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Ismet Bujupaj

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- 1 Ecocriticism is a set of critical approaches to literature that examine how literary works treat the relationship of humans to the physical environment, including the relationship of humans toward the rest of nature (Glotfelty, xvii; Mendelson, 81). Nature has been a peripheral topic in most critical interpretations of Arab American literary writings. Perhaps because much Arab American writing engages with the flow of cultures across borders, a process which cultural anthropologist James Clifford famously termed “the transit lounge of cultures” (7), it may be difficult for critics to deal with the treatment of nature or even to notice it, for how can nature exist in a transit lounge? Ecocritical studies have typically paid close attention to works which display rootedness in one place; the field has grown slowly from regional foci toward a transnational scope. What does nature mean when it appears within the transcultural flow portrayed in many Arab American writings, and what would an ecocritical approach to Arab American literature provide? Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, compares advantageously those who travel and their multiple visions about the world to those who have lived all their lives in one place and possess only one home and one culture (185-6) and, indeed, the critical reception of Arab American literature frequently examines this theme of being “out of place.”

² Viewed another way, however, what Arab American writing may offer is doubled places: the diasporic place in the present time of the speaker or protagonist, and that other place which throws its shadow on the present, coming from memories of displacement and experiences of immigration. How do displacement and immigration affect the human relationships to place and the physical environment, and more specifically to the human relationship to nature? On the one hand, one could attempt to see in the treatment of nature in Arab American literature simply a pause to “smell the roses,” as it were, suspended outside the debates of cultural politics. At the other extreme, one could argue that every appearance of nature in these writings is still only about the cultural politics of contesting stable forms of identity. Somewhere between these extremes, with recourse to the basic questions of ecocritical literary theory, one might begin the study with more complexity, framing it around interpreting the relationship of humans to nature and the physical environment. In the writings of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mohja Kahf, nature is neither simply an escape from cultural politics nor strictly a battleground for that politics; instead, nature adds a deeper dimension to experiences already shaped by political and cultural contestations.

³ It is difficult to read Lisa Suhair Majaj’s poetry without immediately sensing the primacy of nature in it, and thus noticing the lack critical literature exploring the representation of nature in her work. In the poetry of Majaj, a Palestinian American poet and literary critic educated in Lebanon and the United States and living in Cyprus, we find the ravaged landscapes of 1980s Beirut, the golden leaves of New Hampshire trees, and close portrayals of the asphodel flower. Poet Naomi Shihab Nye often depicts small, modest images which for all their smallness have tremendous power, as critic Samina Najmi has explored. Nye’s poetry often draws in, from across several cultures, experiences of small, joyful connection to personal place and to nature with which human beings heal themselves from trauma and resist the grandiose claims of ideologies of separation and exclusion. Syrian American poet and novelist Mohja Kahf’s poetry portrays nature as a source of spiritual alternatives to conventional forms of religion, while her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is grounded in the human relationship to nature, particularly in the U.S.

state of Indiana, where much of the novel takes place. In fact, a central problem of Kahf's novel, introduced in its first pages, is the relationship of the protagonist to this Midwestern state, including its physical topography, and it is from nature that the protagonist gains spiritual insight during key moments; thus the absence of critical treatments of nature in regard to Kahf's work is notable.

Majaj: Asphodels Are News

- 4 "Majaj's imagery," writes Mohja Kahf, "is thick with vegetation, not just the figs we expect in Arab American poetry and the olive trees that are such symbols for Palestinian poetry, but asphodels and knotted fruit and American farmscapes" ("Controlled Burn"). Natural flora and fauna are contrasted to the world of fast-paced news about war in Majaj's poem, "What Happens Next? Be the First to Know. CNN Breaking News," which is quoted here in its entirety:

Next there is asphodel, anemone,
children gathering twigs
and tadpoles. Next there are kite tails
wandering over the wide sky
of spring. Next are hen's eggs
fresh-laid and almond trees breaking
to blossom and village bread fragrant
from dome-shaped ovens of clay
and kittens mewling and seasons uncurling
like new leaves, tender and green
and next there is war (*Geographies of Light*, 98)

- 5 The title (italicized in the original text) reproduces the language of an advertisement for a world news station, but the poem's voice presents a profound contrast to the concerns of the news station. The phrasing the poem's first line is intriguing: "Next there is asphodel, anemone." "Asphodel" and "anemone," each in the singular form, have no verb. In an odd—and beautiful—play on the diction of news broadcasts, it is as if the poem is asserting that each flower simply constitutes, in itself, a news event. What is news? What is news for the station, stipulated in the marketing-driven diction of the title, is different from what is news in relation to human and natural life on the earth, the poem seems to say. The television station's term "next" is given new meaning with the speaker's repetition of it in connection to the happenings of spring. From the ground level of the village, the anemone and the asphodel flower constitute "news." Children gathering twigs and tadpoles, too, constitute news. These things should be included in our

narrative of what happens “next,” the poem asserts. The last line of the short poem returns to the concerns of the news station, but now the reader knows that this is not the whole news.

⁶ If one interprets this poem through a lens of cultural politics, it is certainly valid to see in it a critique of carnage-focused U.S. news coverage of the Middle East, which leaves huge gaps in its viewers’ understanding of life in the region, as Edward Said was among the first to argue extensively in his 1980 book, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Such an interpretation would assume that the village in the poem is in the Middle East, which is a leap requiring evidence from the text (unless “dome-shaped ovens of clay” are found only in the Middle East). Such an interpretation might conclude that the poem tries to redress this gap in the U.S. news station’s treatment of the Middle East by offering life-nurturing images to counter the professional preoccupation with violence. In any case, and especially as there is no textual evidence for placing the village in the Middle East, it is also simultaneously valid to interpret the poem using an ecocritical approach, exploring how the poem depicts the relationship of humans to the rest of nature, and to place.

⁷ The poem says, in essence, that human lives not embroiled in violent conflict, as well as nature itself, are left out of the news station’s version of “breaking news.” The extra line space before the poem’s ultimate line underlines this gap. The brevity of the final line is a fine irony, for what would normally be the bulk of the newscast, war, is relegated to one brief phrase, while what is normally non-news, the cyclical life-producing aspects of nature, is given nearly the whole poem. The poem critiques a vision of the world, embodied by “CNN,” that sees violent and unsustainable human relationships with other humans—namely, in war—as crucial for its viewers to know, but fails to see anything important in human relationships to tadpoles, much less in non-human activities such as hens laying eggs or almond tree “breaking / into blossom.” The contrast between CNN’s discourse of “Breaking News” and the poem’s vision is subtly underlined by the unusual choice of the word “breaking” to indicate the blossoming of almond trees.

⁸ Human activities form one-third of the poem’s list of nine happenings in the village: “children gathering,” kite-flying, and bread-baking. The other six happenings are all about

flora and fauna. They are, in addition to “asphodel and anemone,” hens’ eggs, almond trees blossoming, kittens mewling, and seasons “uncurling,” “like leaves,” (the leaves, although they are really a vehicle in the simile about seasons, are included here in the count of six). Some are verbs and some are nouns; the reader can now see them all as kin to human activities. We thus finish the poem’s first ten lines with our sense of “what is next” expanded to include small, daily human activities as well as the cyclical activities of nature’s flora and fauna. Thus, with the first ten lines having built our appreciation of human life, animal life, and plant life intertwined in the village, the last line, as short and simple as it is, nevertheless has acquired the power to strike the reader with horror. The CNN version of news, the poem implies, typically begins only with that last line of the poem, giving its viewers only the war, as if there had been no existence in the village before war. Majaj’s poem asserts that the daily happenings of human life interconnected with nature—“the kite tails / wandering over the wide sky”—should be part of “the news” in order for us to fully appreciate the horror of the news of war.

⁹ Majaj’s poem “Asphodel” also calls upon us to “remember the pliant asphodel” (*Geographies of Light*, 95). The poem’s opening lines call forth both cultural and botanical knowledge about the flower, drawn from the history of humans’ relationship with the asphodel: “Asphodel: known to the ancients/ as nourishment, circulatory medicine/ glue for the shoemakers.” It is as if the speaker is building a defense of the flower, by showing how humans are indebted to this particular flower. Humans have used the flower physically for tangible gain. Because of that debt, one may say the poem is arguing, the lessons the poet will draw from the asphodel deserve human attention today, even with the influx of terrible human news from the political arena, which claims to be more important than an asphodel. She ends the poem with a call to ponder the ethical lessons provided by this flower’s cycle of bloom:

before tomorrow’s dawn is darkened by news
of war, before armies ready their weapons,
....
let us remember the pliant asphodel
how it rises from earth to joyous air
how it carries its song so briefly
so tenderly, so open to the light” (*Geographies of Light*, 95).

- ¹⁰ Here, the asphodel’s intense yet fleeting blooming season is linked to the production of “song,” the poet’s own task. The asphodel stands not so much in contrast to the human world of war, as a lesson for that world. Given the mess

humans have made of their relationships with each other, the warring of armies, humans could benefit by looking more closely at the actions modeled by the asphodel, the poem argues, just as humans have benefited from the asphodel in various tangible ways such as using it to glue their shoes. Will Majaj's painstaking research and artistic crafting of lines about the asphodel be wasted on critics who would mine her poems only for identity politics, ignoring the significant dimension of her poetry which can be gleaned by adding an ecocritical approach?

¹¹ Trees populate Majaj's poetry, often helping to create a sense of personal place for diasporic speakers and enable them to make connections between the present place and the lost place. In Majaj's poem "Olive Trees," the opening lines describe present-day rows of olive trees which evoke the memory of olive trees that the speakers (the first-person plural "we") have harvested in the past:

We drive between rows of olive trees
that lean into the road like ghosts,
silver-green under the moon of midnight,
and remember spreading sheets on dry earth,
knocking branches till the hard fruit fell,
the glisten of hands smeared with oil. (*Geographies of Light*, 13)

- ¹² In the present-day, the speakers drive between the trees, while in the past, they were on foot, spreading sheets for the harvesting and gleaning of olives. Driving between trees means the speakers are encased in the hard chasses of automobiles. By contrast, in the past they touched the trees with their hands—a much closer economy of human relationship to the trees, one which left physical residue, "the glisten of hands smeared with oil," exchanging cells between skin and bark. The present-day trees are comforting and grounding, but are they enough?

A single tree stands watch outside our window.
All night long its roots hold the earth. (*Geographies of Light*, 18)

- ¹³ Being able to "hold the earth" is a power provided by the presence of trees. This sense of being grounded in a personal place, rooted by trees in the present-day of the poem, is contrasted to the next (and final) stanza, which looks from "now" toward a continued future in diaspora, further in time away from those trees of the past they used to touch with their hands:

Now we walk out into the tunnel of days
and a million memories rustle:
waves that touch the shore and whisper,
touch the shore and whisper,
till we bend to gather them
and they flow through our fingers
leaving only a glaze of salt. (*Geographies of Light*, 18)

¹⁴ The refuge of the trees is “now” distant from those who must “walk out into the tunnel of days.” The speakers try to reach with their hands to “gather” but these are only memory waves, not sheets spread under real olive trees. Like waves on an ocean shore, they are salty. One may reach for the conclusion that the memory of the olive trees and the residue they leave on the hands can itself sustain the speaker, but nothing grows in salt, which is all that the waves of memory yield on the hands. Memory and residue, nostalgia for the discrete identity and stable place, are not the answer. The speakers need real trees, trees they can touch and harvest. The poem leaves us with their longing.

¹⁵ In Majaj’s poem, “Season of Fire, Season of Light,” the speaker connects the leaves of New Hampshire trees in the present with blossoms that, in the past, “trembled clouds in gold clouds on the trees” in Beirut. The opening season is one in which, as William Butler Yeats might put it, “the trees are in their autumn beauty,” a transitional season in which nothing stands still and all is in flow. Majaj’s poem opens with the words, “Outside Lebanon, New Hampshire.” Here the poet gives us a town in the “New” World named after the entire “old country,” Lebanon. “Lebanon” is a term used in English-language translations of the Bible, a book of prime importance to those immigrants from Europe who settled in the land during the colonial era of the United States. We know from Steven Salaita’s argument in his book *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (2006) that this sort of naming, with its Biblical subtext, reveals parallels in the displacement of indigenous peoples by Zionist settlement of Palestine on one hand, and on the other hand European colonial conquest of the land that would become America. Majaj’s choice of town in the first line may remind the reader of this, and of the fact that the flow of cultures across the world’s geography and history is a process shaped by politics and economics. The New World town’s name creates a double layer of place, the present place and the distant but remembered place. The speaker is standing in two places at once: just outside present-day Lebanon, New Hampshire and the war-ravaged Beirut, Lebanon of the speaker’s memory. In any case, the poem begins by indicating that the place being depicted is “outside” even this present Lebanon. As in Majaj’s poem “Olive Trees,” the human relationship to place is doubled for this traumatized speaker standing in diaspora, and the connecting image is the trees. From a perspective that examines the human relationship to nature and place, these

golden trees trigger the process by which the diasporic speaker makes connections between the two places; the trees do not resolve the problem, but they do begin the process of indicating the rift within the traumatized speaker, perhaps even point to the possibility of healing it.

- 16 Majaj then goes on to give the reader the brilliance of autumn trees outside Lebanon, New Hampshire, tying them to the “fares” that must be paid by the dead to cross over into the afterlife, first, then to evacuation morning in the speaker’s remembered scene from Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990. It is not only the color of the trees that Majaj evokes vividly in her lines; it is their movement in the wind. She represents the trees using the multiple terms of sight, motion, and hearing, before adding a fourth, a socio-political, dimension to them:

a hundred trees are chanting of fall.
When the wind stirs, gold coins flash
under every tongue. Their fares have been paid,
but the dead still can’t cross
to the other side. Bright ghosts, they linger
on the chill New England air.

*

We’re still traveling the road from Beirut.
Still remembering how blossoms trembled
in gold clouds on the trees
the morning of evacuation (*Geographies of Light*, 44)

- 17 “Bright ghosts” refers to “the dead” who “can’t cross,” but the phrase also gives the reader a breathtaking way of seeing the autumn trees, one which hints at the evacuation scene in the next stanza. In the view of the speaker, the gold light shimmering from the autumn-colored trees in the U.S. state of New Hampshire evokes the similarly colored treetops in Beirut on a day of traumatic displacement. However, rather than using shocking images of war’s devastation in Beirut that morning, Majaj uses the trees’ “gold” coloring in both places, notwithstanding the different nationalities, ethnicities, and religions that form the social context in each location. Additionally, the reader is given a sense of debt owed, with the choice of “coins” to represent the autumn-colored leaves, the poet’s diction imbuing the lexicon of the natural scene with an ethical and economic dimension.

18 In Majaj’s poem “Homemaking,” the speaker describes her mother’s personal experience of home; here, too, place is bifurcated in two locations across the world from each other. In this case, the change of location is not caused by geo-politics, but implicitly by the structure of gender dynamics in the family. “It was a place of stone and trees,” a

small topography of home whose shape and shade creates a personal space for the figure of the mother, and expresses the poet's vision of human relationships to nature and place.

Afternoons,
she watched shade drip
down the wall, collect in puddles
on the tile. Sometimes dusk found her
still there, ear pressed like a medic's
to the house's chiseled skin,
listening for the echo of her heartbeat,
for the measure of her life
in the faint settling of stone. (*Geographies of Light*, 11)

- 19 The house has a skin and a heartbeat; the woman experiences the house as a living organism. What happens when the woman's sense of home is disrupted by a change in her physical location in the world? The poem continues, "She crossed an ocean and found a world/ different yet the same./ A woman's labor is a woman's labor." The second home is not portrayed as alive; there is a sense of loss. A cross-cultural critique of traditional gender roles is subtly present in the poem. Women's work of "homemaking" (in the cross-cutting tradition of gendered division of labor), may have a different physical look, but its relational *process* is similar, the poem suggests, related to the fact that traditional concepts of women's work in the home are not to be found only in one place but have been constructed in parallel ways in several societies. Stones and the shade of trees come together to shape the homescape, but though the woman may seek their stability, this consistent process is what really shapes "the measure of her life." Viewed through an ecocritical lens that examines the relationships of humans to their environment, the economy of the mother's relationship to the home has not changed, though the location has changed.

20 In another Majaj poem, "Cadence," nature is the speaker's path to slipping through "the hyphen" the poem mentions between "Arab" and "American." "Cadence" is a narrative poem telling a story that begins with a poet stepping up to a podium to begin reciting poetry, faced with a mixture of two kinds of people in her audience, each having very different expectations:

The audience watches curiously
as the Arab-American woman steps up
to the podium. Light hair and skin,
unaccented English....they thought
she'd be more—you know—*exotic*.
Or: the audience waits attentively

as the Arab-American woman steps up
to the podium. She is cousin, compatriot,
fellow-traveler: Arab resonance
in a place far from home. (*Geographies of Light*, 57)

- 21 The part of the audience mentioned first is uneasy with or disappointed by her outward signs of sameness with them, such as her “unaccented English,” and longs for the poet to represent a different place, one that they are a bit embarrassed to call “exotic” although in the end they are willing to call it that—but Majaj underlines the contest between their first-world sophistication and their naïve expectations by putting the word in italics. The protagonist feels trapped by this portion of her audience’s determination to pin one discrete cultural identity on her “if she blinks.” Equally entrapping, the second part of the speaker’s audience wants her to represent “home” for them, to be their “home” girl, to sound the notes of nostalgia and a discrete cultural identity associated with homeland and heritage. The third stanza says that the speaker has her own wish distinct from the wishes of both portions of her audience; she “longs to walk into the forest empty handed/ climb up a mountain and down again,” and “dreams of shouting from/ a high place, her voice cascading down/ wild rivers.” The poet finds in climbing the mountain an answer to both her audiences, those who want her to represent their concerns as immigrants “far from home” and those who feel at home in the unaccented English she speaks and want her to represent the “you know—*exotic*.” The mountain is a “high place” with “wild rivers” from where the poem’s speaker “dreams” of speaking, from where her voice would be “cascading” down in that other imagined reality, perhaps echoing the “West Wind” of the British Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. But no, it does not reach Shelley’s tones of prophecy voiced in his poem “The West Wind;” Majaj has more modesty, and more layers of self-criticism and social criticism that subtly bring the reader back down from any claims of poetry to timelessness and universality. The trees are the speaker’s place of inner peace and energy in that alternate reality, but the poem’s protagonist pre-empts her own ability to go there by imagining that both her audiences would cut off her focus on trees and mountain-climbing:

...Already she can hear the questions:
“Do Arab women do things like that?”
And the protests: “We have so many problems!
-- our identity to defend, our cultures under siege.
We can’t waste time admiring trees!” (*Geographies of Light*, 57)

- 22 The poet's immigrant audience members "can't waste time admiring trees," given the urgency of the cultural politics of Arab American identity that they feel, an urgency underlined by the other part of the audience's question, "Do Arab women do things like that?" Two lines in the final stanza end with present continuous verbs "waiting" and "climbing," drawing our attention toward "song" and language:

She's standing at the podium, waiting.
She wants to read a poem about climbing
a mountain. It's the song of what travelers
take with them, leave behind, transform.

From stillness, words ripple: clear cadence. (*Geographies of Light*, 57)

- 23 The art of poetry is thus underlined as flow and process: "words *ripple*" (emphasis added) as the protagonist of the poem begins speaking, determined to escape the pincers represented by the two sides of her audience. At the end of the poem, the speaker is still "waiting" at the podium, and the reader is left to imagine what she will say in *her* poem.

²⁴Going further in Majaj's work, we find the landscape of Palestine pieced together in poetry—because on the ground, it has been erased. For understanding this, we might borrow the term "deep map" from ecocritics who have addressed Native American writing; a deep map is a term for "the detailed naming of place that can be achieved only in narrative" (Mendelson 81). For example, Majaj achieves "deep mapping" in her poem, "Fifty Years On/ Stones on an Unfinished Wall," the long centerpiece poem of Majaj's volume, *Geographies of Light*. The poem is a momentous chronicle of the 1948 Palestinian displacement that is called in Arabic the *Nakba* (meaning "Catastrophe"). It not only creates a poetic roster of some of the displaced Palestinian individuals and razed Palestinian towns, but also gives a sense of the erased topography of Palestine, erased by the razing of villages and farms, coupled with the Israeli state policy of renaming, in Hebrew, the razed places.¹ This masterwork poem deserves voluminous careful attention from ecocritical perspectives. However, such an examination would fill the length of an article by itself, and the poem is noted here just to point out the rich potential that may lie in further ecocritical analysis of the work of this Palestinian American poet.

Nye: Here and Here and Here

25 Naomi Shihab Nye bridges two generations of Arab American literature. The first generation came of age in regards to literary publication approximately a decade-and-a-half to two decades prior to the cohort of writers to which Majaj and Kahf belong. Gregory Orfalea, who is an Arab American writer of the earlier generation, co-edited the first anthology of Arab American poetry in English, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988), which includes some of Nye's work. Nye has made a prolific contribution to American poetry with her collection of poems such as *Tender Spot: Selected Poems* (2008), *You and Yours* (2005), *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* (2005), *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002), *Fuel* (1998), *Red Suitcase* (1994), *Words under the Words* (1994), and *Different ways to pray* (1980). Nye was "born to a Palestinian father and a mother of European ancestry, and raised on a farm in St. Louis where she learned to love animals and appreciate her father's love for the land" (Gomez-Vega, par. 3). Pointing to the importance of the human relationship to place in her work, Nye says in an interview, "My father's entire life was shadowed by grief over loss of his home in Palestine in 1948. Millions of refugees worldwide have known a similar grief. I never have. But I have tried to mention theirs again and again in some of my writings" (Long, 32). Mining Nye's work from an ecocritical perspective on this topic alone would be fruitful. However, Nye's work is not only attuned to a dual ethnic heritage but to multiple cultural influences, each of them bringing a place in the world into the reader's focus; her familial heritages bring in Palestine and the U.S.-American Midwest, while her personal journeys add the U.S.-American Southwest and locales in Latin America. Nye's poetry also "lies well within the American tradition of story-telling poets like Robert Frost" (Gomez-Vega, par. 3), and like Frost she also has a keen eye for nature.

26 In the Nye poem "Half-and-Half," the first character we meet expresses separation from those with different religious identities; he asserts that religious identity must be discrete and stable. The poem reports his first words, "You can't be," but standing alone they are puzzling; to be understood, they must be read in conversation with the poem's title, "Half and Half." By reading the title in conjunction with the first line, we understand the man as saying "You can't be half and half" and only then does his

sentence make any sense. Thus, by making the man's lines a response to a dialogue begun by the title, the poem already is asserting a discursive connection between people, despite the man's words of separation.

"You can't be, says a Palestinian Christian
on the first feast day after Ramadan.
So, half-and-half and half-and-half.
He sells glass. He knows about broken bits,
chips. If you love Jesus you can't love
anyone else. Says he. (19 *Varieties of Gazelle*, 97)

- 27 The man's phrase, "You can't be," is a negative statement about existence. Read alone, this phrase simply denies existence to the "you" it addresses. By beginning the line with this quote from the man, the poem exposes how he has painted himself into a corner with this way of thinking, for obviously the person addressed exists, as the man is addressing a "you." Next, the man is identified as a "Palestinian Christian" and then the poem's second line indicates that the time is "the first feast day after Ramadan," thus placing the man in a Muslim frame of reference. The next line says, rather cryptically, "So, half-and-half and half-and-half," echoing the poem's title, "Half and Half." To what does the "so" refer, if not to the simultaneity of being "Palestinian Christian" in the midst of "the first feast day after Ramadan?" This line thus points to religious pluralism as the social reality surrounding the religious exclusivism expressed by the man. "So you see," the speaker seems to say to the man, "you exist in a context that is both Christian and Muslim, even while you are verbally denying that people can be half and half." Perhaps the poem here is unfair to Palestinian Christians, who demographically are far less than half of Palestinian society and who may sometimes feel that they are the ones surrounded by people of another religion telling them they "can't be" (and one can never forget the added pressure of Occupation which affects Palestinians of both religions); however, this poem is not written in Arabic for an Arabic readership with its specific, different debates, but in English for an Anglophonic readership. The poem associates this character's insistence on having one discrete religious identity not with wholeness, but with "broken bits" of glass, which are hard and sharp and, one could go on to infer, may even be harmful. The brief phrase, "Says he," without insulting the man dissents from his intolerance, and this phrase is given emphasis by occurring at the end of an end-stopped line.

²⁸The poem continues with another figure, a woman, who is juxtaposed to the man:

A woman opens a window—here and here and here—
 placing a vase of blue flowers
 on an orange cloth. I follow her.
 She is making a soup from what she had left
 in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean.
 She is leaving nothing out.” (19 *Varieties*, 97)

²⁹ In this section of the poem, Nye imbues the simple household tasks of an unnamed woman with a quiet will to wholeness and inclusion that overturns the exclusive terms of identity voiced by the man. While the man says “If you love Jesus you can't love/ anyone else,” the woman “opens a window,” creating her own space and her own outlook on the world in a small tangible way. She is supported by the speaker of the poem, who says “I follow her.” The woman opens a window “here and here and here.” This line, with its curious repetition of the same word three times joined by the grammatically simplest of conjunctions, allows us to see that the small local “here” is multiplied by the woman; this stands in contrast to the grandiose claim of the man. Also pulling us into the small act of opening the window is the woman’s placement of flowers in “a vase of blue flowers on an orange cloth.” It is almost as if we can see a bit of the home’s interior that is framed by the window now that it is open.

³⁰ While Majaj likes to mention specific species of flowers, such as asphodels, Nye paints these flowers through color. The vivid colors mentioned by the poet enable the reader to envision the act of the woman, making it tangible, unlike the grand sweeping abstraction of the man in the poem. The poem allows her humble and ordinary act a three-dimensional status that overrides the more rigid view of the man. Samina Najmi has convincingly argued that Nye’s poems have “smallness as an aesthetic” which claims feminine space in a “politically defiant posture” against “traditionally masculine turfs of war and international politics” (158). An ecocritical approach adds another, complementary, dimension to the idea of Nye’s aesthetic of smallness, by analyzing human relationships to the environment or, more specifically here, the man’s relationship to his environment compared to the woman’s relationship to her environment. While the man is in a state of separation, the woman is in a state of connection, opening windows made of the glass he deals with in shards. Moreover, the woman in the poem above makes her

ecological footprint on the earth small, avoiding damaging nature by over-consumption, by using ingredients that are “what she had left,” the modest “the shriveled garlic and bent bean” instead of wasteful expenditure. She makes the soup tastier, the readers assume, by using the thrifty housewife’s tactic of “leaving nothing out,” in contrast to the man’s leaving out of non-Christian people. In this way, the poem creates for the woman a sense of her home and her own personal place, an ecological and ethical one that is nourishing, both physically and spiritually.

- 31 Literary scholar Samina Najmi remarks that “smallness as an aesthetic appears most obviously in Nye’s close-ups of natural phenomenon” (158). Trees are an example of such close-ups; trees in Nye’s poetry are often connected to human well-being, wholeness, and a sense of the small personal place in the face of displacement and other larger issues. In Nye’s poem “My father and the Fig Tree,” first published in *Different Ways to Pray* (1980) and reprinted in many anthologies (cited here from *19 Varieties of Gazelle*), the speaker connects her father’s past and his Palestinian heritage passed on to his daughter, with a fig tree planted in the present time by the speaker’s father in Dallas, Texas. The poem begins in the daughter’s first-person recollections:

In the evenings he sat by my bed
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
They always involved a fig tree.
Even when it didn’t fit, he’d stick it in.
Once Joha was walking down the road and he saw a fig tree.
Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree and went to sleep.
Or, later when they caught and arrested him,
his pockets were full of figs.

.....
The last time he moved, I got a phone call.
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song I’d never heard.
“What’s that?” I said.
“Wait till you see!”
He took me out back to the new yard.
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the world.
‘It’s a fig tree song!’ he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own. (*19 Varieties of Gazelle*, 6-7)

- 32 In the first half of the poem, the speaker’s father tells the daughter stories that involve fig trees, giving this tree the meaning of connection to homeland, Arabic folktale, and the Arab cultural heritage of Arab Americans. Joha is an Arabic folktale figure. Then, in the present day, with

delight, the speaker's father takes her into "the new yard" located "in the middle of Dallas, Texas," a bit of nature in an urban location. Instead of using storytelling to evoke the fig tree, as he did in her childhood, he is now showing her that he has made a new personal place, and what makes it such is the presence of the fig tree. Like the diasporic speakers in Majaj's poems, the father is always present in two places at once, the present one and the one traumatically lost, and here the fig tree connection the two places. The father's fig tree in Dallas does not solve the politics of Palestinian displacement, and it does not redress the injustice of the lack of Palestinian right to return to their homeland (a right upheld by international law), but it gives a bit of sustenance to one displaced Palestinian in a small-scale way. By using the fig tree, the poem shows the creation of this personal place in a way that does tap into the memories of collective heritage indicated by the first half of the poem. Due to this factor, the poem makes the father's way of creating his personal place not just individually meaningful but collectively meaningful to many Palestinians and Arab American immigrants.

³³In chapter 5 of *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau expresses a joy similar to the joy of the father in this poem when he writes, "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself," delighting in his farm on Walden Pond as the father delights in his Dallas backyard with its newly planted fig tree (n.page), but Thoreau's famous refuge in nature does not have the double meaning of connecting to a homeland lost through displacement, and is highly individualistic while the father's joyful "fig tree song" taps a collective, communal heritage in addition to expressing joy in personal place. Examining Arab American literature through an ecocritical lens can expand the scope of ecocritical studies that have focused on American nature writing, and deepen our understanding of both canonical American literature and new Arab American writing. "Arab American writers," notes Gregory Orfalea, "are heir not only to Whitman and Eliot, but also to one of the world's largest poetic traditions;" he goes on to discuss the important place of poetry in the Arab cultural heritage of Arab Americans, but few critics pause at the earlier part of his sentence, to consider how Arab American writing also offers exciting new ways to reconsider such canonical American writers as Frost, Whitman, and Thoreau ("The Arab American Novel," 115).

³⁴From tree to tree, roots extend, and bring familiar fruits to different locales separated not only by geography but by geo-politics. Arab American writers such as Nye and Majaj describe human relationships to nature despite objections of the impatient listeners we met in Majaj's poem "Cadence," who would say the speaker was "wasting time admiring trees." The father in Nye's poem, despite his displacement as a Palestinian, has succeeded in creating a small personal topography meaningful for him, "a world that was always his own," just by planting a tree. Trees are never a waste of time.

Kahf's Time with Trees

³⁵Trees do not have political identities, generally speaking. However, one can construe them in ways that are imbued with cultural politics. The fig tree of memory is represented as a piece of Palestine shored up by the father and appreciated by the daughter in Nye's "My Father and the Fig Tree." By contrast, the trees central to Mohja Kahf's poem "Redwoods" are not from the "old country" but exist only in one place on earth today, in the Pacific coastal region of the United States.

³⁶"Redwoods" is a poem in the voice of an immigrant's grown child expressing resentment of the parental nostalgia for the old country and culture. Certainly, the poem "Redwoods" appears to try on a voice that is only part of the Kahf range; this poem ought not to be read in isolation from the overall balance-point where her poetic voice tends to register. As critic Samaa Abdurraqib notes, "Kahf is successfully able to challenge the traditional trajectory of Muslim immigrant writing," avoiding the stereotypical notion of the U.S.-raised generation's rebellion against the immigrant generation (68). Kahf, in other words, does not usually voice the position of rebellion against the parents' "old country." In fact, at times she even leans into that nostalgia, as in her poem in the voice of a Syrian boy raised in Brazil, "Word from the Younger Skaff." Born in Syria and raised in the United States, Kahf includes in her writings many instances of complex and compassionate understanding of the immigrant parents' experiences, most substantially with the parental characters in her novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Kahf's body of writing is often seen as containing, on the one side, an assertive call upon mainstream American

society to adjust its attitude toward the Arab American newcomers who will not necessarily conform to mainstream American identities as they struggle with their own internal identity pressures. Simultaneously, Kahf's oeuvre contains an internal critique of oppressions that operate within Arab American communities. This dual critique is the balance of Kahf's work. Dual critique is the axis of her poem, "My Body Is Not Your Battleground," for example, which lacerates both oppressive narratives (that of mainstream U.S. culture and the narrative within the community, the Muslim community in this case) rather evenhandedly. "Redwoods," however, is a moment in Kahf's work articulating almost exclusively the internal critique, a warning to Arab American immigrants to deal with the unique and different topography of their adopted land.

³⁷Even so, the speaker in "Redwoods" does not adopt a facile voice of rebellion, but a more complex voice. At the same time, in this poem the rejection of immigrant parental nostalgia for the heritage culture is undeniable: "We are tired of your ancient language," says the opening line, and other lines are even more specific, voicing a loss of faith in the parental belief system, which is characterized as outdated: "We don't believe in your seventh-century victories/ or your ninth-century liturgies./ We are done with your tenth-century religion" (*E-mails from Scheherazad*, 88). The phrase "seventh-century victories" surely refers to the early conquests of the Islamic empire, while the ninth and tenth centuries were periods when Islamic institutions took the shape that are widely associated with the norms of Islam since then. This, thus, suggests the voice speaking in the poem as the voice of a Muslim American descendant of immigrant Middle Eastern parentage.

³⁸It is important to note that the rebellion in "Redwoods" does not express an embrace of "mainstream" American values or identity, but a more complex embrace of spiritual values drawn from nature, namely from redwood trees. These spiritual values shored up from the new land are then connected to the Quran, but not in the traditional way assigned to the immigrant forebears, to whom the speaker says: "Your ancient palm oasis is not here but see/ the redwood trees have majesty and grace/ and beneath them rivers flow" (*E-mails from Scheherazad*, 88). The latter line turns, in a key moment, on echoing Quranic descriptions of paradise as being a garden beneath which rivers flow (e.g. Quran, 61:12, and many other verses). The

poem's last lines say, "Still you deny the revelation of the redwoods/ magnificent, underneath which rivers flow," repeating this image of the rivers (2003, 88). "Still you deny" also evokes the recurring refrain of Chapter 55 of the Quran, "Then which of your Lord's blessings would you deny," making the line a powerful yet Quranic rebuke to the parents. Palm trees, though they also exist in the United States, are clearly associated in this poem with the "old world" of the immigrant parents; they are "*your ancient palm oasis*" (emphasis added). Thus, the embrace of the new world juxtaposed with the "ancient" world is an embrace of new revelations which do echo the revelations of the Quranic verses, but in a new form: the specific form of the majestic redwood trees.

³⁹It is in a grove of old-world cherry trees that the protagonist of Mohja Kahf's novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, reaches a key moment in her self-development or personal journey. The protagonist, Khadra Shamy, has gone to Syria seeking temporary refuge from her hyphenated life in the United States, which had reached a point of psychological breakdown for Khadra. The breakdown comes about in large part due to the pressures on her from her U.S. immigrant family about her life's decisions and due to the pressures of identity politics surrounding her in the United States as a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf, or *hijab*. Khadra's great-aunt, called in the novel by what we are told in the text is an Arabic word for "grandmother," "Teta," is tending Khadra during this time which Khadra spends in Syria. During this time period also, Khadra meets a poet on the mountain in Damascus, an unrelated older man who could be considered a "grandfatherly" figure, and he also gradually helps her to recover from her state of bewilderment or breakdown. This poet, along with Teta, and Teta's lifelong Syrian Christian friend Hayat, take Khadra to picnic in the cherry orchard, where "cherry flowers in long, pendulous corymbs had blossomed on the dark, naked wood, light against dark, like a pale girl in a black man's arms" (308). This description blends the natural world with a blending of different races or skin colors in the social world, making a statement about the beauty of mixing ethnic differences. Thus, the statement Majaj makes in regards to Nye's poetry being about "the recognition and articulation of differences" can also be applied to Kahf's work.

⁴⁰The novel's description of nature in the orchard scene is very important. The scene is set thus, among trees: "Khadra ran and picked cherries, meandering through the colonnade of trees, reaching up through the dappled play of leaf and light and shadow. And the trees bent their fruited branches low for her" (308). The last line echoes a Quranic verse (76:14) which describes paradise as a place where tree branches heavy with fruit bend low for the residents of paradise. The fact that the text is written with this Quranic echo is significant, due to the fact that Khadra's family's intense religiosity has been a factor in her identity and the pressures on her in the United States; thus, the healing experience she has in the orchard in Syria will show her a new, more tolerable way to glean the fruits of her Islamic religious heritage, without rejecting that heritage.

⁴¹One aspect of ecocritical approaches is to ask, "are the values expressed...consistent with ecological wisdom?" (Glotfelty, xix). In Kahf's novel, much is made of the fact that this orchard is located in a place known for its groves of trees and under threat from urbanization, for Hayat says "To the Ghuta, before they cut down the last grove, hurry!" and the poet declares that the "Ghuta Orchards" are a sight that Khadra must see during her stay in Syria (308). The "Ghuta" is thus delineated as a topography distinct from the city of Damascus, and as "nature." The Ghuta is not the name of a town but a farming region skirting the city of Damascus. While it is true that an orchard is a man-made topography in the natural landscape, it is agricultural and not an urban location. Hayat's statement also points to an environmentalist awareness that such places are under threat of urbanization.

⁴²What happens to Khadra, under the dappled shade of the cherry trees of the Ghuta Orchards, is this:

Khadra set the bucket down and scooped out a handful of cherries...Her scarf, a kelly-green chiffon, was slipping off the crown of her head. She reached to pull it back up. Then she stopped, noticing the wine-red juices running between her fingers, and not wishing to stain the lovely scarf. The poet glanced at her. Khadra paused, standing there in the fading rays with her palms spread, her hands spiraled upward toward the sky like question marks. She was in a position like the first stand of prayer. A yellow butterfly fluttered by. The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She remembered when she had taken her last swim...as a girl. She closed her eyes and let the sun shine through the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes, and she knew deep in the place of *yaqin* that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, alhamdulillah*. The sunlight on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahulimanhamadah*. Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self, developing. (309)

43 The phrase “the scarf was slipping off” is repeated, underlining the significance of this moment. This is the first time that the adult Khadra stands outdoors without her Islamic headscarf, whose wearing in public is mandated by her parents’ interpretation of Islam. It is significant that Khadra’s unveiling does not occur in the United States, where Khadra could be seen as taking off her scarf in order to assimilate, and could be seen as betraying her religious identity due to her submitting to the pressures from her adopted country’s stereotypes against the veiling practice of her Muslim religious community, given the fact that “the American reading of the veil” is that it is “oppressive and unAmerican” (Abdurraqib 62). It is not to conform to “looking American” that Khadra removes her *hijab*. Instead, it is in Syria and in nature that she is able to let her scarf slip off. Specifically, she is in an orchard during its fruiting season. At first, it is her instinct to preserve her scarf (from the cherry stains) that ironically causes her to let it go on slipping down her shoulders as she feels it loosening. Having lifted her hands upward to fix the scarf, she finds herself standing in the first position of ritual Islamic prayer, as the next sentence tells the reader. However, instead of expressing the certainty of the defined movements of that ritual, her hands are described as “spiraled upward toward the sky like question marks.” We infer that she has in that instant begun to question the necessity of fixing her scarf the way she has always worn it since puberty, as dictated by her community’s understanding of Islamic law. Then, a yellow butterfly flutters by, as if suggesting to her to allow the fluttering scarf to continue on its path as well. Her questioning gains its stand not from another rigid ideology, such as anti-religious secularism as opposed to religiosity, but from nature (trees, sky, sunshine, and butterfly) an alternative source of spirituality, one which she sees as sanctioned by God. It is similar to the description in Kahf’s poem titled “Learning to Pray All Over” where the speaker says, “I will find/ Rock, stream, wind, road/ These, these will become my daily prayers,” in which she names four things all related to landscape as sources of new spiritual energy to take the place of the five ritual daily Muslim prayers (2003, 100). Capturing a similar spiritual energy from nature as an alternative to institutionalized religion, the speaker in Kahf’s “Poem to My Prodigal Brother” says:

My body catching this wind is obeying
the pulse of the breathtaking Divine.
You, canoeing those rapids, are breaking

into the spray of larger, unseen Waves" (*E-mails from Scheherazad*, 89)

44 Belief in the "unseen" or "*ghayb*" in Arabic is a key Islamic concept which is evoked here; the term occurs sixty times in the Quran (e.g. "God is the Knower of the unseen and the witnessed," 13:9), which draws a complementary oppositional relationship between two categories. In the poem, the physical, tangible waves the brother may experience while "canoeing those rapids" evoke "unseen Waves," capitalized, which hints at entry into transcendental or divine knowledge of the sort emphasized by the Sufis, who are sometimes termed the mystics or gnostics of Islam. Especially given the capitalization of "Divine" two lines above, the poem is positing human relationships to nature as a source of experiences which can parallel the Quranic text in offering gateways to "the unseen." Also, as Orfalea has pointed out, Arab American writers are heirs to American as well as Arabic poetry traditions; in what ways might Kahf be affiliated thematically not only with Sufi traditions of transcendentalism, but the transcendentalism of American poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Beat Poets?

45 Nature and God, and divine knowledge, intertwine in the cherry orchard scene from *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* that is quoted at length above, to "bless" the protagonist's decision to allow the scarf the motion of its fall to her shoulders. The orchard's sunlight, which reminds Khadra of her childhood enjoyment of sunshine on her bare skin before she took up the veil, is surely an experience of nature that God has bestowed on her—this is what the text suggests that Khadra is reasoning and feeling about her connection to nature in this moment. Kahf also draws on Sufi terminology to express the insights that bring Khadra to this moment. Following this passage, Khadra reflects that "veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle" and sees that "both are necessary" (309). Khadra herself characterizes the moment of insight as "*kashf*, the unveiling of light" (309). Her words here draw upon the twelfth-century Sufi master Ibn al-Arabi, who is buried in Damascus and whose tomb Khadra has mentioned visiting and experiencing as a place of refuge (292-293). Ibn al-Arabi developed the concept spiritual "*kashf*," "unveiling," as a "direct supersensory insight into the true nature of empirical phenomena," and indeed, the "notion of supersensory unveiling known as *kashf* is absolutely central to Ibn 'Arabi's mystical epistemology" (Kynsh). Seeing

“veiling and unveiling” not as opposites, but as parts of the same cycle, shows that Khadra, having unveiled, is not now going to oppose veiling. The text does not allow us to see the two practices as terribly opposed to each other, just as earlier the white blossoms melting on the dark wood are described in a way that shows differences as beautiful, not mutually exclusive. In this regard, Khadra will still have many times when she wears the scarf, yet she wears it differently from this moment on, with more flexibility. During Khadra’s return to the United States, on the flight from Damascus to Chicago, she puts the scarf on her head but does not fix it as she did before: “Not tightly, the way Ebtehaj [her mother] wore it. Loosely, so it moved and slipped about her face and touched her cheek, like the hand of a lover” (313). Her inclusive gesture in regards to her hands and her scarf reminds us of the inclusive gesture of Nye’s woman with the “blue flowers/ on an orange cloth.” Both create small personal meanings but ones which allow greater flexibility of worldviews than a religious rigidity which is contrasted to them. It is Khadra’s connections to nature under the trees of the Ghuta orchards that have taken her to this moment of supersensory spiritual insight.

⁴⁶If Khadra’s personal journey in the novel is toward finding a way to reconcile the parts of what Majaj calls the two sides of “the hyphen” in her Arab American identity, then nature also helps her in that development in other ways. Notwithstanding that Indiana and Syria are on opposite sides of that hyphen, when Khadra meets the poet on the mountain in Syria, he has a tobacco scent from his smoking of Turkish cigarettes with “no filter,” just “bits of shredded tobacco at both ends”; this scent reminds her of something. She cannot name it, at first:

She sniffed. Musty, kind of a rich rotten wood smell. Old forest undergrowth. Old rich woodlands.
 “Oh my God,” she blurted.
 “What?” he said. “You are invoking the deity for what purpose?”
 “The smell of your cigarettes,” she said, half-joking. “It solves a puzzle I’ve been bothered by all my life.”
 He lifted an iron-gray eyebrow.
 “Indiana,” she laughed. “That’s the answer. Indiana smells like Turkish cigarettes.”
 (301)

- ⁴⁷ The “puzzle” of Indiana’s “smell” is introduced early in the novel, as the adult Khadra is driving back into the Midwestern state of her childhood:

And the smell, she thinks, getting out at Glen Miller Park to pray *fajr* [the ritual Islamic prayer in the dawn] on the grass near a statue labeled *Madonna of the Trail*. God, what is it? She has forgotten it, living for years away. There is a definite

smell to the air in Indiana....Silage, soybeans, Hoosier hay, what? (2)

- 48 These three guesses that Khadra lists here for the answer to “what does Indiana smell like” are all connected to the use of land in the Midwestern U.S. state of Indiana. However, across the world in Syria, unexpectedly she smells the same scent, or in any case she experiences it as the same scent. The connection between the two is “old rich woodlands.” In this regard, the attentive reader will remember that during her college years Khadra has been told that Indiana was once “covered so thickly with forest that a squirrel could go the entire state without ever touching the ground” just “jumping from tree to tree” (190). She is told this by her friend’s father, who is puffing tobacco on a pipe as he tells her this information about the natural history of Indiana. Nature, in the form of trees or the suggested scent of “old forest undergrowth,” thus helps Khadra to make the connections between Indiana and Syria on the level of her physical sense, the sense of smell. This connection, which began via the nose or, to put it differently, the body level, will come to her on an intellectual level only at the very end of the novel, when she realizes that although they may look very different, her Syrian parents and “Hoosiers” (a term for residents of the state of Indiana) have similar characters: “blond and earnest and solid. Midwesterners—Hoosiers—set in their ways, hardworking, steady, valuing God and family. Suspicious of change. In a funny way, Khadra realizes suddenly, as she surveys the crowd, they’re us, and we’re them. Hah! My folks are the perfect *Hoosiers*!” (438). This is an extremely central and climactic insight of the entire novel, and it is through nature that Khadra is prepared to have it. In this moment, finally, Khadra no longer feels herself “distanced” from the folks of Indiana where she grew up, or “out of place,” but a part of that community, as well as a part of American Islam and Arab America. Finally, like the father in Nye’s fig tree poem, Khadra has made the beginnings of a personal place for herself. This is a climactic moment for Khadra, and few critics have examined the way in which the novel’s text suggests that nature plays a key role in allowing her to achieve this place. In fact, many other of Khadra’s developments in the novel, beyond the scope of this paper to explore, are achieved by the stepping stones provided by Khadra’s experiences in, and connections to, nature.

Conclusion

49 Ecocriticism comprises a vast set of approaches. “Many kinds of studies huddle under the spreading tree of ecological criticism,” as one key figure in the field puts it (Glotfelty xxii). Though Glotfelty’s definition of ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” has been much debated, it opens the door to interpreting nature in Arab American literature. Much of the critical response to Arab American literature has ignored this aspect. The way nature is treated in these writings remains informed by U.S. cultural politics and global geo-political developments. Obviously, the connection of people to nature has implications that are affected by the global politics affecting all immigrants to the United States, Arab Americans among them, and the latter in distinct ways in the hostile climate after 9/11. Sometimes in the writings of Arab Americans, it can be true that a fig tree does appear in fact to symbolize the immigrant parent’s Arab heritage viewed nostalgically from displacement or exile, and sometimes a redwood tree symbolizes its opposite, as a natural feature found only in the United States. However, the treatment of nature in Arab American writings extends beyond such a simple spectrum. Nor, on the other hand, is nature simply a place of rest from geo-politics. Complex moments in these writings show the fluid process of nature alongside the fluid process of cultures, always touching and transforming people, never the same river twice.

50 In any case, the full merits of writings by Arab Americans will not be appreciated or understood if cultural politics approaches exclude ecocritical approaches instead of integrating them. The poetry of Lisa Suhair Majaj shows the reader human beings not only in their political dimensions, but interacting with a spectrum of flora and fauna, which heightens the wisdom humans can bring to political life, to conditions of displacement, and to memory of trauma. Nature in Majaj’s poetry enables the reader to understand that noticing the natural economy of village life exposes the true cost of war. Naomi Shihab Nye’s poetry develops not only an aesthetic of smallness, as other critics have noted fruitfully, but an aesthetic of attentiveness to a multitude of connections between people and their environments. The poetry and fiction of Mohja Kahf develop nature as a source of spiritual energy that offers an alternate path away from both oppressive mainstream U.S. narratives and oppressive conditions within Arab American

life. In all three writers, there is often a doubling of place, like a cherry with two pits at its heart. Even though the focus in this study of Majaj, Nye, and Kahf has been on their treatment of nature and place—and their particular lyricism with trees—the ecocritical study of the human relationship to the environment includes all environments. Many other Arab American writers would benefit from ecocritical readings, including those whose work centers on urban spaces such as Lawrence Joseph, Joseph Geha, Evelyn Shakir, Hayan Charara, and Randa Jarrar, whose novel, *A Map of Home*, takes its protagonist from apartments in Cairo and Kuwait City to a trailer park in Texas. Examining the ways in which the human relationship to the physical environment feeds transformative cultural processes in the writings of Arab American poets and novelists is a worthwhile endeavor, and there is room for many more studies of Arab American literature “under the spreading tree” of ecocriticism.

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NOTES

1. For details see Swedenburg, chapter two "Scenes of Erasure."

ABSTRACTS

Much critical engagement with works of Arab American literature focuses on cultural identity and political issues, without treating nature in those works. The writings of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mohja Kahf, provide rich opportunities to start examining Arab American writings through an ecocritical lens which examines the human relationship to nature, place, and the physical environment. Often, in these works, place is doubled, with the present-day physical environment as well as the place remembered from a past, from which the speaker is separated by trauma or displacement. Nature frequently serves to connect these two places; at other times it serves as a source of spiritual energy that can help the speaker to transcend the rift. The complex treatments of nature and place in these works offer a fluid process that is neither fully separate from cultural politics nor completely defined by it.

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Keywords: Arab American literature, diaspora, Ecocriticism, nature, place

AUTHOR

ISMET BUJUPAJ

Fama College, Kosovo