

# CRITICAL INSIGHTS

## The Immigrant Experience

Editor

**Maryse Jayasuriya**

*University of Texas, El Paso*

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# **We Are Made to Leave, We Are Made to Return: Writing Movement in Contemporary Arab American Literature**

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Mejdulene B. Shomali

## **Introduction**

In the poetry collection *I am Made to Leave I am Made to Return*, Marwa Helal troubles a linear and progressive narrative of Arab immigration to the United States. Rather than imagine that relocation to the United States is a singular, fixed act, or that it reaps positive rewards for the immigrant, Helal highlights the fraught relationship Arab immigrants have to their new country of residence. She does so by pointing toward the imperial violence that may have caused Arab departure from the Middle East and by articulating the many other kinds of violence Arabs may face in the United States. Helal's work also explores how Arab immigrants are in constant motion among multiple nations and locations, thereby muddying the permanence of immigration and the definition of the term itself. Helal's work is one lens into the treatment of immigration by writers of Arab descent, living in the United States. Drawing on the work of Helal and her contemporaries, this essay will explore the theme of immigration in Arab American literature. It will analyze how contemporary Arab American<sup>1</sup> writers engage questions of movement, space and time, and ancestry in their work. To do so, it is useful to first give an overview of the category Arab American, a brief history of Arab immigration to the United States, and an outline of Arab American literary periods in the United States.

## **Arab American Writers**

It can be difficult to classify a category like "Arab American Literature" because the idea of "Arab Americans" is itself open to interpretation. The first term—Arab—refers neither to a singular country nor geographic region. Instead, Arab is often used to designate countries or populations that speak Arabic, national

members of the Arab League, or communities with shared cultural and political histories. Each classification can back up against the next—Arabic is the language of the Koran and, as such, is used in Muslim communities that may or may not identify with Arab identity; regional differences in the spoken version of the Arabic language might render one Arabic speaker unintelligible to the next. The Arab League includes twenty two separate nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Each has its own complex, individual history; how can the moniker “Arab” account for such heterogeneity? Moreover, the geopolitical region known as the Middle East contains countries and communities that are not included under the umbrella “Arab,” though they share certain histories because of their geographic proximity, relationship to the West and colonial rule (e.g., Kurds, Iran).

As such, Arab can be an ambiguous and difficult term to apply to a community or body of literature even before immigration. When immigration is factored in, some of the regional, cultural, and historical specificities both advance and recede in significance. For example, recent immigrants seeking refuge from the Assad regime in Syria or fleeing amidst the Yemeni civil war may understand their nation of origin as central or significant to their presence in the United States in ways Saudi immigrants may or may not. Yet, all three groups may arrive and become understood in the United States context under a more generic, pan-Arab moniker. Or, alternately, many in the West are more aware of the Syrian humanitarian crisis than the Yemeni and may assume all new Arab immigrants come from the former and have no framework for understanding the latter. At the same time, Arab immigrants to the United States are subject to increased discrimination and profiling with regard to their Arab identities, yet on the United States census, Arabs are classified as white, thereby limiting their recourse to anti-discrimination protection and other resources occasionally allotted to minority ethnic groups in the United States. Like other immigrants, their path to citizenship can be unduly complicated by anti-Arab sentiment. In

addition to legal hardship, these communities often face cultural and social exclusion in the United States. Finally, American could refer to not only immigrants in the United States, but to immigrants in the Americas, including Canada and countries in Central and South America. How then, do we understand the “American” in Arab American?

Here it is useful to turn to other scholars of Arab American literature who have organized critical analysis around the category and defined it with loose parameters that allow the nuances within the category to remain salient. In *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (2011), Steven Salaita uses the following: “Arab American literature consists of creative work produced by American authors of Arab origin and that participates, in a conscious way or through its critical reception, in a category that has come to be known as ‘Arab American Literature’” (4). Salaita addresses the problem of ambiguous identity classification by attribution of intentionality to the author or to reception of the texts by an audience. So, the writer and the reader together understand a category. In his analyses, Salaita emphasizes the writer’s ethnic origin and thematic content in helping materialize the literature as Arab American. In *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011), Wail S. Hassan focuses on first-generation Arab immigrants to the United States and Britain, who despite fluency in Arabic, write in English. For Hassan, then, Arab refers to country of origin and American refers to the language of the text (4-5). In *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship in Belonging* (2014), Carol Fadda-Conrey uses Arab American to “[denote] a minority collective whose members are connected not only through a shared cultural and linguistic Arab heritage but more importantly through common investment in shaping and performing a revisionary form of US citizenship” (10-11). Like Salaita and Hassan, she locates Arab via the authors’ cultural histories. Unlike the others, Fadda-Conrey understands American to be a conscious reckoning on behalf of those authors, who seek to transform the category of American via its coupling with Arab. Drawing from each of the preceding

definitions, in this essay we will consider Arab American literature as Anglophone texts published in North, Central, and South America by authors of Arab origin, whose works invoke a linguistic and cultural connection to the Arabic language or Arab nations.

### **Arab American Immigration Histories**

Historians of Arab America outline three waves of Arab immigration to the United States: the 1800s–1925, 1945–1967, and 1965–the current period. Immigrants during the first period were commonly Christian from the Ottoman-ruled provinces of Syria, Mt. Lebanon, and Palestine; immigration records place their numbers in the region of one hundred thirty thousand (Suleiman 2). The first wave's end is marked by the passing of the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, which limited immigrants to the United States by limiting new immigration based on nation of origin and capping new arrivals at 2% per year of the then- population in the United States. Despite the emphasis on nation of origin, immigrants in the first wave often identified through religious or familial affiliations, rather than through a pan-Arab, national, or racial affiliation (Hassan 15; Suleiman 4). Indeed, Arabs experienced uneven racialization in early records of immigration, sometimes being counted as white and awarded citizenship, and other times not. Often the racial status assigned to Arabs by white America reflected other kinds of identity markers, including religion and socioeconomic status (Saliba 312-3; Gualtieri 7-8).

The second wave is bookended by two wars: the end of World War II in 1945 and the Six Day Arab Israeli War in 1967. Notably, this period marked a spike in immigrants exiled from Palestine. It also saw renewed immigration from previously noted Arab regions as well as a growing Yemeni population. The immigrant population in this time period was both more affluent than previous generations and expressed more religious diversity. This period also witnessed an increase of Arab immigrants traveling to the United States on student visas, many of whom remained in the United States after graduation (Suleiman 9; Arab American National Museum, "Arab American Immigration").



Immigration of Arabs to the United States resumed in 1965 after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act, or the Hart-Cellar Act. This act attempted to redress the discrimination of the Johnson-Reed Act by eliminating nation-of-origin quotas and substantiating instead a categories system that preferred immigrants with kin already in the United States and immigrants with specialized skills. As before, wars in the Middle East, notably in Iraq and Lebanon, contributed to large influxes to the United States from these nations (Ludescher 94; Arab American National Museum, "Arab American Immigration").

Scholars of the latter two periods suggest that the politicization of Arabs in the 1950s and 60s and the increased anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in American culture with regard to Middle East politics (e.g., the Arab Oil Embargo, the Gulf Wars, and 9/11) changed the tenor of immigrants to the United States; rather than seeking status via assimilation or identification with whiteness, many later immigrants exalted or maintained cultural proximity to their countries of origin. Similarly, those who arrived in the United States as exiles or as refugees had a different orientation than those who might have arrived to seek education or other career opportunities (Saliba 310-1; Fadda 13).

Though it is difficult to narrate proximate history from the present moment, we can hypothesize that the ongoing Syrian and Yemeni civil wars will impact Arab immigration to the United States. One can also imagine how the 2017 sanctions on travel under the Trump Administration in the form of Executive Order 13780 will impact immigration from the Arab countries under heightened scrutiny. Current records from international student enrollment suggest that immigration to the United States is waning on the whole (Redden par. 2). When we revisit this period down the line, we might understand the 2000s as a distinct wave of Arab immigration.

### **Immigration in Arab American Literature**

As Arab immigration to the United States proceeded in waves, so too did the production of Arab American literature. Critic Evelyn Shakir sees Arab American literature in three movements—early

(1900s–1920s), middle (1930s–1960s), and late (1970s–present) (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 3). These movements correspond roughly to the waves of immigration delineated above (Ludescher 93–4). The work of the first wave of immigrant writing in the early 1900s shares a political motivation toward acts of translation and bridging the East/West (Shakir, “Coming of Age” 67; Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 1; Ludescher 95–6). In the second and briefest, Arab writers distanced themselves and their work from an Arab American classification, and instead understood themselves as mainstream creative producers (Shakir, “Coming of Age” 67; Ludescher 100–101; Majaj, “Arab-American Literature” 2). In the last movement, however, the writing reflects the tonal shift in immigration suggested above: it, too, became more politicized about its Arab identity, was critical of its new American surroundings, and imagined an Arab American identity that existed within and against both ends of the identity (Majaj, “Two Worlds Emerging” 75; Hassan 35; Salaita 7–8; Fadda 24–5). This section will briefly cover the first two phases, suggest an end cap for the third, and turn toward texts from the contemporary moment to articulate new modes of engaging immigration.

### **Mahjar Writers: 1900–1920s**

Many critics consider *The Book of Khalid* (1911) by Ameen Rihani as the first Arab American novel. Rihani was a prolific writer and was part of a collective of Arab writers known as Al Rabita al Qalamaiyya (the Pen League). The Pen League included Khalil Gibran as the first Arab American writer to be taken up by a mainstream audience. Rihani, Gibran, and the other members of the Pen League were active producers of Arab American literature in the 1920s in the form of novels, plays, poetry collections, and literary journals. These writers and their work are collectively referred to as the Mahjar school of Arab American literature. Mahjar is the Arab émigré and the writing of the group was strongly influenced by the status of its members as Arab immigrants in the United States.

Evelyn Shakir noted in her 1993 essay “Coming of Age: Arab American Literature” that much of the Mahjar work was concerned

with substantiating Arab writers' facility with the English language and thereby underscoring their American identity. Following this critique, Lisa Suhair Majaj argued that "they [the Mahjar group] actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies . . . not only in an attempt to bridge worlds . . . literature of this period often reflected a strong need to prove oneself worthy in the U.S. context" ("Arab-American Literature" 1-2). Hassan takes up this critique in *Immigrant Narratives* as well, noting that the work of Rihani and others should be considered, in its form and aims, as influenced by Orientalism—the repertory of images and ideologies from which Arab identities and cultures are viewed and interpreted in the West (3). Mahjar writers navigated this Orientalism in multiple ways—primarily, Hassan argues, through the mode of translation—interpreting their originary countries to their countries of residence (28-9).

### **"Regular Americans": 1930s–1960s**

If the Mahjar writers were conscious of their dual identities and attempted to create work that bridged their lives and experiences, their descendants in the mid-to-late 1900s were instead "costumed . . . as 'regular Americans,' and hoped to pass" (Shakir 67). Majaj classifies the literature of this period as quiet in comparison to the flourishing of literary production in the Mahjar and states that it "reflects a hesitancy to engage with Arab-American identity as something of contemporary relevance" ("Arab-American Literature" 2). Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, and Eugene Paul Nassar, the major Arab American writers of this time, were in turn indifferent, embarrassed and overwhelmed, and highly sentimental about their ethnic backgrounds (Ludescher 102). Two other writers worked during this period, Salom Rizk and George Hamid, but Shakir, Ludescher, and Hassan delineate their work as more thematically aligned with the Mahjar and the late period. In either case, however, this relatively sparse period of Arab American literature corresponds with slower immigration patterns to the United States.



## **The Multicultural Boom: 1970s–early 2000s**

It is difficult to locate a unifying theme or concept that can adequately capture the heterogeneity of work and ideologies represented in contemporary Arab American literature, especially if one dates the category as early as the late 1960s. Instead, I suggest a useful periodization might consider the 1970s–the early 2000s as one moment of Arab American literary production that focuses on canon building. Several critical texts engage how Arab American literature changed in the latter half of the twentieth century. The engagements of the United States with the Middle East (e.g., oil embargo and Gulf War) as well as the progression of the women's, civil rights, and lesbian and gay liberation movements in the US created a political climate wherein minority communities were vocal and active in their critiques of their nation of residence (Majaj, "Arab-American Literature" 2-3; Fadda 21-2). This climate also facilitated the rise of ethnic literature canons in the US, wherein narration of one's history and experiences were one mode of consciousness-raising and resistance to discrimination. Specifically, the 1980s and 90s witnessed a flourishing of the Arab American literary scene in the form of numerous collections. Anthologies like *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988), *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), attempted to situate Arabs alongside other minority groups in the United States as one means of inclusion in American citizenship (Hartman 172-3; Shomali 4). Rather than wax nostalgic about home, or attempt to be read as or assimilate into whiteness, Arab American writers, like other minority ethnics, became legible through the marketing of themselves as hyphenated Americans.

## **Critical Reconfigurations: After 9/11**

Though Arab American writers had been critical of their relationship to the United States and their countries of origin well before the events of September 11, 2001, the climate and response to Arabs in the United States became explicitly hostile in its wake. Though Arabs had been long subject to Orientalism and anti-Arab racism,

the virulent Islamophobia that flourished during this time period has had a broad and sustained impact on Arab American lives and their creative output (Naber, "Introduction" 39-40). Scholars refer to this period as one of heightened visibility and simultaneous invisibility—wherein Arab and Muslim life in the United States is highly scrutinized and, at the same time, seemingly invisible (Cainkar, "The Arab American Experience" 9; Jarmakani, "Arab American Feminisms" 234; Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders" 55). It is invisible because stereotypes and tropes cloud representations of Arab Americans and often obscure the narrative Arab American writers and artists attempt to circulate. It is within this moment of always-already politicization that contemporary writers must navigate the production and circulation of their work. Here I would like to turn to Helal's work to capture some of the dominant preoccupations and themes in Arab American literature today.

In the front matter of *I am Made to Leave I am Made to Return*, Helal identifies some of the central conceits of contemporary Arab American literature: translation, memory, ancestry, and movement. The front matter consists of an Egyptian proverb translated into English and a quote from contemporary Arab American poet Fady Joudah about translation and memory. The reference to Egyptian colloquialism and Arab American literature, both Anglophone and in translation via Joudah's quote, outlines the three literary genealogies that shape Helal's work: Egyptian, American, and Arab American. Another moment of this hailing occurs later in the collection with the piece "[[;".':.:[[ (REMIXED," which simultaneously references Arab American poet Philip Metres's *abu ghraib arias* in *Sand Opera* (2015) and African American rapper Kanye West's track "Runaway" off *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010). The poem combines references to contemporary American politics and its transnational interventions with a staccato delivery that resonates not only with West's music, but call-and-response rhythms that populate Arab oral histories.

Through the sleight of hand of presenting an Egyptian quote in translation and then commenting immediately after on the process of translation, Helal signifies to her reader that language and its

manipulation will be the dominant mode of interaction between these three legacies. Later in the collection, Helal coins a new poetic form called the Arabic—a poem written in English and read from right to left, as in the Arabic language. The form further calls for an Arabic letter, numeral, and footnote to appear without translation. The poem was originally published in *Winter Tangerine*, and included the author's comment:

The Arabic . . . vehemently rejects you if you try to read it left to right. To vehemently reject, in this case, means to transfer the feeling of every time the poet has heard an English as Only Language speaker patronizingly utter in some variation the following phrase: "Oh, [so-and-so] is English as a Second Language. . . ." As if it was a kind of weakness, nah" (Helal, "poem to be read from right to left").

Both the poem and the comment articulate a politics of refusal—the refusal to appear in a singular capacity or language, the refusal to capitulate to English as the only or most significant language an Arab immigrant would speak, and the refusal to accept anti-immigrant or racist depictions of the poet as less than the hypothetical speaker. Helal's sustained code switching throughout the collection underscores that her duality, or even unquantifiability, while potentially a kind of displacement, is simultaneously a strength in her interaction with the world. In the writer's words from "generation of feeling," "[she] is trying to tell you something about how/rearranging words/rearranges the universe" (*I am Made* 7-9).

The dedication, "for absence, for presence" emphasizes the ephemeral nature of memory from Joudah's passage: "Memory is . . . translation's muse and taxonomy. Memory is sometimes unconscious cognition, other times absence." How memory works in tandem with language, legacy, and movement is another central preoccupation of the work that speaks to Arab American literature writ large. In the prose poem "involuntary memory" the speaker narrates the experience of driving through a tunnel on a US street and imagining it exits into Cairo. The reference—a memory activated by the fluorescent lighting—comes unbidden but certain. The disorientation of the speaker and the poem's stream-of-

consciousness narration muddle the geography of here or there. The final line "im almost home," suggests that the reader, and perhaps the speaker, is uncertain (Helal, "involuntary" 34). Where, finally, is home? In the short "returning note no. 6" Helal writes, "when you know youre walking into a memory before youve made it" (1). The play on location and dislocation renders memory the most stable home in the collection, but memory itself is unreliably presented. I would suggest these doubled ambiguities reflect a kind of response to the nostalgia of previous immigrant generations (Ludescher 107) and at the same time reject the impetus to supplant one location with the next.

The dedication thus also alludes to the work the collection will do around movement: across language, across space, and across time. Within the collection are poems titled as numbered leaving notes and returning notes—but the collection does not include a sequential or complete set. The notes are brief, numbered missives from the speaker, which could be about the processes of leaving and returning or are notes left when one leaves or returns. These fragmentary, short notes echo the first poem in the collection "made" which repeats the chapbook's title as the first two lines: "i am made to leave, i am made to return" (Helal, *I am Made* 1-2). The collection does not speak to arrival or departure so much as the constant shuffle of leaving and returning, going and coming. In the endnotes, Helal credits the title of the collection to graffiti artist ESPO, who painted a mural titled "Love Letter to Brooklyn" on the side of Macy's parking garage. The complete work includes references to the NYC train system. The mural's location on a garage and reference to travel emphasizes Helal's transitory focus. But perhaps most tellingly, the complete two lines of ESPO's original piece are "I AM MADE TO LEAVE/I AM MADE TO RETURN HOME." Helal absents home from the arc of her travels; she deemphasizes a stable or clear location in favor of the time and space between.

In "poem for palm pressed upon pane" the speaker is once again in a car and later a bus. These transitory spaces bookend the poem, while the palm of the title turns out to be a plant 5,000 miles away, stretching toward a window, toward light. As in "involuntary



memory," the speaker eludes a singular location; mansurah, cairo, delta, desert, heliopolis, ohio, new mexico, and masr all make appearances in the fifteen lines of the piece, leaving the reader to wonder where the speaker is in the car; where the bus is taking a character named hatem; which living room a mother stares from; and, finally, where the palm tree lives. The poem "if this was a different kind of story id tell you about the sea" repeats the title forty-three times on forty-three separate lines, each time using italics to emphasize some, all, or none of the words. At first glance, the reader might attempt to decode the italicization pattern, but no discernable pattern emerges. Sometimes the italicization begins or ends mid-word; the line appears entirely italicized five times, and not italicized at all twenty-one times. The poem functions as the first line to a story that is never told: we are in a different story, and in it, we will not hear about the sea. But the story that is not about the sea never gets started; we, instead, repeatedly hear about what we will not hear about. The uneven italics cause the lines to dance on the page like waves or water. The sea and its story are told by reference to their absence. Movement here is figured through the page and against, while the reader navigates the sea of the story untold in the writer's refusal to tell it. A few poems later, in "leaving note no. 3" Helal writes "i ocean you" (1). Bodies of water materialize as spaces of action and movement, which occur frequently in immigrant literatures; Helal goes further by dwelling on the water and making its meaning ambiguous—what is the story of the sea? What does it mean to "ocean" another? It ceases to be the passage, or a means from one location to the next, but becomes the focus and meaning itself.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the attention to ephemerality and constant movement characterizes contemporary Arab American literature most accurately. While early immigrant writers imagined their work bridging divides, and others attempted to move toward whiteness and away from Arab identity or again back toward Arabness and away from whiteness, the constant evocation of Arab American

writing is its dedication to travel—the suspension between locales as location, the articulation of change over difference itself, and an anticipatory echo of clocks ticking in every time zone. Movement, with its emphasis on process—the act after leaving and before arrival—supplants immigration in the Arab American imaginary.

## Note

1. I use Arab American rather than Arab-American or other versions. This is consistent with nomenclature for other ethnic minorities in the US as well as both the current preference in Arab American studies and the Chicago Manual of Style.

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