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Anglophone Arab or Diasporic?

The Arab Novel in Australia, Britain, Canada, the United States of America¹

This essay examines Arab literature written in English. It provides an overview of the recent but burgeoning critical studies of this field, and assesses the widely used labels of “Anglophone Arab” or “Anglo-Arab” in these studies. It highlights the limitations of this “Anglophone Arab” designation and suggests that the critical concept of “diaspora” be applied to this writing to overcome, even if partially, some of these limitations.

In his critical introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English* (2014), Nouri Gana suggests that the question of national or ethnic identity is a significant burden that weighs upon underlies Arab writing in English. Focusing on Arab-American fiction, which Gana treats as paradigmatic of all Anglophone Arab works (13), he cautions that “it has become quite common to approach [...] Arab American creative endeavors in a homogenous fashion,” emphasising its Arab and/or American traits while generally bypassing “the nuanced struggles to break out of the ethno-racial identity [...] matrix” (29). He refers to this as the “identity-imposition-disposition” that menaces all Arab migrant writers in the US, and is further muddled by the fact that “Arab American scholars and critics have not yet resolved their differences on the issue of labelling” (29-30).¹ The closest resolution can be found in Lisa Suhair Majaj’s notion of the “split vision” that is “expressed as a tilt toward one side of the hyphen or the other” marking out Arab-American fiction as alternately Arab or American (124). Although this split vision was first formulated 1999, Gana’s more recent comments in relation to it, where he argues that it “has not ceased to hijack the decentered gravity of Muslim and Arab American literatures,” illustrate that this notion of split identity remains pertinent (20).

Laleh Al Maleh, in her editor’s introduction to *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009), also discusses the complexity of trying to classify examples of Anglophone Arab literature in national terms as well as the serious shortcomings to the study of this field if it remains constrained by identity. Stressing what she refers to as the “difficulty of ‘locating’,” Al Maleh states that with “human mobility on the rise and new identities constantly being formed and re-formed, inclusion and exclusion [of Anglophone Arab literary

1. The term “Arab” is a difficult one to define but based on the main studies that deal with Anglophone Arab writing, by Nouri Gana, Layla Al Maleh and Wail Hassan, as well as earlier works by Geoffrey Nash, the term seems to be used in two ways. Primarily, Arab is used to describe a writer who has migrated from an Arabic-speaking country or who is the offspring of migrants from the Arabic-speaking world. A more complicated usage relates to the changing nature of national identity in the Arab world and its diaspora. For instance, most of these studies start with the earliest Arab writers working in English, Ameen Rihani and Khalil Gibran. From the perspective of today, these writers are referred to as Lebanese-American, but at the time of writing in the early 1900s Lebanon as a state did not exist (it was created in 1923). At that point they were migrants from Ottoman Syria. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to refer to them as Syrian-American but their works, in particular Gibran’s, have been used by scholars to map what was an emerging Lebanese identity. The recent erosion of the border between Syria and Iraq will potentially reproduce similar instability of national identity. While using “Arab” does not resolve the term’s instability, it allows critics to draw together a group of writers to analyse and research their literary texts, while simultaneously noting the ambiguity of borders and fluidity of the meaning of “Arab.”

2. Part of this article was written and researched during a short fellowship at the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I would like to thank centre’s director, Professor Ato Quayson, for hosting this fellowship and for his helpful feedback on several ideas explored in this essay.

texts] under a national rubric become increasingly difficult" (52). Insisting on the use of such "national rubrics" obscures other important considerations, like "whether the mere crossing of a geopolitical border amounts to traversing boundaries of space, race, culture, and history" (52). In a similar move, Gana has suggested that the main reason why spirited debates have emerged amongst literary scholars "about the definition and scope" of the four main fields of Anglo-Arab writing (Arab-American, Arab-Australian, Arab-British and Arab-Canadian) is due to the inadequacy of nation-based identity labels (9). Gana samples a definition from the work of Steven Salaita, which emphasises the Arab origins of writers alongside the identities they assume in relation to the host lands in which they reside after migration. But these dual national designations do not satisfy Gana, and he is quick to point out that Salaita's definition "ought to be supplemented by a more comparative, transnational and multidirectional framework if it were to be fully applied to the entire phenomenon of Arab fictional writings in English" (10). Both Gana and Al Maleh, then, the respective editors of the two substantial collections that critically engage with Arab literature in English, agree that nation-based definitions are limiting, and what is urgently required is a comparative framework that can identify the transnational connections and literary affiliations that underpin this field of writing.

The supposed comparative approach Al Maleh and Gana collections pursue is one they and their contributors interchangeably refer to as "Anglo-Arab" or "Anglophone Arab." Both these terms supposedly undermine national categories, allowing these literary critics to theorise the works of authors who have migrated from the Arab world, who write in English and work within various English-speaking countries. This kind of non-national determined designation has prompted Al Maleh to include a writer like Nada Awar Jarrar, whose migrant or diasporic status is ambiguous because while Jarrar writes in English, she resides mainly in Lebanon after having spent many years in Australia (54). The non-national approach has also seen the incorporation of a chapter, by Mara Naaman, on the distinctly American author Mona Simpson in Gana's collection. Simpson's Arab lineage, due to her Syrian father, provokes complex questions about how literary criticism could assess her fiction as Arab-American. These examples typify the two elements – language and ethnicity – that are used to define literary works as "Anglophone Arab." Although language and ethnicity are not synonymous with the idea of nation and transcend it in many ways, these two elements have not produced a comparative or transnational model of literary analysis as one would expect, but have, rather ironically, maintained a nation-centred framework. In light of this, the focus of this essay is two-fold. Firstly, it will examine why the "Anglophone Arab" designation has been unable to escape the domineering nation-based framework, highlighting how writing produced in one particular national space is viewed as the archetype of all Anglophone Arab literature. Secondly, drawing on texts, primarily novels, from a range of Arab diaspora writers, this essay will explore how an alternate concept or designation, that of "diaspora," might overcome some of the limitations of the Anglophone Arab mode.³

3. This article will focus on one particular form of literary writing produced by Arab diaspora writers – that of the novel. There are a couple of reasons for this. The first is that the novel is the most prevalent and prolific form across the century-long period of Anglophone Arab writing and, more importantly, across the several national spaces that are the focus of this article. The second relates to the diasporic dimensions of this essay. Poetry by Arab diaspora writers dominates in the US, especially in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, but is not as significant in other national spaces. Developing the transnational comparative approach and diasporic methods in this article requires this novelistic

Anglophone Arab Literature

The emphasis that Gana and Al Maleh's collections place on ethnicity and language maintains the analytical focus established in two of the earliest studies of Anglophone Arab literature, written by Geoffrey Nash. In these two works, Nash defines what "Anglo-Arabism" entails, referring to it as a "discourse" in the first book (*The Arab Writer in English*, 2) and an "encounter" in the second (*The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, 11). In both these instances, Nash's understanding of the term is oriented by language and ethnicity. As he explains, Anglo-Arab writing is "embodied in Anglophone [*i.e.*, English language] fiction and autobiography by writers of Arab ethnicity" (*The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, 12). However, what differentiates Nash's work from Gana and Al Maleh's is the latter critics' incorporation of world literature methodologies. One illustration of this incorporation is the expansive nature of the more recent studies, which include analyses of a vast array of authors and novels when compared to Nash's more focused works. Additionally, Gana and Al Maleh's volumes cover a century-long period of writing, starting from *The Book of Khalid* (1911) by Ameen Rihani to the more contemporary titles like Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* (2008), while Nash's titles focus on the first half of the twentieth century, in the first book, and the last two decades of it in the second. World literature facilitates this sort of temporal and textual expansion, particularly if one follows Franco Moretti's approach, which urges distant reading and makes use of digital technology to ensure that the largest number of literary texts are read, or emulates David Damrosch's methods outlined in *What is World Literature?* (2003), which, for instance, examines *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100BC) as a way to probe the interplay between antiquity and modernity.

This temporally expansive approach extends to geography, where literary analysis focuses on the global as opposed to national dimensions of texts. Moretti's "distant reading" makes it possible to incorporate many nationally-based canons into a truly world study of literary culture. It is also facilitated by Damrosch's focus on the circulation and translation of texts beyond their national points of origin. Literary works, he argues, might "continue to bear the marks of their national origin even after they circulate into world literature" but these "traces are increasingly diffused and become ever more sharply refracted as a work travels farther from home" (283). Moretti and Damrosch's efforts to define the study of world literature have been applauded mainly for advancing a methodology that supports a "global" and "transnational" approach to literature, that undermines western-centric canons, and that disrupts the convention of reading texts as a form of national allegory (Emery; Giles 3, 5; Rooney 272). This is also generally how critics have responded to Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), notwithstanding Casanova's assertion that Paris is the central hub of world literature (Ashcroft 35). Perhaps because it aims to take a global approach to literature or, as Robert Dixon describes, "to read books at the scale of the world," world literature has been posited as the antidote to the way literary study is pursued through a nationalist template. It is not surprising that world literature has had a particular, even if recent, appeal in literary geographies like Australia's. As a mode of reading, world literature opens up Australian literature to a global literary scene, challenging the supposed parochialism

focus. Certainly, a larger and longer study would incorporate the range of fictional varieties available, which include not only novels and poetry, but also short stories and plays.

that has framed the study of Australian literature and highlighting how Australian literature is determined by contexts beyond its own national confines (Giles; Dixon).

World literature's capacity to undermine or broaden localised or nationalist readings of texts is what seems to animate most of its proponents. But other scholars interested in world literature argue that this "globalizing imperative" has had some undesirable consequences in relation to the treatment of space in this mode of literary analysis (Palambo-Liu, Robbins and Tanoukhi 4). Having supposedly unbounded the object of study from the strictures of national space, practitioners of world literature, according to Dixon, have not simply failed to pay due analytical attention to territorial space (173), but have both, if paradoxically, absorbed all spaces into one and maintained a sense of a hierarchy of spaces, where the constraints of the nation unwittingly remain paramount. These two observations are interrelated and have not just presented a problem in literary studies but also in human geography which, perhaps not unremarkably, has well theorised the notions of space and territory (Brenner; Smith). Neil Brenner, for instance, highlights that the absorption of all spaces into one larger entity does not question territoriality, but simply reproduces it on a global scale – what he refers to as "global territorialism" or "state-centrism on a world scale." In this formulation, the world is a "pre-given territorial container [...] stretched onto the global scale" (49). Phrases like "world society," "global culture" or "transnational civil society" preoccupy Brenner because what they portray is the emergence of a troubling homogeneity, both in terms of territorial space and claims to a universal culture.

In the realm of world literary studies, Apter has referred to this as "oneworldedness" – "a relatively intractable monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference" (83). The concern with homogeneity or "oneworldedness" from Brenner or Apter is heightened when one considers that a uniform global culture is not neutral, but is still infected by pre-existing relations of power within the international system. In world literature these power relations produce, or perhaps reproduce, spheres or sites of dominance which are European, French if one believes Casanova, and, more significantly from the perspective of Anglophone Arab writing, American. This leads Robert Dixon, an Australian-based literary critic working on Australian literature, to conclude that in world literature "all the world is like America or Paris [...] but never like Sydney" (5). Studies of Anglophone Arab writing have gained considerably from world literature models, especially as the latter has developed a framework for analysing migrant fictions within a global format. Wail Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives*, an important study of Anglophone Arab writing that focuses on US- and UK-based Arab writers, has been lauded for its distinctly "global" outlook to examine this corpus of writing (Naaman 378). But this gain has also meant that Anglophone Arab scholarship has replicated the more limiting aspects of world literature that Apter and Dixon have described. Like world literature, Anglophone Arab scholarship absorbs all spaces of its production into one and maintains a kind of hierarchy of space, even while professing to dismantle such hierarchies that prioritise certain literary geographies over others. What seems to be the case, in both Gana and Al Maleh's anthologies, and Hassan's monograph, is a prioritising of Arab-American writing, where it is the standard to which all other Anglophone Arab writing is measured against, making Dixon's statement "all the world is America [...] but never Sydney" or Toronto or even London, all too relevant here.

One of the reasons for the bias toward Arab-American fiction in studies of the Anglophone Arab field perhaps relates to the fact that the overwhelming majority of this writing takes place in America, especially in the first decades of the 1900s where it was almost exclusively American (Gana 3). In addition, what these studies also emphasise is that this fiction began in the US. It is noteworthy that Gana, Al Maleh and Hassan's texts contain a specific chapter study – the first chapter – of *The Book of Khalid* by Rihani, acclaimed as the first Arab English novel. By commencing with Rihani, these works signal that America is the primary site of Anglophone Arab writing and its model form. This is reinforced by Gana when he refers to Arab-American literature as “paradigmatic” (13) and uses it to sketch what Anglo-Arab literature entails. He further extends the special status of the American scene when he comments that it is only the “Anglophone Arab novel in the U.S. [that] has [...] gradually reached a level of maturity that would permit [...] placing it under the sign of world literature” (24). These comments exhibit the same problem that Theo D'haen has pointed to in relation to world literature: “Notwithstanding the best intentions [...] American proponents of world literature always risk turning the practice of what they are doing against their avowed aims, thus perhaps unconsciously [...] upholding a cultural hegemony they consciously profess to be combating” (93-94).

These observations demonstrate how studies of Anglophone Arab literature enforce, even if unwittingly, the cultural hegemony of the US. They also expose why the elements of language and ethnicity which, as outlined above, have been used to analyse and define Anglophone Arab literature have endured despite the shift toward the expansive world literature approach. In other words, because they are broad and applicable in various transnational contexts, language and ethnicity mask the “oneworldedness” that Apter has criticised, ignoring that the preoccupation with them, particularly the unresolved issue of the ethnic identity of texts, was set in relation to Arab-American writing. A key consequence of this has been that a vital aspect, that of diaspora, has been marginalised in the study of the field. This is a curious oversight considering that all the critics mentioned recognise that diaspora, and its related dimensions of mobility, migration and displacement, are significant. Hassan notes it in the very title of his book, *Immigrant Narratives*, and highlights that immigration is one aspect of his study – “how has” he asks, “such writing been shaped by immigration?” (3). Likewise Gana states that in order to analyse Arab writings in English a distinctly “transnational and multidirectional framework” is required (10). For Al Maleh, it is through diaspora that the similarities of Arab Anglophone writing are evident “regardless of its authors’ dwelling-places” (55). These novels, Al Maleh continues, “are semblances [...] of parallel life episodes lived similarly in all of their diasporic corners of the world. In this sense, ‘diaspora’ can be seen as a befitting abode [...] giving [...] [authors] a literary ‘home’” (55). In all these instances, though, the literary critics do not probe the concepts of migration or diaspora much further, utilising them as descriptive terms, that is as a way to describe aspects of the literature, rather than exploring and deploying the analytical value found in theories of diaspora. Moving beyond description, a diasporic reading would illuminate the reciprocal transnational dynamics between texts produced across a range of sites. Such a mode of analysis, which I discuss below, would attend not just to influence of Arab or English literary culture on these texts, but also to the centrality of place and the significance of an unstable and transnational notion of ethnicity found in this fiction.

Toward an Arab “Diaspora” Literature

The diasporic approach to Arab writing in English that this essay attempts to outline is closely aligned with the growing debates about the need to pursue a “migration” or “diasporic” view of Middle East research. In their inaugural editorial to *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East Migration Studies*, Andrew Arsan, John Karam and Akram Khater identified an unspoken fixity that pervades the area study of the Middle East. They argue that Middle East research has accepted the colonial and nationalist discourses that dominated the twentieth century, discourses that “worked to produce the reality they described – one of bounded territories and populations, each one neatly delineated and differentiated from the next” (para. 1). As a result, studies of the Middle East have not only adopted a “staid notion of space and place” but have also, in terms of analytical focus, “remained resolutely trained upon a single spot on the map,” marginalising the histories of Middle East migration that are, as the editors argue, a significant aspect of understanding the region (para. 5). A diasporic approach would cast doubt over the Middle East as a demarcated region and make way for the discovery of the “weird patterns of discontinuous and broken lines” that connect the globally dispersed communities of this region (Rafael 1210). Understanding the Middle East as a “diasporic cartography,” rather than “a clear territorial package,” exposes it as “a set of networks holding together [...] people and things, places and practices” (Arsan *et al.* par 12). The traces of this Middle East are evident in “migrants’ newspapers, books, cultural clubs [and] restaurants,” revealing “palimpsests of diaspora” (para. 12).

This notion of diaspora when applied to Anglophone Arab writing can help overcome some of the difficulties outlined earlier, namely the hegemony of Arab-American writing and the centrality of the nation in world literature. Diaspora is especially useful because, as the editors of *Mashriq & Mahjar* suggest, it, firstly, interrogates notions of geographically enclosed spaces, notably nation-states, and, secondly, is helpful for understanding cultures or ethnicities of displacement while accommodating difference. With regard to the former, theorists of dispersal have exposed the fallacy of states as hermetically sealed by highlighting the deterritorialisation or transnationality that underpin diasporic communities. Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk argue that because of their deterritorialisation, diasporas “fundamentally puncture the notion that territorial association or land and cultural affiliation are natural sources of identification” (*Diaspora and Hybridity*, 32). The inability to link one’s cultural or ethnic identity to a fixed plot of land illustrates how, from the vantage point of diaspora, conceptions of territory are diffuse and unstable. For Khachig Tölölyan, because diasporas are the “exemplary communities of the transnational moment,” they not only transcend the fixity of geographically defined spaces, like nation-states or regions, but also question their construction as delineated land masses (“The Nation-State and its Others,” 5). These ideas tie closely to the second distinction diaspora makes possible, that of cultural and ethnic difference.

In more traditional theorisations of diaspora, ethnic or cultural identity is largely seen in homogenous terms. According to William Safran, a common cultural or ethnic identity is essential for dispersed peoples to remain unified in realising their ultimate goal – that of return to the homeland (83-84). This understanding of diasporic cultural identity has been widely criticised, especially by Stuart Hall who refers to it as “the imperialising, the homogenising form of ‘ethnicity’” (235). Hall argues against essentialised

notions of ethnicity, insisting on the heterogeneity of diaspora. For Hall, “diaspora identities are those that are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). Hall’s conception of identity is further explained by Ashraf Rushdy in his discussion of the African diaspora. Rushdy notes that the African diaspora was the dispersal of not one nation but many peoples from a continent. Unlike the so-called classical diasporas, the “Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Irish – these were [already] nations whose populations were dispersed,” (299) the African diaspora was forged with an already existing difference. This difference was exacerbated through diasporic experience because African migrants travelled multiple routes and settled in a diverse set of locations, forming a complex web of affiliations.⁴ In light of this, Rushdy refers to the African diaspora as a “concept” where difference is its central defining feature. He argues that “difference becomes the antidote to racial essentialism” and “transnationalism [...] the antidote to [...] cultural nationalism” (299). In this sense not only is diaspora “necessarily attuned to the ways identities are constituted in spaces not bound by the borders of the nation-state,” (298) it is also distinctly capable of resisting and monitoring the “oneworldedness” that seems prevalent in world-based modes of analysis.

Hall and Rushdy’s observations have particular resonance for the Arab diaspora, which, like the African variant, is comprised by the dispersal of peoples from a variety of nation-states and constituted through difference. Insights from Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk regarding the need to reconceptualise enclosed geographical space, are reflected in the arguments of Arsan, Karam and Khater namely in relation to adopting a “diasporic cartography” that sees the Middle East as less a regionally bound entity and more a web of “weird patterns” and “discontinuous lines.” The conceptual model of diaspora that the ideas of these theorists establish, one that is comparative and that maintains rather than erases difference, is apt for examining Anglophone Arab literature. It is a model that can illuminate and probe the reciprocal transnational dynamics between texts that originate from different corners of the diaspora and one that acknowledges the diverse and dispersed qualities always-already embedded in the term “Arab.” It is this that is missing from extant readings of Anglophone Arab literature which have generally resisted analysing texts across geographical sites, and as a result failed to challenge narrow constructions of place and ethnicity.⁵ However, placing Arab novels in English under the sign of diaspora goes some way to addressing these neglected aspects.

Regarding geography, Arab novels in English, when assessed as diasporic works, illustrate how national or regional spaces are constructed beyond their own confines. This is evident in two ways: the first relates to the comparison or juxtaposition of unlikely cities found in this fiction; and the second is revealed in this literature’s marked engagement with history. In relation to the use of history, this does not refer to novels

4. For Rushdy, African migration was voluntary and involuntary, but he places great stress on the latter noting that forced migrations were the result of the extensive slave trade. He argues that the “enormous injustice of the slave trade” contributed to the production of a “new people.” While he does not suggest that slavery should be assessed as having positive consequences, he argues that it is important to “see how a people creatively responded to these crimes” of slavery and forced displacement (300).

5. A survey of, for instance, Gana’s collection illustrates the strong emphasis on the category of the nation in the analysis Arab writing in English. What is even more revealing are the two chapters that examine Arab-Australian and Arab-Canadian writing as separate entities that are not seen to interact with other Arab writing produced in the UK or US. A comparable trend is evident in Nash and Al Maleh’s work.

that are set in ancient or medieval periods, but rather the extent to which narratives set in the contemporary period note the diasporic historical depths of the region. This is reflected in two award-winning novels, Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006). Hage's novel is set during Lebanon's civil war, precisely in 1982, in the Christian sector of East Beirut. The narrative explores the impact of this war on two adolescent friends, Bassam al-Abyad and George al-Faransawi, as they rapidly diverge in their political views and their commitment to Lebanon. Bassam, on the one hand, is preoccupied with leaving Lebanon, while George, on the other hand, becomes increasingly involved with a Maronite Christian militia. Matar's text is a story told by the adult narrator, Suleiman el-Dewani, from the vantage point of 1994 Cairo, looking back on his childhood in 1979 Libya. Suleiman's father, Faraj el-Dewani, is abducted by Gaddafi's guards for his opposition to the regime and its increasing authoritarianism. As will be illustrated, it is through these narrative concerns that both novels depict and ultimately undermine the construction of Lebanon, by Christian Lebanese, and Libya, by Gaddafi's regime, as culturally and politically closed spaces.

Hage's novel, which depicts the insular political culture of 1980s East Beirut, provides insights into this Christian community's view of Lebanon's national culture and identity. For these Christians, Lebanese culture is distinct in the Middle East because it is not Arab. This point has been stressed on numerous occasions in Lebanon's history, notably during the 1940s independence debates that took place between members of Lebanon's Christian and Muslim political elite, and is also supported by a broader scholarly discourse that seeks to essentialise Lebanese culture and history as particularly Christian and non-Arab. In doing so, Lebanon's historical record has been used to produce a narrative that explains any Arab influence, such as the use of the Arabic language, as "historical accidents" (Moosa 303).⁶ This Christian version of Lebanon seals the country's geographical contours and projects an essentialist and distinct image of Lebanese national identity. It is this Lebanon, and the threat from Muslim militants seeking to take over and Islamise it, that George and his militia colleagues aim to defend. George conveys the urgent nature this mission to Bassam, stating that the Muslim *ummah* (nation) is organised against Lebanon: "They are coming from all over the world to fight us, Bassam, here in our land. Palestinians, Somalis and Syrians – everyone has a claim on this land" (Hage 128). In Matar's work, the singular vision of Libya that Gaddafi insisted on is depicted throughout the novel, mainly by detailing the threat to those who challenge Gaddafi's view of Libya. Matar's book documents the long-standing opposition within Libya, one which became most visible in the 2011 uprisings. It also shows the degree of the regime's thoroughness in targeting figures of the opposition, with scenes in the novel of the regime's guards approaching even the young Suleiman to determine the location and activities of his father. What the regime enacts in the novel in 1979 is reflected in a speech delivered by Gaddafi on 22 February 2011 in Tripoli, directed at the revolutionary forces seeking to overthrow him. Gaddafi states his "millions" of supporters will comb Libya "inch by inch, home by home, building by building, alley by alley, person by person" until the "country is clean of dirt and impurities" (Gaddafi). This speech was delivered toward the end of Gaddafi's leadership, but, as depicted in the novel, his leadership was characterised by such acts of "purification."

6. For further details of the construction of Lebanon in the Maronite imagine see Bayeh especially 73-85, Hage (1996), Salibi.

It is this insular and enclosed vision of Lebanon and Libya, put forward by the political culture of the Maronites and Gaddafi's regime that is resisted in the work of Hage and Matar, notably through their engagement with history. In *De Niro's Game*, Hage's protagonists ride through war-raved Beirut on a motorcycle, during a lull in fighting. Although surrounded by destruction and decay while driving "down the main streets where bombs fell" Bassam notes that these streets are also the place "where ancient Greeks had danced, Romans had invaded, Persians had sharpened their swords, Mamelukes had stolen the villagers' food, crusaders had eaten human flesh, and Turks had enslaved my grandmother" (12). Through this description, Bassam disrupts the enclosed Maronite view of Lebanon, and focuses attention on the country's disorder to highlight its rich and multilayered past. Similar narrative manoeuvres are evident in Matar's text, where the protagonist is preoccupied by Libya's ancient Roman past in the midst of its oppressive present. In the opening scene, Suleiman accompanies his mother to Tripoli and is instructed to wait for her by the sculpture of Septimius Severus where the "Roman Emperor born all those years ago in Lepcis, proudly stood" (3). Suleiman describes the posture of the emperor, suggestively noting his extended arm pointing toward the sea, "urging Libya to look toward Rome" or to look outside and beyond itself (4). From its initial pages the novel gestures toward a porous image of Libya. This is further reinforced in a later sequence where Ustath Rashid, an art historian, takes Suleiman and his friends to the ancient site of Lepcis. Rashid informs the group that Lepcis, before it became Roman, was founded by the Phoenicians of Tyre, from modern-day Lebanon. The many artefacts located in Lepcis also highlight African and Greek influences. Libya, then, like Lebanon, is a place that is far from self-contained but is, as its history reflects, constituted by a plurality of places that have penetrated it. In this light, the "alley by alley" that Gaddafi sought to purify would be an impossible task because, as Matar illustrates, a delimited and insular Libya runs counter to the country's more plural historical record.

Alongside this recourse to history, Arab diaspora writers also juxtapose urban spaces, utilising particular narrative techniques to highlight that a full appreciation of Arab cities and spaces relies on a transnational framework. Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and Tony Hanania's *Unreal City* (1999) are key examples of this. While the narratives unfold respectively in Cairo and Beirut, both also feature London and England as significant sites in relation to these Middle Eastern cities. Critical engagement with Soueif's novel – which focuses on Asya al-Ulama, her life in Cairo and later the UK where she travels to complete a doctorate in English literature – has been framed by postcolonial theory. Joseph Massad writes that Soueif transports her lead character to "the heart of Empire," (76) and Shaden Tageldin suggests that Soueif's narrative has internalised the impact of modern European imperialism on Egypt (84). As a novel that dramatises the colonial relationship between England and Egypt, set between these two places and featuring a central character who becomes a professor of English literature at the American University of Cairo, assessing this novel as a postcolonial work is appropriate. But this is not the case in relation to Hanania's novel and its marked engagement with London. In this instance the postcolonial frame is not entirely adaptable to *Unreal City* as Lebanon and England do not share the same kind of imperial relationship as Egypt and England. *Unreal City* details the life of a nameless narrator during Lebanon's harsh civil war, noting his upbringing in a well-heeling Beirut family,

his education in prestigious English schools, his work as an artist at the London Tate gallery, and his final absorption into an Islamic fundamentalist group, *Jihad al-Binaa*, to enact a suicide mission in London supposedly against Salman Rushdie. But these references to London and the protagonist's connection to England are not merely incidental. Rather, if one notes the intertextual engagement that Hanania establishes with the very title of his novel, then London's relevance to Beirut is heightened. The reference "unreal city" is taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a poem considered as "English Modernism's definitive report" on post-World War I decimated London (Long 146). It is this comparative reference that Hanania employs to shed light on the urban decay that defined wartime Beirut. Read through a diasporic lens, *Unreal City* and *In the Eye of the Sun* can be taken together to illustrate, whether determined by postcolonial dynamics or not, how geographical spaces are not exclusive, but are constituted through interaction with external and unexpected places. The boundaries of the UK and Egypt, or London and Beirut are not, to borrow from Akram Khater, "hermetically sealed" but in these transnational narratives "perforate," dislocating the Middle East from its familiar and staid coordinates (322). What this and the geographically diverse historical references in Hage and Matar's novels reflect from a diaspora perspective is not only how places are determined by rich and varied comparisons and interactions with other spaces, but also how it is a diffuse sense of place that diaspora authors utilise to narrate and describe the Arab Middle East.

This complex approach to place is replicated in Arab diaspora literature's treatment of ethnicity. Unlike Anglophone Arab criticism, which remains constrained by the "split vision" model that stresses nation-based labels, Arab diaspora fiction looks beyond it. The limitations of the Anglophone Arab approach have marginalised the degree to which Arab writings in English reimagine ethnicity, especially how they draw on or establish alternate spheres where such imaginings can take place. Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Michael Mohammed Ahmed's *The Tribe* (2014) exemplify how Arab fiction need not be guided by the "split vision" model. In relation to its focus on ethnicity, no other post-9/11 novel seems to have attracted as much critical attention as Abu-Jaber's work. This is perhaps not surprising given that *Crescent's* publication coincided with the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, and although composed prior to this war, its content was uncannily prescient. The narrative deals with the story of Sirine, an Iraqi-American woman who works as a chef in Nadia's Café in Los Angeles. Although aware of her Iraqi heritage, through her uncle who raises her after she is orphaned and imparts his knowledge of Arab history and cuisine, her Iraqi roots are further reawakened by her relationship with Hanif, an Iraqi exile working as a linguistics professor at UCLA. As suggested, due to the timing of the novel's appearance *Crescent* has been widely analysed in terms of its treatment of Arab-American ethnicity at a particularly difficult moment in the relations between Arabs and Americans (Fadda-Conrey 2014; Karoui), and the ways in which it depicts a multicultural and diverse ethnic community located in a particular district of Los Angeles (Fadda-Conrey 2006). Gana likens the quotidian multiculturalism of this district to the conviviality that prevailed in Al Andalusia where, prior to the fall of Grenada in 1492, Muslims, Christians and Jews were able to coexist and thrive in spite of their differences. Nadia's Café is the epicentre of such conviviality and many of the novel's pivotal scenes take place here. Sirine serves dishes both to her American customers, like "Lou Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern Studies, Morris

who owns the newsstand; Raphael-from-New-Jersey, Jay, Ron and Troy from Kappa Something Something [sic] fraternity house,” as well as her diverse Middle Eastern clientele: “Jenoob [South], Gharb [West] and Schmaal [North] – engineering students from Egypt; Shark [East], a math student from Kuwait; [...] Odah the Turkish butcher, and his many sons [...] [and] Khoorosh, the Persian” (Abu-Jaber 10). These descriptions of the American and the Middle Eastern customers might seem to reinforce the “split vision” mode, depicted in *Crescent* through the multiple groups that mingle in the café. But, concentrating particularly on the mixed lineage of the café’s Middle Eastern customers, these descriptions also show how this novel aims to move beyond a split dichotomy, highlighting the diversity that exists within the Arab and Middle Eastern ethnicity itself. In a post-9/11 context where the figure of the Arab and Muslim were increasingly homogenised, not to mention demonised, (Karoui; Naber) the emphasis of Abu-Jaber’s novel on the diversity within the Arab ethnic community can be read as an attempt to complicate the binaristic split vision approach that frames the “Arab-American” category of fiction.

In Ahmad’s *The Tribe*, this split view is almost totally marginalised, with the novel instead focusing on an extended migrant Lebanese family living in Sydney, Australia. Only one or two scenes address the issues of Arab ethnicity within the context of Australian racism, signalling that even though this family is racialised by the dominant white community, this will not be the narrative’s preoccupation. This, however, does not mean that issue of ethnic identification is absent. *The Tribe* explores these questions through alternate means, distinctively by drilling down into the domestic space and lives of “Baat Adam” (The House of Adam) to show how the Adam family has, as Ghassan Hage suggests, carved for themselves a “resilient” space where they can exist with a sense of “normality” (“Writing Arab Australian Universes,” par 12). The family’s dwelling space is vividly described in the novel’s opening section, “I: The House of Adam,” by the adult narrator Bani Adam, who looks back on his childhood. Readers are taken down corridors, into various bedrooms, bathrooms, the laundry, upstairs to the second storey, into the backyard granny flat and are introduced to a cast of characters that include not only Bani’s parents and three siblings, but also his two bachelor uncles, Ali and Ibrahim, his married uncle Osama whose family reside upstairs, and his grandma, Yocheved. Rich with description, it becomes increasingly clear that this “House of Adam belongs to everyone. We go upstairs and they come downstairs. We don’t knock on doors and we don’t say ‘excuse me.’ No one has a special seat or private drawer. We share the backyard and the garage and our rooms and our clothes and our toys and our food” (22).

It is within this crowded yet homely space that Bani, in his first person narrative, explores the family’s collective cultural and ethnic identity, and his place within it. The family is often referred to as “the tribe,” but Bani also imagines them as many grains of sand. The most significant figure to Bani is his grandmother, and the novel’s longest section “II: The Children of Yocheved” details how this matriarch both represents and binds the Adams together. It is therefore apt that Bani should always see these grains of sand that operate as a metaphor for his family reflected in his grandmother’s eyes. Initially what he sees is an “hourglass” but soon discovers “more than just a few grains of sand – inside [Yocheved’s eyes] was a desert” (35). This prompts Bani to ask his grandmother “tell me what I am made from?” and her reply inextricably ties him to the family and his ancestors: “You are made from your grandfather, oh Bani” (35). Later in

the narrative, at his uncle's wedding, Bani challenges these ties, wondering if he wants to completely conform to this tribe's expectations. His uncle's bride is a distant relative, connected to the family even before the marriage, and Bani questions if it will also be his fate to accept such a marriage. He recalls the hourglasses in his grandmother's eyes, but this time the sand in them is not simply a capacious desert but is a limited scene, where "the sands dictate [his] future" (102). His questions "what if the desert in my grandmother's eyes came to an end? What if it collided with the sea?" are a register of Bani's resistance to the expectations of the tribe, which involves marrying a woman from his ethnic and religious community. Bani, however, expresses a desire for a "foreign" wife outside this community, from over "there, across the sea": "I can see her face, her fair skin and her freckles and a shy smile; nothing like the girls of 'The Tribe'" (102). The novel does not offer a comfortable resolution to Bani's wish to break free of familial and communal expectations. Rather an ambivalence is registered with his grandmother's death when he looks through her "eyelids and into her eyes, one last time, the very last time, and into those hour glasses, running no more" and realises the "truth [of] where I come from, and what I am made of" (131). While he is part of the sand that constitutes the Adams, this sand has "stopped running" allowing him some freedom beyond the tribe. It is in this sense that Ahmad's novel remains concerned with questions of ethnic identity but eschews the "split vision" frame of analysis. What the family, the Adam tribe, provide in this text are alternate ways to explore the issue of diasporic belonging without, to rephrase Hage, constantly "worrying" about how this Arab culture fits in with, or against, the dominant one.

Conclusion

In her essay on the author Mona Simpson and the need to broaden the category of Arab-American fiction so that it includes writers like Simpson, Mara Naaman makes a strong case for moving beyond the narrow categories of ethnicity and language. She argues that an urgent political project faces Arab-American writers today, in a post-9/11 and Iraq war era, which is to resist marking out their literature for its representations of a minority ethnic identity, an identity that is all too often romanticised and even fetishised (380). It is a challenge to which these writers must rise to reclaim their voice as Arab- and Muslim-Americans, and assert their right to represent their own community in all its complexity against the "cacophony of distorted voices and images of Arabs that bombard Americans daily" (380). There is, however, no reason why Naaman's important and prescient suggestions should not also extend to the way Anglophone Arab literature has been defined and analysed. Her words focus on the Arab-American literary space, thereby restricting the antidote to the problems or concerns she has with this literary field. One of the key ways to broaden the analysis of Arab-American fiction, to resist potentially parochial readings and challenge the dominance of this field within the wider sphere of Arab writing in English, is to apply forms of analysis that attend to the transnational dimensions of this literature. A diasporic mode of reading which, as this article has outlined, challenges cultural or ethnic hegemony through its recognition of "difference" and stresses the interconnections between disparate geographical spaces, illustrates how this literature can be read as a form of diaspora writing. By employing diasporic reading methods, literary critics and scholars can show how this writing desta-

bilises the “split vision” approach to ethnicity and the hermetically sealed constructions of place that has preoccupied analysis of this literature.

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