“Neither here nor there”: A Conversation with Laila Halaby

2 December 2020

Ishak Berrebbah and Laila Halaby

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/7740>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.7740

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Electronic reference

Ishak Berrebbah and Laila Halaby, “Neither here nor there”: A Conversation with Laila Halaby”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 43.2 | 2021, Online since 23 July 2021, connection on 03 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/7740> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.7740>

This text was automatically generated on 3 February 2022.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

"Neither here nor there": A Conversation with Laila Halaby

2 December 2020

Ishak Berrebbah and Laila Halaby

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is worth pointing out that Laila Halaby, besides her two novels that have been discussed in this interview, has other published works and forthcoming literary projects. *My Name on His Tongue* (2012), for instance, is a collection of poems that shed light on women who grew up and lived in the United States as Arabs and Americans. The literary output in the making is *Woman, Be My Country*, a novel in which three unlikely characters – Filasteen Salama, Shah Reza D, and William Wallace – interact over coffee as a result of war, and their names, which represent a heavy burden to carry, have had a profound effect on their choices. *Watching the Girl You Love Walk Away with Charlie Manson* demonstrates a year of grief in 12 stories that take place in the year after Trump's election. Also, *The Weight of Ghosts* is a memoir under consideration for publication.

Ishak Berrebbah (IB): You have contributed remarkably to the contemporary Arab American literary canon, given that your fiction has been acknowledged positively by many literary critics such as Steven Salaita (2011) and Amal Talaat Abdelrazak (2008). Is there a link between your fiction and your life in any aspect? In other words, do your life experiences have an impact on the shaping of your fiction?

Laila Halaby (LH): I think just my existence shaped it, the fact that I was always between, so I think that was what drove me to fiction in the first place, the fact that I never really felt this Arab Americanness has its own culture. I had that American mom and a Jordanian father and it was not a cohesive blending. I think to make sense of that I wrote stories and I think that's where it came from. I think the various stories that developed often come from the things that I see and I want to work through, and I want to understand better. You know it is not so much that I am

having these experiences necessarily, but maybe I am puzzled by them or seeing them around. When I started *Once in a Promised Land* I lived in Los Angeles, in Westwood, and there were so many young Iranian men there and they were so confident. I look at this and I say to myself "you are foreigners and you are so much more confident than even Americans. How does that happen?" I would see this all the time and wonder and wonder and I then thought what would shake that confidence and that was how I had the idea of the accident, so the whole book [*Once in a Promised Land*] started from that corner and that tends to be how my writings evolve. So yes and no, to answer your question.

IB: In terms of readership, do you have any sense of who is reading your work internationally and whether you consider that audience when you are writing?

LH: I don't generally think about who I am writing for, because I write it to write it not for someone necessarily. I mean sometimes if I am writing poetry and it is a little more political and responsive to something then, maybe, but for the most part no. I am always surprised, I am always amazed because *West of the Jordan* came out in 2003 but I finished it in 1995. So you know it is sad because before 9/11 nobody cared about us. It was like "oh oh wait now we wanna know." So I think it always amazes me when people... I get so many emails from people in India. There are so many people in India who are doing a thesis on my books and stuff like that and it always amazes me. I have no idea but I am always pleasantly surprised, how is that? [Laughs]

IB: That's true. I mean after 9/11 everything about Arabs started to be viewed through a critical lens. A remarkable example of your fiction is *West of the Jordan* (2003). It is narrated by four female narrators: Mawal, Hala, Soraya, Khadija. Using exclusively female narrators can possibly be regarded as, and suggestive of, your desire to reinforce the role of women in contemporary narratives. Is this true? And is there a relationship between the structure of narratives – fragmented and episodic – and the nature of the narrators' lives?

LH: You know, this goes back to your previous question of who do you write for. I am sure you hear this all the time in the UK, but here [in the US] there is always one Arab woman, there is only one. Just one mould and everyone comes from that. I think I always struggled with this weird idea of what an Arab woman was indeed versus what I knew to be true and so I think... you know... when I was writing this [*West of the Jordan*], it was a long time ago. I think I was exploring the world that I knew, which was so much more diverse than anything that is flooding out there now, and just really showing the same stories everybody else has. We may have different details but we are the same. We have strong people, weak people, smart people, dumb people, we've got them all you know. So playing with different characters who had different stories or different particular motivations was kind of a way to honour that.

IB: Brilliant! The narratives in *West of the Jordan* introduce male characters often through the gaze of female characters. Interestingly, male characters' identity whether in diaspora or the homeland is mostly troubled by their being influenced by patriarchal practices and improper fulfilment of gender roles. A good example of such characters is Khadija's father. What do you suggest by this?

LH: Could you expand on your question – when you say a good example is Khadija's father I feel that there is a very specific thing in your head when asking this question, so I want to hear more.

IB: I mean throughout the novel there are some male characters who perpetuate patriarchy such as Hala's father, Khadija's father, and also Soraya's father to some extent. Talking about Khadija's father in particular, he shows a strong male dominance within the family

and outside the family and tries to control women's lives, especially Khadija's, who cannot go out with her American friends, nor wear improper dress, nor engage in relationships outside marriage. This also includes the violence against his wife and daughter and also his son. So what do you suggest by this kind of representation of such male patriarchy in your novel? What is your purpose? Do you want to critique them or show some aspect of Arab culture?

LH: Well, here is one. That her father is one man but there are a lot of other men in the novel throughout. I think, again, I don't really have an agenda when I am creating characters but I think, just as I said before, we have great people and we have jerks. There are some abusive men and there are some very loving and nurturing men. I think they figure in here [*West of the Jordan*]. And you know it is funny, I remember this Afghani woman who wrote, who was an author and she was saying when we come from a culture where everybody is spitting on us all the time about this and this, and how do we also tell stories about those people who do things that are not good? I think I am very conscious of my intent. There is that [patriarchy] certainly in more restricted and conservative families. You find that sometimes. I think here [in the US] in particular, I think sometimes, you know, culture does not translate easily, so you tighten your hold on the representation of things. So I think we have those people but we also have the other people. If he was the only man in the book I would say yeah that would be my intent but he was not. I would say "look at all of them." I don't know. Do you feel he stood out?

IB: Well. There is Hamdi, there is Walid, and these characters are represented as protective and supportive. Hamdi provides support to Soraya and he guides her, Walid protects Soraya in the Bar [when attacked by drunk white Americans]. Certainly there are men who care about female partners, and you are right in saying that to understand this we have to go through all characters. But Khadija's father is interesting throughout the novel because the way he treats his daughter and his wife depends on his situational psychology. Maybe this is because of certain diasporic mediations. I want to emphasise Khadija's father because he seems to represent the negative potential of traditional culture.

LH: Yes, so going one step deeper. What is the role of holding on to that patriarchy and holding on to more conservative views? In the long run, what will it offer to him [Khadija's father]?

IB: Probably it is to fill the gap that he experiences in diaspora; the loss of home, being poor, being oppressed by the American life and his failure to achieve the American dream. All this creates a gap in his life, and patriarchy and violence are an outcome, or let's say an excuse, to fill that gap, and the victims are his daughter and wife and even his baby, as well as the fact that he is an alcoholic.

LH: Yes, I think one of the things that has always been, may be the rule of a lot of my writings, which is less dependent on culture and just more dependent on humans, is "why do some people manage all of this stuff and some people don't?" You know, why can one character come to this country and thrive and another character just falls apart. What I am doing as a writer is exploring that dynamic and how it manifests itself. So if somebody cannot manage this, how is it showing? So even here [in the US] it happens, it happens everywhere!

IB: Khadija's father projects a particular type of fatherhood which I call a "hybrid fatherhood," constituted by two oppositional but interconnected types of fathering: constructive and destructive. Khadija says: "sometimes my father loves my mother – and the rest of us – so much that he becomes a kissing and hugging machine. Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath. But most of the time he is sad, his thoughts somewhere I cannot visit" (2003, 37). Can this unstable/

situational fatherhood be considered as an outcome of the surrounding environment in the USA and certain diasporic mediations such as nostalgia and homesickness? And does it define, in some sense, what it means to be an Arab American father?

LH: I think that's interesting, what did you say? Hybrid fatherhood! I think that's really interesting. You know just as there is no one Arab woman there is no one Arab father. I think we can look at this generationally. If you grew up with violence... you know, I used to say it this way; I knew so many people who had been hit as kids, or were beaten, not beaten as abusive beating, but beaten like discipline beaten, and they are all fine, right? But there was a context for it, right? I mean you grow up in a village and this is the parenting style of ninety percent of the village because it just is and then you don't question it the same way but when you are here [in the US] you have brought that thing with you and there is no context for it. I feel like in the back of my head I am justifying some sort of corporal punishment, which I am not! I just want to underscore that. If you grow up in a village and you come here and the expectation is that you will be in the delivery room where the baby is born and you will change the diapers and do all of this and you have never seen this in your life, how will you react? And that was not something that was considered acceptable. I mean, what do you do with all of that? I think that expectations about assimilation and details are also very difficult sometimes. Again, I am not justifying his [Khadija's father] behaviour. I think he is terrible but he is human and how did he get like that?

IB: Do you think that you are trying to voice and echo the problems of Arab women through your female characters?

LH: I suppose. I think I feel that way towards any of my characters. Maybe I gravitate more towards female characters because I am a woman. But I really do think it is the curse of any writer that you end up tied and believing in whatever characters no matter how flawed you do have them. I think I advocate for all of my characters regardless, not on the basis of their being women.

IB: Exposing the troubled constructions of patriarchy and unveiling the socio-cultural factors that confine and harden women's lives in the Arab society are often part of feminist agendas. Does this mean that you are a feminist? Or let us say, do you consider yourself an Arab American feminist?

LH: If by feminist you mean supporting the rights of women based on the assumption of equality, then yes, absolutely!

IB: Do you think, in this regard, that Arab American feminism is effective in voicing Arab women's concerns and claiming their rights in the USA and Arab world?

LH: I think it is interesting. I certainly have colleagues who are very active feminists and in their field I think they are massively effective. If you empathize with my women characters there is an element of feminism within you. I think I don't have that political energy that many of my colleagues do, but I am very impressed with the focus and forcefulness of many women and their relentlessness, their refusal to back down. Honestly, you know, I have been lucky in the sense of that silver lining of the mixed life and the separateness. I have had more autonomy than many of my female colleagues. So sometime if you have it softer you don't have to fight in quite the same way.

IB: Growing up in the Arab community, did you struggle yourself with patriarchy?

LH: I did to some degree, both from my father and his expectations, and from the community when I was a bit older (late teens), but I always felt as if I had a backdoor.

My mother went to Radcliffe, was trained at the University of Pennsylvania as a lawyer (one of three women then), but did these things because she wanted to and had access to them, not seeing herself as paving the way for other women. In other words, in my household it was a given that you should pursue your dreams regardless of gender.

IB: Alright, going back to *West of the Jordan*. The narrative suggests that Arab culture clashes with American culture. It reminds us of Samuel Huntington's thesis *Clash of Civilizations* (1993). This is demonstrated through Khadija's parents and how they prevent her from going against the norms and the ideal Arab traditions in the USA. In this regard, how does the clash between the two cultures characterize the nature of Arab American identity? And does this clash hinder the process of assimilation and belonging?

LH: I don't think a non-fluid assimilation is inherent to Arabs. Also, "Arab American identity" is a broad sweep. Khadija's family is both more conservative and more conventional, so being in a situation where traditions aren't embraced will be more challenging for them. Also, I think this has a lot to do with individual parenting styles and expectations.

IB: Within the context of the novel, Khadija is prevented from engaging with the American culture because of what? Is it because her parents think she may lose her identity, heritage, Arab values and traditions? Or because American culture is often regarded as an intruder and threat?

LH: I think both very much. I think it is about fear. If you get closer [to Arab culture] you would go back to that whole "virginity thing." If you get too close to American culture then that is a possible threat too. I don't know, I never come up with an answer I am happy with to this particular question, but I definitely think fear is at the root of it, for all the characters. Even Mawal who's home. There is that sense that if America comes too close it takes something from us.

IB: Rogers Brubaker in his famous article "The 'diaspora' diaspora" (2005) lists three criteria that define a diaspora: Dispersion, Homeland Orientation, and Boundary-Maintenance. Focusing on the second criterion, throughout my reading of *West of the Jordan* I sense that male characters in diaspora, such as Hamdi, Haydar, and Khadija's father, are more oriented to their homeland than other female characters, namely Soraya and Hala, who refuses her father's request to stay in Jordan following her mother's death. Does this relate to gender identity? How can you explain this?

LH: I like this question. It is a good one, I particularly like this one. As I think about it I think we as humans tie identity to different things. Maybe for men that rootedness in home matters more. So I am a counsellor, right, I see people get sick and they struggle with it and men, almost universally, find it harder than women.

IB: Does this mean that women can negotiate their lives better than men in diaspora?

LH: I think so, personally and also professionally I would say yes. How about you? What do you think?

IB: Well, it depends on the nature of experiences of persons in diaspora. We can for instance sense that the name "motherland" is feminine, right? And anything that is feminine holds connotations of affection, relief, cosiness, etc. Motherland is gendered, and in a sense, it symbolises the mother or a figure of a woman that a man would go to in order to get rid of some anxieties. Probably that is why men are more attached to their motherlands when being in the diaspora. I cannot generalize, but this case is often seen in contemporary Arab American novels. A good example is the character Han in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003).

LH: Yeah. Interesting, really interesting.

IB: The narratives in *West of the Jordan* also inform us of how Arab characters, particularly men, endeavour to achieve what is known as "the American Dream." This is apparent through Khadija and Soraya's fathers who work hard to pursue a successful materialist life. By this, can we say that the American Dream is part of the Arab mentality in the USA?

LH: Yes, I think that certainly. There is this fantasy that you come and become successful. It also differs from the immigrants who came to the USA in the nineteenth century. They were a different kind of immigrants, right? Also the option to go home didn't exist the way it does now. There are many factors.

IB: Yes, I agree with this. Now let's go back to fiction. Speaking about Arab men in the USA – a setting of diaspora – Haydar, Soraya's uncle in *West of the Jordan*, seems trapped by his loss of home, estrangement, and memory of traumatizing experiences that he went through back home such as the witnessing of his father's death. This causes him to have mental and psychological issues. Hamdi, another relative of Soraya, describes Haydar as "bipolar, paranoid schizophrenic" (2003, 214). As such, to what extent do you think bitter experiences and diasporic mediations affect the Arab American community in terms of psychological and mental health? And does this have a profound impact on the way Arab American individuals negotiate their hyphenated identity?

LH: I think in Haydar's situation he experiences an awful thing. If you are traumatized and there is no way to express it you will have a lot of mental health stuff to deal with. It will come out somewhere. You know some people manage to find healthier ways for whatever reason. I think in his particular case it was about diasporic factors but it was also trauma factors more. He is traumatized, he can't function, he turns to drugs, and the entire Arab community turns their back on him, so who does he turn to? He turns to people who are not in his world and this makes him seem like he is turning his back on his culture when in fact, really, it was his culture that rejected him. So I think certainly in that sense. There are a lot of expectations of how you are supposed to be as an Arab and for many reasons people cannot deal with that. It's hard to maintain the support you need if you are being told you are wrong.

IB: Yes, well, Haydar is an interesting character as much as Khadija's father. Both endure poor conditions while suffering psychological and mental issues. The terrorist events of 9/11 marked a cultural and political revolution that, consequently, put Arabs – particularly Muslims – under a critical lens. In his *Poetics of Visibility in the Contemporary Arab American Novel* (2020) Mazen Naous suggests that, since 9/11, Arabs in the USA have started to be regarded as hyper-visible subjects. This, in fact, seems to mirror your opinion in your article "Dare I ask?" (2008). I quote: "It has been very difficult since 9/11 to be an Arab or a Muslim and not be forced to think often about your own Arabness or Muslimness." From your own perspective, then, what are the poetics of visibility¹ of Arabness and Muslimness in the USA that can cause further hardship in the lives of Arab Americans in terms of integration and actualizing the sense of belonging?

LH: It seems to me so much that this is based on non-reality versus reality, and being treated and seen as characters in fiction. Like the submissive woman that I never understood. Like how many submissive women do you know? I don't know any! I literally don't know any woman like that. And this is a stereotype I used to hear all the time; it does not even fit. Like after 9/11 everybody is a terrorist, everybody could be a terrorist! So you are faced with those expectations and you are just a person. It is like you are having to justify yourself, and I think that's the hardest.

IB: Further to this, the repercussions of 9/11 events on the lives of Arabs in the USA are quite apparent in your novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Jassim, for instance, endures intense security surveillance by the FBI (2007, 234–35), racist treatment, and mostly,

onerous stereotypes because he is identified as an Arab and potential terrorist (2007, 223). In this regard, drawing on Jassim's experiences, do you think Orientalist stereotypes and assumptions determine the way Arabs in the USA negotiate their racial and cultural identities?

LH: I think they do. I am hopeful that this is less true now, as you have more Arabs and Muslims living and being seen. But certainly when Hollywood was the reference point, I think that was a huge factor in spreading Orientalist stereotypes. I think there is a sort of implicit bias, and inherent racism with white privilege. I think that is what I really want to explore. We all carry some ideas about other people and they are buried very deep, and we are going to act on that and then we are going to see these repercussions.

IB: In relation to the last question, in your short article titled "Dare I Ask?" (2008), published by Beacon Broadside, you position yourself as the ambassador of your culture when you say: "I am always happy to offer any understanding I can to offset American 'Jahiliyya,' or generalized ignorance of other cultures." Your words, as stated, hold implicit criticism of American Orientalist stereotypes that govern Arab cultural and racial identities. Given that your statement was made more than a decade ago, do you think Orientalist assumptions are still perpetuated nowadays? And do you think that Arab writers should carry on in the mission of challenging and correcting stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims in their literary output and writings?

LH: I encourage Arab writers to write. So the first part of that definitely, but as to the second part, I think that there is a certain expectation that if you are an Arab writer you write about just Arabs and you address these things directly. I think I have big issues with that. I think, as an artist, you do what you do, and because you are an artist you do what matters to you, to create characters in a certain way. I remember listening to that Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby, she is lesbian and she said she would do shows and people would say, you are not lesbian enough and that there are not enough lesbian jokes. She goes, like, "I have been on the stage the whole time." That to me sums it up – I am writing this, my books are published, you don't get to tell me what the contents should be, the important thing is the fact that they get published. I think there are people who are driven to writing to correct these things [stereotypes] and if that's your passion then that's what you should do, you know. You have to write your world and I think that's the basic thing. My integrity in my writing is more important to me than to write about a certain thing and I would expect that of any artist in any sphere. In 2003 there were very few Arab American writings or Arab writings in English, it is not as if we had a bookshelf in a bookstore, so I think you are supposed to have a bookshelf in a bookstore, and I think, why am I not an American writer? Why can't you see me as an American writer? Why do I have to be a category? I am an Arab and I write. I mean do we talk about Steve Jobs being Syrian – no! But he was! I think it's so important that we don't have to dictate who we are and how we are because we are Arabs or Muslims or Japanese or Lesbian or whatever.

IB: In the same article you identify an Afro-American woman named Carmon. There seems to be a convenient understanding between you and her because, arguably, each of you represents your ethnic minority in the USA. Accordingly, is it possible to say that the Arab American community, as an ethnic community, has some commonalities with other

ethnicities in the USA – such as Hispanic, South Asian, or Afro-American – in terms of socio-political and cultural circumstances?

LH: I think so, certainly. I think you find this as much at an individual level as at the group level. I think we as some “others” connect with individuals of some others because our experiences are similar and we might feel comfortable within that group because of those familiarities. About groups, if they bond together, I think yes, to some degree, and certainly when you have situations like Donald Trump as one common enemy so we can all come together. I don’t know if that always works like that ideally; we all share so many things, and to come to connect over that, I think can be lovely and powerful.

IB: In *Once in a Promised Land*, Jassim and Salwa seem to avoid the Arab community after 9/11 events. The former for instance spends his time with Penny, a white American waitress, and the latter accompanies Jack, an employee at a bank and drug dealer. This can be interpreted, as Valassopoulos argues, as an attempt to “reject the allure of an ethno-national-centred community that might offer a buffer against the feelings of victimhood or marginalization in post-9/11 USA” (2014, 600). Can this be understood as a particular type of allegiance to the white American community, anti-essentialist behaviour towards the Arab community, and a confirmation of US citizenship for the sake of social inclusion?

LH: None of the above. I believe that their isolation was a biproduct of their basically chasing the American Dream; they are busy, they are working. So their social bonds are so diminished because they, both of them, are focused or maybe hyper-focused on their work place. I don’t think either of them is going and hanging out with groups of Americans, they each have these also dysfunctional connections or maybe superficial connections that then become bigger because they feel untethered. They are not rejecting the Arab community and running to the American community and hanging out or having barbecues or whatever. I think they are just very isolated generally and that is the cause of their problems.

IB: In your novel *Once in a Promised Land*, moreover, you demonstrate a combination of Arabic storytelling and folktales – drawing on a Sheherazadian style of narration – and Western fairy tales. For example, in addition to the stories told by Salwa’s grandmother in the narratives, the narration in the novel starts with “Kān ya makān fī qadīm al-zamān” (2007, VII). This is the Arabic version of “once upon a time.” Does this reflect an implicit conflict between East and West? Or is it a strategic manifestation of your hyphenated identity?

LH: Maybe an implicit “different perspective” rather than conflict. And also an implicit projection of belonging rather than strategic manifestation of my hyphenated identity.

IB: The novel also shows how food importantly constructs immigrants’ cultural memory and actualizes their feeling of home. This is demonstrated through the characters Jassim and Randa. The former remembers a lunch of roasted lamb with garlic once taken at his uncle’s farm back home (2007, 39). The latter is addicted to Lebanese coffee that “boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness” (2007, 283–84). As such, what is your opinion about the role of culinary practices in shaping Arab immigrants’ identity in the USA and mitigating their diasporic experiences?

LH: We ground to what is familiar and what nurtures us, right? So I am sure you see this all the time with other people who are from other places. How many times have I said that a restaurant has opened here, and I say “that’s home food,” it tastes like home food, I mean that’s what we’re looking for. It is not just a fancy restaurant. I think that’s universal not just for Arabs. It is a connecting point, food has a lot of power. Although it is sometimes taken to the extremes, like have you seen the

chocolate-Hummus, chocolate-Hummus! [Laughs] Who does that? Just wrong, wrong! But I see this with other friends, that we all have that little thing that tastes like home. Maybe I have a friend who is depressed: I have to make Taboulah and that would be fine. I mean that seems like such a weird comfort food to me. But I think we all have something that connects us to home.

IB: The relationship between culinary practices and the construction of Arab American identity is apparent in other contemporary novels, such as Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003). This might show that there is relationship between you and other Arab American novelists. Do you feel yourself to be part of a particular writing community? In other words, do you feel yourself to be part of a genre?

LH: Yes, you know, it's the same tribe. And there are some stellar writers. There is that sweet part that we are all American writers and we would like to be recognized as such, not marginalized. I think this is less true now, we are less marginalized. I think there is more awareness and more technology, and globalization that has that side effect, people are integrating more.

IB: The outbreak of Covid-19 and its repercussions nowadays have affected how we live our lives in most all aspects. Do you think that the resultant social, economic, and political circumstances add more burden to the experiences of ethnic minorities in their host countries? Drawing on the case of Arabs in the USA, for instance. And do you think that this will be a major theme in Arab American literature one day?

LH: Maybe, not in a direct way. It may figure in. It is not something that hits me particularly. Time will tell, we shall see.

IB: Arab American identity has always been regarded as hybrid, heterogeneous, and dynamic, amongst other key terms, and it has evolved through generations. As a final question in this lovely interview, what is your opinion about the "nature," and also the future, of Arab American identity?

LH: Actually I don't think Arab American identity has always been regarded as hybrid, heterogeneous and dynamic. I think it has been historically seen as this kind of flat thing and it is only in the last few years that it really evolved into this multi-faceted thing you are describing to me. So, you know, I think like any group of people in this country, I think, it will evolve, but not evolve just for the sake of evolving. It will evolve as people become more and more immersed in American culture. It is complex and its complexity makes it more visible.

IB: Yes, I mean it develops through generations. Speaking about generations, do you think there is a generational gap between previous generations and the current generation within the Arab community in the USA?

LH: In terms of?

IB: In terms of culture or cultural practices or traditions, or religious commitment, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABDELREZAK, Talaat Amal. 2008. *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings*. New York: Cambria Press.
- American Writers Museum. 2020. <https://americanwritersmuseum.org/my-america-laila-halaby/>.
- BRUBAKER, Rogers. 2005. "The 'diaspora' diaspora." *Racial and Ethnic Studies* 28, no. 1: 1–19.
- HALABY, Laila. 2003. *West of the Jordan*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- HALABY, Laila. 2007. *Once in a Promised Land*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- HALABY, Laila. 2008. "Dare I Ask?" Beacon Broadside. <https://lailahalaby.net/articles/>.
- HUNTINGTON, Samuel. 1993. "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3: 22–49.
- NAOUS, Mazen. 2020. *Poetics of Visibility in the Contemporary Arab American Novel*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press.
- SALAITA, Steven. 2011. *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- VALASSOPOULOS, Anastasia. 2013. "Negotiating Un-belonging in Arab-American Writing: Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50, no. 5: 596–608.

NOTES

1. For more reading about what constitutes Arab visibility in diasporic context see Naous 2020.
-

ABSTRACTS

Arab American literature, especially the novel, according to the Arab American literary critic Steven Salaita, has developed "as a formidable art form in the Arab American community" (2011, 2). In Salaita's view, Arab American literature "is undergoing something of a qualitative and quantitative maturation" (2). However, Salaita also points out that it is difficult to define Arab American literature because it is "diverse and heterogeneous" (4). The definition of Arab American literature is complex because the identity of its producers, such as novelists and poets, is even more complex *per se*. The diversity of Arab backgrounds for Arab-American authors is significant and their ties to both the Arab world and the USA hold political ambiguities and

complex characterizations. Such diversity also plays a key role in determining the relationship between the Arab American community and other dominant minority groups. This relationship, as Fadda-Conrey suggests, features "common experience of struggle against marginalization and discrimination, as well as their continuous negotiation of issues related to identity politics, in-betweenness, multiple home fronts, and uneasy belongings" (2014, 8). It is, therefore, necessary to approach those who contributed to the creation of such a literary canon and understand how they reflect on their identity and also their writings. As such, I have conducted an interview with Laila Halaby – a prominent Arab American novelist – to shine a light on some of the components that form much of her own identity as a writer, as an Arab American, and also as an American citizen. This interview posits critical questions with regards to her two fascinating contemporary novels, *West of the Jordan* (2003), which won the prestigious PEN Beyond Margins Award, and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). The former tells the story of four Arab female cousins of Palestinian origin in their adolescent years: Soraya and Khadija who live in the USA; Hala who lives between Jordan and the USA, particularly Arizona; and Mawal who lives in a small traditional Palestinian village known as Nawara. They live in differing conditions and encounter several bitter experiences due to cultural, political, social, and also economic reasons. The latter revolves around the story of a couple, Salwa and Jassim, who migrate from Jordan to settle in Arizona, in the USA, and search for better opportunities to lead successful lives. However, they encounter an inhospitable climate and experience the repercussions and the ravages of 9/11 events. They find themselves at a complex political crossroads and helplessly endeavour to straddle two different cultures.

Laila Halaby was born in Lebanon to an American mother and Jordanian father. She spent most of the years when she was growing up in Arizona where she formed an understanding of her own identity as the meeting point of two conflicting cultures – a hyphenated identity. Halaby comments: "My father always lived in Jordan, my mother always lived in the States, so I've never felt like I'm Arab-American. I feel like I'm Arab and I feel like I'm American, but the hyphen is lost on me. Even though I feel like the hyphen is also where I live, you know? It's funny" (<https://americanwritersmuseum.org/my-america-laila-halaby/2020>). Halaby justifies this claim with her answer in this interview: "When I was growing up and navigating these labels, Arab-Americans seemed like their own culture. I was two things, never a merged category. With increased immigration, 'Arab-American,' to me, is a much more general term than it was once." She is currently working as a counsellor in psychosocial oncology at the Cancer Centre, University of Arizona on a Merck Foundation grant.

INDEX

Keywords: Laila Halaby, identity, Arab America, post-9/11, diaspora

AUTHORS

ISHAK BERREBBAH

University of Coventry

Ishak Berrebbah is conducting his doctoral research in literary and cultural studies at Coventry University, UK, on a fully funded scholarship. His most recent publication is "The Mosaics of National Identity in the Arab American Diaspora: Exploring Long-Distance Nationalism in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," in *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* (15.1, 2021). His research

interests intersect with Diaspora studies, Postcolonial literature, gender studies, and Arab literature in English.

LAILA HALABY

In addition to more than fifty poetry and short story publications, Laila Halaby is the author of two novels, *Once in a Promised Land* and *West of the Jordan*, as well as a collection of poetry, *my name on his tongue*. Laila is Lebanese born and lives in Tucson where she works for the University of Arizona as a counselor, and also as a partner with community organizations to teach / encourage / tease out self-expression through arts and writing. She served on the curating team and as a featured writer in the American Writers Museum's recent exhibit *My America: Immigrant and Refugee Writers Today*.