination of diasporic counter-archives to new scholarly publics obliges scholars to account for their marginalities and clarify the politics of retrieval.

Finally, researchers in refugee studies and border studies are forcing a rethinking of how scholars write about displacement within the region, and in particular, how individuals interact with, evade, or subvert regulatory controls. Whether writing about empires or nation states; international law or humanitarian biopolitics; or border patrols, visa officers, or refugee assistance groups; the myriad ways that human mobility defies—but also redefines—territorial space has become a mainstay of Middle East studies. Refugee studies assert the significance of prioritizing individual agency through methodological approaches that capture how refugees speak back to the state or humanitarian structures via ethnographic, archival, or spatial analysis. They also remind us that legal categories like “refugee,” “stateless person,” “internally displaced person,” or “economic migrant” are never neutral descriptors of a person’s condition, but part of a geopolitics governing the right to move and with it (in Hannah Arendt’s words) limiting the “right to have rights.” Meanwhile, border studies scholarship challenges the territorial determinism that once dominated the field further, revealing how processes like partition, migration control, smuggling, or settlement of displaced people generate new ideas about popular sovereignty, shaping domestic politics, justifying deportations, and creating states of exception. In Middle Eastern borderlands, refugees, migrants, but also locals are simultaneously at home and strangers; borrowing from Gloria Anzaldúa, “To survive the borderlands, you must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads.”⁴

Mashriq & Mahjar has focused on providing a place for critical conversations and dissemination of new research that broadens and deepens the scope of this subfield. In the years to come, the journal hopes to continue supporting scholars asking new questions. For example, an upcoming special issue will focus on childhood and migration. As a group, the experiences of children and youth have been largely absent from Middle East and North Africa migration studies thus skewing our narratives towards that of adults. Similarly, we are just beginning to see scholars look at queering migration studies, while others are investigating how disability studies can intersect with migration studies, and still others are shifting narratives towards working-class experiences of migration. New research is seeking to

bring into relief migrants' "interior lives"—as historian Nell Irvin Painter has urged in the different context of the lives of enslaved African Americans—and place emotions at the heart of their narratives in order to more fully reclaim the humanity and history of migrants.⁵ In making *Mashriq & Mahjar* a space for critical migration studies, we follow the lead of Sylvia Wynter in seeking to overturn the Western bourgeois conception of the "human," which excludes "a category defined at the global level by refugee/economic migrants stranded outside the gates of the rich countries, [who are] . . . the postcolonial variant of [Frantz] Fanon's category of *les damnés*."⁶

The papers in this issue embody this goal. They are drawn from two *Mashriq & Mahjar* workshops conducted under the heading "New Perspectives on Middle East Migrations." The first took place virtually in Summer 2021, inviting graduate students to receive developmental feedback on works-in-progress related to migration, diaspora, and refugees. This was followed by an in-person conference in Summer 2022 hosted by the Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies to take stock of the field's dramatic transformations. It was also a key moment of reintroduction for scholars in this field following two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and its own immobilities.

In "The Drowned and the Displaced: Afterlives of Agrarian Developmentalism across the Lebanese-Syrian Border," China Sajadian examines the enduring impact of agrarian developmental projects in Syria, focusing on the consequences of the Euphrates Dam project on the local population. Syrians displaced by the dam's construction in the 1970s are known as *al-maghmurin*, "the drowned;" through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with individuals displaced by the dam project and living like refugees in Lebanon, Sajadian queries how promises, struggles, and losses associated with agrarian reform have been resurrected in the context of wartime displacement. The concept of "afterlives" is central to the article, referring to the enduring traces of agrarian dispossession and Syria's transition to a post-socialist economy. Understanding the lasting effects of agrarian reform and rural displacement in Syria, Sajadian challenges conventional framings of refugees as a contemporary humanitarian issue in favor of a lens that emphasizes this displacement's historical, ongoing dimensions. Sajadian's article was the 2021 recipient of the Alixa Naff article award.

Ann-Cristin Zuntz and Marina Kaneti's article, "In the Skies Over Sofia: Place(s) in Displacement for Syrian Women in Bulgaria" explores the displacement experiences of three Syrian women who

arrived in Bulgaria before the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Challenging “assumptions about why people move during conflict” as well as “the linear nature of such movements,” Zuntz and Kaneti pursue the complexities of emplacement among Syrian women in Bulgaria by examining the women’s homes, workplaces, and the streets of Sofia. The authors critique the categorical smallness of labels like “migrant” or “refugee,” which fail to capture the reasons people move during conflict or how they create spaces for themselves post-displacement. The piece also provokes scholars working with human mobility to attune themselves to the ways that migrants and refugees make themselves at home, and the ways that homemaking sits in tension with ongoing mobility.

Joseph Leidy explores the interplay of youth, authority, and long-distance nationalism among Syrians in Argentina in “*El Zaím: Youth, Authority, and Syrian Nationalism in the Mahjar.*” Focusing on efforts by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and its leader, Antun Sa’adeh, to recruit membership in Argentina, Leidy highlights the role of the mahjar press in disseminating SSNP claims on youth political loyalties, and bolstering support for new party branches established in Argentina and Brazil during this period. While this is a story of political mobilization, Leidy also illustrates how the arrival of youthful members from the diaspora into SSNP party structures challenged the expectations of its established elites. Leidy poses this intergenerational challenge as a diasporan rethinking of the “politics of notables” thesis of Albert Hourani and his contemporaries.

In “The Syro-Lebanese from ‘Syriban’: Nostalgia, Partition, and Coexistence in Eveline Bustros’ Imagined Homeland,” Joshua Donovan examines the interwar diasporic activism of Lebanese writer Eveline Bustros. Despite the partitioning of the Levant by French colonial powers and the emergence of Syrian and Lebanese nation-states, Bustros’ writing and activism reflected a distinct political vision for the Levant that challenged conventional nationalist frames. Examining Bustros’ correspondence and published works, Donovan illustrates how she challenged the notion of a straightforward, inevitable creation of separate nation-states. As both an émigré writer and a repatriate to interwar Lebanon, Bustros asserted claims to national belonging that defied the territorial barriers that increasingly shaped life in the Mandate. Her concept of national identity was of a felt sense, of affect and connections that extended across the bordered Levant and to its many diasporas.

In “Counter-Cartographies and Migrant Infrastructures: Some Critical Reflections from the ‘Campscape’ of Shatila, Beirut,” Francesca Ceola explores the Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon and considers how its residents think about, articulate, and create meaning of space. Official maps of Shatila often serve to homogenize and obscure the complex realities of living within the camp quarters. Using a counter-mapping methodology invites camp residents to describe the social networks and “reticulated structures of care” that operate within Shatila’s boundaries. Examining these local maps, Ceola illustrates how young residents organize their social lives and economic livelihoods, particularly during a moment of state withdrawal of resources for refugee preservation. Ceola ultimately argues that this process of counter-mapping provokes us to rethink assumptions about camp spaces as “informal” or improvised, and by extension permanently “temporary” and outside the urban space of Beirut.

Finally, this issue includes a feature interview with Rachel Norman and author Carlos Martínez Assad. In “There are So Many Ways to Tell a Story,” Norman and Assad reflect on his transition from academic history to writing fiction centered on Lebanese experiences in Mexico. The conversation broaches the cultural liminality of Lebanese in Mexico; the centrality of Arabic language, family, and temporality in Assad’s fiction; and the power of narrative fiction to tell histories that are otherwise inaccessible. This new feature is part of a larger project to explore new methods of disseminating emerging work in MENA migration through publishing interviews, primary source roundtables, research notes, and pedagogy features.

Taken collectively, this issue showcases a few of the field’s new directions by thinking about migration not merely as an object of analysis but as a central facet of everyday lived experience. Ten years ago, the editors of this journal asserted no history of a community is “simply a passage through time; it is also a map, made up of a constellation of points and routes that have shaped and given (it) meaning.”⁷ *Mashriq & Mahjar* endeavors to be a port of call, a stopping off place where scholars and students of migration, displacement, diaspora, and refugee studies convene and attempt a faithful cartography.

NOTES

¹ Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, "On Forgotten Shores: Migration in Middle East Studies, and the Middle East in Migration Studies," *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–8.

² Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 235.

³ "Call for Papers: MESA '18 Without Boundaries, 52nd Annual Meeting," in *Program for 51st Annual Meeting, MESA 2017, Washington DC, November 18–21* (Middle East Studies Association, 2017), 130, https://mesana.org/pdf/2017_Program_PDF.pdf.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, "To Live in a Borderlands Means You," *Borderlands/La Frontera: A New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 194–95.

⁵ Nell Irvin Painter, *Southern History across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁶ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.

⁷ Arsan, Karam, and Khater, "On Forgotten Shores," 6.