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*Creolizing Diaspora*

*Home and Identity, Language and Hospitality in Arab Diasporic  
Literature*

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## INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on Arab multilingual literature and investigates the extent to which diaspora can be considered a useful term of reference for the exploration and critical interrogation of the literary works written by authors of Arab origin in Europe, the United States, and Canada. My study takes the risk of examining a literature that occupies, as Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton note, “a third space that is not entirely Arab nor is it entirely French or English” (4) — to which I would add also German and Italian. Salhi and Netton investigate the Arab diaspora from different viewpoints but take into consideration mostly Anglophone authors. This is also the case of the collection *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009) edited by Layla al-Maleh and regrouping essays that follow the development of Arab Anglophone literature from the beginning until the post-9/11 period and focus on the works written by authors of Arab origin in the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia. In the winter of 2006, MELUS (the Journal of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States) devoted a special issue to Arab-American literature, while in 2008, the leading literary journal PMLA collected various contributions from different literary critics working on Arab-American literature. These few examples show us that, in recent times, Arab-American writers and the larger category of Anglophone authors of Arab origin have started to gain visibility and recognition. In the American and Anglophone contexts, the body of literature written by these authors has been analyzed as a field of its own; the same cannot be said for Europe where works by Arab-Europeans have been included in the larger category of migrant literature. In Italy, the term *letteratura della migrazione* [migrant literature] (Gnisci 1998) designates a range of works written by migrants of different origins living in Italy and writing in Italian. In Germany, literary critics have coined and employed a variety of definitions, such as, among others, the term *Gastarbeiterliteratur* [host-workers’ literature], *Migrantenliteratur* [migrants’ literature], and the so-called *inter- multikulturelle Literatur*

[inter- multicultural literature]. In France, the contested definition “Beur” literature<sup>1</sup> was coined in the 1980s and was temporary replaced in the 1990s by the so-called “banlieu” literature (Hargreaves, 2005) to encompass the literary works written by writers of Arab origin who either were born in France or migrated to France during their childhood. All these terms, however, denote a clear intention of separating the works written by native authors from those written by migrants. This is also the case of Canada where, as Smaro Kamboureli notes (2000), diasporic literature is still perceived as a deviation from the national literature, an anomaly and a superfluity.

My research intends to intervene in this debate and develop a different theoretical model, by opening up the literary and cultural niches in which the works by authors of Arab origins have been relegated and moving beyond the rigid national and linguistic boundaries that govern both comparative literature and the so-called Weltliteratur. What I intend to do is to broaden the angle of current investigations on Arab diasporic literature, by comparing works written by Arab-American, Arab-Canadian, and Arab-European authors who write in German, English, Italian, and French. In opposition to the framework of traditional comparative literature and Weltliteratur that tend to reaffirm the primacy of national boundaries (Hargreaves, 2005) and to read works in translation, I propose to develop an alternative theoretical model that is multilingual and interdisciplinary, and that blurs rigid national demarcations by using *diaspora* as a key term of reference.

According to Robin Cohen (1999), the term *diaspora* originated in the Mediterranean basin where it had a positive meaning associated with economic prosperity, territorial expansion, and new opportunities. Later on, however, *diaspora* came to indicate the forced removal and subsequent dispersal of Jewish people, Armenians, and Africans and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> The term *beur* is highly controversial: while some people appropriate it to claim their Arab cultural background, others, such as Nina Bouraoui, reject it. The origin of the term is unclear; according to Woodhull, it derives from “verlan”, a criptic language spoken by the youth in the French banlieux and consisting of inverting the syllables of the words. Beur then, would be the manipulated version of the word “arabe.” See Woodhull 32.



acquired a negative connotation (Cohen, “Rethinking 'Babylon'” 255). As Waltraud Kokot, Khatchig Tölölyan and Carolin Alfonso observe, today “ 'diaspora' remains widely contested, both as a term of reference and as a concept of research” (2). In this study, I employ *diaspora* as a theoretical notion to read and interpret the literary works written by authors of Arab origin and to rethink the negative polarities local vs. global, national vs. migrant, native vs. foreigner that inform migrant literature. Indeed, as Paul Gilroy reminds us: “the diaspora idea invites us to move into the contested spaces between the poles that we can identify roughly as the local and the global” (“Diaspora” 297). Besides being a term of reference, *diaspora* is also meant to designate a concrete historical condition marked by relation, and capable of “galvanising a new creative energy” (Cohen, “Rethinking 'Babylon'” 252) and giving birth to original world-views, non-conventional intercultural practices, and a fruitful syncretism. This idea echoes Avtar Brah’s description of diaspora as “the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested” (208-209). The term *diaspora* functions as a red thread that enables me to make my way in the heterogeneous and multilingual writings that I address and analyse in this study; it is the lens through which I read and interpret Arab-American, Arab-Canadian, and Arab-European experience and literature. I share with James Clifford the conviction that “it is not possible to define diaspora sharply, either by recourse to essential features or to privative oppositions” (“Diasporas” 310). This belief, however, does not prevent me from considering *diaspora* as a pivotal theoretical concept for the analysis of the texts under exam and for the exploration of the historical, social, economic, and gendered dimensions of the Arab diaspora. According to Clifford (1994), experiences of diaspora are characterized by displacement, imaginary and idealized reconstructions of 'home(s)', multiple (dis)identifications, transnational coalitions, and a feeling of nostalgia for the country left behind.

Another key term I employ in this study is *transnationalism*. As Paul Kennedy and Victor Roudometof rightly point out, “affiliations and supernational organizations based on religion, ethnic diasporas and transregional trading associations (...) preceded the modern nation” (3). In recent time, however, and under the effect of global migration, there has been an intensification of the practices and strategies that diasporic subjectivities and groups carry out in their everyday life. *Transnationalism* allows me to foreground the multiple connections, affiliations, and interactions that diasporic communities and subjectivities implement and perform across national borders and carry out in their “new” (home)lands.<sup>2</sup> By using *transnationalism* instead of internationalism, I want to clarify that the focus of my study are not nations and national institutions but diasporic individuals and communities that draw their affiliations and coalitions inside and across national borders. *Transnationalism*, as I intend it here, entails various acts of crossing, surpassing, and transcending boundaries; in this sense, it represents a *Leitmotiv* that resonates throughout my work.

The third concept I use in this study is *migration*. As Adrian Favell rightly notes, standard definitions of migration focus on the emigrant leaving his/her nation-state, crossing a border, and entering a new country to start a new life. The perspective from which the phenomenon is analyzed is one based on binary oppositions that separate the country of emigration from that of immigration, moving from staying, the migrant from the native, the guest from the host. I intend to question this one-way process, by insisting on the interplay and interrelation that distinguish these dichotomies and, in last analysis, undo their static opposition. Such conceived, migration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that “cries for an interdisciplinary approach” (Brettell and Hollfield vii). This is why, I believe that a literary perspective on migration will improve our understanding of this complex phenomenon and offer us a non-conventional point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the binary construction homeland vs. country of adoption as a starting point that will lead me to redefine this opposition as a precarious and instable construction. By addressing and analysing the different writings, I intend to destabilize these definitions, open them up, and blur their rigid demarcations.

## 1. An Overview on the Arab Diaspora

### 1. *The Arab-American Community*

According to Gregory Orfalea (2006), Arab migration to America began a long time ago: indeed, some traces would attest to “an ancient North-African – and particularly Libian - presence” on the American soil long before Columbus (44); later on, in 1492, a Spanish Arab translator called Louis de Torre accompanied Columbus on his traverse to America and some Moroccan slaves were among the first explorers to set foot in the “New World.” If the history of the first migrants to the United States is uncertain and based only on traces, modern Arab migration, on the contrary, has been thoroughly studied and divided into three main phases.<sup>3</sup> The first wave of Arab migration to the US dates back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was mainly constituted by people from “Great Syria,” a province of the Ottoman Empire including today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. These first migrants were mainly Christians escaping from the Ottoman’s political and economic oppression and from the “periodic famines, insect blights, and the droughts” (Orfalea 51) affecting the area. They were a heterogeneous group divided by regional, cultural, and religious differences and united by a common language, Arabic. As Gualtieri points out: “They could be at once Ottomans, Syrians, Zahalnis (residents of Zahle), Druze, and Maronites, Damascene Sunnis, Greek Orthodox from Beirut, Jews from Aleppo, and many other combinations” (155). Among them, there were many women, following their husbands or travelling alone to seek a better life in the United States.<sup>4</sup> First-wave migrants arrived by boat on Ellis Island and then moved to the Northeast and Midwest; they usually worked as peddlers, opened family businesses or went to work in factories. Some of them never reached America, as in the case of the 1500 Arabs who died after the shipwreck of the Titanic (Gualtieri 50-51). Since the beginning,

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive analysis of the Arab migration to the US, see Gualtieri (2009); Naff (1999); Orfalea (2006); Suleiman (1999).

<sup>4</sup> According to Gualtieri, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Arab women moving to the United States reached 32% of US women. It is a pretty high number if compared to other ethnic groups: Southern Italian women, for instance, made up 21%. See Gualtieri 40-41.

Arab migrants claimed the right to be recognized as American citizens, but would also support Arabism and the nationalist movements involving different Arab countries.<sup>5</sup> Another controversial issue was their racial status: were Arabs to be considered white or black? Their racial ambiguity caused them to be alternately perceived and defined as white and non white, compromising in many cases their rights to citizenship and provoking episodes of racial discrimination and violence.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first Arabic literary societies and journals were established: in 1920, Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani, together with other Arab intellectuals, founded the *Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya (The Pen League)* and the so-called *Mahjar* School of Arab-American writing. Most of the works produced in this period were written in Arabic or English with the intention of bridging the distance that separated the Arab from the American community (Majaj, “Arab-American Literature”).

Arab migration to the US halted between the 1920s and the 1940s because of legal restrictions, a worldwide economic crisis, and World War II. The second wave took place only after World War II and was constituted mainly by Palestinians, refugees and exiles escaping from the wars in Yemen and Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> Among these new migrants, there were also Egyptians, Iraqis, and Syrians fleeing their countries for political reasons. In contrast to the first wave, these migrants were mainly Muslims, highly educated, and in good economic position. The third wave took place between 1967 and 2005 and was constituted mainly by Palestinians fleeing Israeli occupation and by other Arabs escaping from the war in Iraq, Kuwait, and Lebanon or leaving their countries under the pressure of Islamic fundamentalism. During this period, stereotypical and biased representations of Islam and the Arab world

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<sup>5</sup> On the emergence of Arabism and Arab nationalism among Arab-Americans, see Gualtieri 81-111.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the episodes of lynching that Arabs were victim to because of their racial ambiguity, see Gualtieri 114-134. Arabs shared this racially uncertain status with Italians and other immigrants from the Mediterranean region.

<sup>7</sup> The Yemeni war took place between 1962-1970 and the Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years from 1975 to 1990.

began to be increasingly diffused by the media to the point of damaging the status, reputation, and self-image of the Arab population and the Arab-American community.<sup>8</sup>

In this period, under the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, new writers belonging to ethnic and racial minorities started to gain visibility and were included in the emerging ethnic literature. Few of them, however, were of Arab origins, and Arab-American literature started to gain recognition only around the 1980s when the anthology *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988) edited by Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa was published. The first of its kind, this anthology represents a turning point in the history of Arab-American literature. As Lisa Suhair Majaj points out:

This collection asserted the existence and presence of Arab-American writers, introduced Arab-American poets to a new audience, created a sense of an Arab-American literary community, and made it possible for authors to write not as anomalies but as Arab-Americans, thereby laying down the page upon which the century-long story of Arab-American literature could begin to be told. (“Arab-American Literature”)

This anthology was followed by another collection of essays called *Food for Our Grandmothers* (1994), edited by Joanna Kadi. As the subtitle *Writings by Arab-American & Arab-Canadian Feminists* suggests, this anthology, besides embracing a feminist ideology, intended to be transcultural and transracial and wanted to offer “landmarks, signposts, names, and directions not only for Arab-American and Arab-Canadian communities but for other communities of color and our allies” (Kadi xvii).<sup>9</sup> These are also the years of the oil crisis, the Iran Revolution, the First Intifada, and the Gulf war, and Arab-American writers started to be more politically engaged, critical, and concerned with contemporary hot topics. In “Blood”

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<sup>8</sup> On the negative representations that Arabs and especially Islam have been subjected to during this period, see Said (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Kadi’s feminist and interracial approach reveals the influence of other anthologies edited by women belonging to other ethnic and racial groups and published in those years. For example, the work *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1981.

(1995), for instance, Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes: “Today the headlines clot in my blood. / A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page. / Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root / is too big for us. What flag can we wave? / I wave the flag of stone and seed, / table mat stitched in blue” (121).

According to Orfalea, the date of 9/11 represents a crucial moment in Arab-American history, as it subjected the Arab-American community to an extreme visibility and gave rise to feelings of deep vulnerability. The Patriot Act signed by President George W. Bush on October 26 2001, supporting “indefinite detention; searches, seizures and wiretapping, and guilt by association” (Orfalea 312), contributed to raise a sense of persecution among Arab-Americans who felt stigmatized and marginalized from the American nation. The feelings of fear, anger, and vulnerability, circulating in the Arab-American community in the post-9/11 period are condensed in “First Writing Since” written by Arab-American poet Suhair Hammad. This is how the speaker expresses the emotional turmoil and collective hysteria following the terrorist attack on 9/11: “fire in the city air and i feared for my sister’s life in a way never / before. and then, and now, i fear for the rest of us. / (...) one more person ask me if i knew the hijackers. / one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in. / one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed. / one more person assume they know me, or that i represent a people. / or that a people represent an evil. / or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page” (*Zaatar Diva* 98-102).

The 2003 “Report on Arab Population” shows that approximately 1.2 million people of Arab descent live in the United States (Gualtieri 187). In fact, there is no general agreement on this estimation, because immigrant authorities have used different standards to classify Arabs, and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century no distinctions were made between Arabs and migrants from Greece, Turkey and Armenia (Suleiman 2009).<sup>10</sup> The 2003 Census shows the existence

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<sup>10</sup> This idea is shared also by Naff and Gualtieri who estimate Arab-Americans to be around 3.5 millions. See Gualtieri 187; Naff 13.

of an unresolved racial identity since “80 percent of Arabs reported their race as white and no other race, while 17 percent identified as white and another race” (Gualtieri 187). If race represents a crucial and controversial issue for Arab-Americans, the term 'Arab-American' is at the centre of another debate. This disputed definition was first coined in 1944 by the Institute of Arab American Affairs (IAA), based in New York and constituted by Arab speaking Americans with the aim to discuss the potential impact of an Israeli State within the borders of Palestine (Gualtieri, 2009). The term is still in use today, even if some Arab-American communities, especially the Lebanese and the Syrian ones, tend to consider it too homogenizing and not capable of foregrounding the internal regional and religious differences that constitute the Arab diaspora. Although I am aware of the fact that this category is contested and criticized within the US, I nonetheless intend to use it, because it allows me to emphasize the two imagined communities that Arab diasporic subjectivities tend to identify with and foreground the tensions and inner conflicts engendered by their hyphenated identity. In “Claims” (1994), Majaj expresses this doubleness as follows: “I am the wheat stalk, and I am / the olive. I am plowed fields young / with the music of crickets, / I am ancient earth struggling / to bear history’s fruit. / (...) I am opposite banks of a river, / and I am the bridge” (85-6). Similar conflicting feelings and a sense of dual belonging mark also the writings of Naomi Shihab Nye and Diana Abu-Jaber, whose works I address in this study. Nye is the daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother and has spent most of her life in the United States, except for some childhood years in Palestine. In her poems, the sorrow and nostalgic feelings experienced by migrants combine with the drama of Palestinians and the puzzle of human violence in general. As Robert Bonazzi notes, her poems are “touching tender spots” (14) that illuminate the everyday and induce the readers to reflect on the vulnerability and interdependence that distinguish each human life. In “Shoulders” (2008), for instance, through the image of a man carefully crossing the street in rain while carrying his

son on his shoulder, Nye invokes mutual solidarity between human beings and proclaims: “We’re not going to be able / to live in this world / if we’re not willing to do what he’s doing / with one another. / The road will only be wide. / The rain will never stop falling” (64). Nye’s poetry is eclectic and worldly: she addresses political concerns, narrates her travels to Bahrain, Honduras, Calcutta, Colombia, and celebrates daily aspects of domestic life, as in the poems “Traveling Onion” (*Tender Spot* 131) or “Arabic Coffee” (*Tender Spot* 130).

Abu-Jaber is the daughter of an Arab father, a descendant from Christian Orthodox Palestinian refugees escaped to Jordan, and an American mother. In her works, she develops and intertwines different themes: the loss and grief experienced by diasporic and exiled subjectivities, their quest for identity and (self-)recognition, the conflicts between generations, and the importance of intercultural affiliations. As Nouri Gana notes, one of Abu-Jaber’s most impressive qualities is her capacity to delineate “a complex tableau of Arab-American subjectivities” (“In Search of Andalusia” 237) and to bring to light their intimate, personal, and human side. This is how in *Crescent* the narrative voice introduces Han, one of the protagonists of the novel: “His black hair is shot through with glints of gray and there is something pure and regal about the cast of his forehead; it seems like the distinctive, beautifully formed sort of brow that is bred within royal houses for generations” (31).

## 2. *The Arab-Canadian Community*

The history of the Arab-Canadian community is in many ways parallel to the Arab-American one:<sup>11</sup> the first migrants came to Canada from 'Great Syria' at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; they were predominantly Christians and left their homelands first and foremost for economic reasons. The so-called “new wave” took place between 1962 and 1992 and was

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview on the history of Arabs in Canada, see Abu-Laban (1980); Hayani (1999); Hagopian and Paden (1969).



mainly constituted by Muslims (Sunni and Shi'a)<sup>12</sup> coming from Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and migrating for political reasons or fleeing from war-torn countries (Dahab, *Voices of Exile*). Today, Arab-Canadians are variously distributed across Canada and the largest communities can be found in Ontario and Québec.<sup>13</sup> They belong to different religious groups (Catholic, Maronite, Coptic-Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish) and come from different countries, mainly from Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt.

Arab-Canadians were among the beneficiaries of the Canadian multicultural policy, officially introduced in Canada in 1971 and reinforced in 1988 through the Multiculturalism Act. According to Kamboureli (2000), however, the multicultural agenda followed by the Canadian government represents an astute process implemented to respond to and contain the demands of the various ethnic communities, in particular the requests of the French-Canadian minority. This interpretation is shared by Gana (2009), who argues that the multicultural agenda that Canada followed in the 1970s was engendered by the so-called Quiet Revolution (*Révolution tranquille*) started in the 1960s under the impulse of different separatist Québécois groups, infiltrated by terrorist groups such as Direct Action and FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec), and culminated in 1970 with the October Crisis and the proclamation by the Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Eliot Trudeau of a state of emergency. In any case, the multicultural agenda followed by the Canadian government in those years favored, especially in Québec, the emergence of a body of works written by authors belonging to different ethnic minorities. As Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx observe (2004), “the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the explosion of Québécois literature written in French by authors of immigrant origins” (2) and its subsequent recognition by literary critics and scholars. Following this general trend, Arab-Canadian literature started to gain visibility during the 1980s and 1990s,

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<sup>12</sup> The term shi'a designates a religious minority within Islam (11%) that represents a majority in countries such as Iran (92%) and Bahrein. Religious but also theological-legal and political differences separate the sunni from the shi'a. For a deeper analysis on shi'ism, see Salati and Capezzone (2006); Momen (1985).

<sup>13</sup> For the precise percentages that refer to the situation in 2001, see Dahab (2009).

although Elizabeth Dahab considers Naïm Kattan's essay *Le Réel et le Théâtral*, published in 1970 to mark the origin of Arab-Canadian literature. Arab-Canadian writers are active in different sectors of the society: they are poets, novelists, playwrights and work in the press, the editing and publishing market, and the theater. Their literary production spans different genres (drama, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, essay writing): only few of them write in Arabic; the majority, nearly 65%, writes in French (Dahab, *Voices of Exile*). Some of them, as in the case of the novelist Rawi Hage and playwrights Wajdi Mouawad and Abla Farhoud have gained visibility also outside Québec.<sup>14</sup>

As their Arab-American counterparts, Arab-Canadians have been confronted with the harmful consequences of 9/11 in terms of social exposure and vulnerability, and use literature as a medium to openly contest the denigrating propaganda against Arabs and Arabness that started to circulate in Canada after the terrorist attack of the Twin Towers.<sup>15</sup> Drawing their literary material from the everyday life, these writers succeed in giving birth to a literature that does not renounce to or disown its cultural specificity, but is also capable of transcending it and resonating with universal meanings. This is particularly true in the case of Abla Farhoud, the Arab-Canadian writer who is at the centre of this study. Farhoud was born in Lebanon and in the 1950s moved with her family to Québec. She is a well-known playwright but has also written three novels called *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante* [*Happiness has a Slippery Tail*] (1998), *Splendide Solitude* [*Splendid Solitude*] (2001), and *Le Fou d'Omar* [*Omar's Madman*] (2005). Through her writing, Farhoud explores issues related to the meaning of life and the role of art, the impact of diaspora on the self, and the power exerted by patriarchy on the life of women. In *Le Bonheur a La Queue Glissante*, for instance, the

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<sup>14</sup> In 2008, Rawi Hage won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award; in 1993, Abla Farhoud received the French Prix de Théâtre de Liberté de la Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques; in 2002, Wajdi Mouawad was given the French title of Chevalier de l'Ordre National des Arts et des Lettres, while in 2004, he was awarded the Grand Prix de la Francophonie.

<sup>15</sup> For a compelling analysis on the reactions of Arab-Canadian writers and filmmakers to the politics of fear diffused in Canada after 9/11, see Gana (2009).

protagonist is Dounia, a 75-years-old Canadian woman of Lebanese origin who laments the oppression that she has been victim to and regrets having been silent and docile throughout her life thus allowing her father and her husband to have the upper hand on her.

### 3. *The Arab-European Community*

Europe and especially the countries on the Mediterranean sea have a long history of commercial, political, and cultural exchanges and relations with the Arab world. The presence of Arabs in Sicily, for instance, dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century: in 827, the Aghlabid emir Ziyâdat Allah started an expedition led by Asad ibn al-Furât to conquer the island. Palermo was conquered in 831, Messina in 842, and Taormina in 902. The island was subsequently governed by the Kalbid (947) who ruled it for about two hundred years, when the Normans in 1060 took control of the entire island and annexed Noto, the last Muslim citadel, in 1091 (Bresc, 2009).<sup>16</sup> Like their Muslim predecessors, the Norman princes attracted to their courts Arab intellectuals and scholars such as the geographer al-Idrisi, the dialectician Fakhr al-Din, poets and linguists such as ‘Abd ar-Rahmân of Trapani, Ibn al-Birr, and el-Makkî.<sup>17</sup> Very few buildings but numerous objects, textual products, and name of places attest to the rich and valuable historical, linguistic, and cultural presence of the Arabs in Sicily (Mazot, 2004).

In more recent times, colonialism represents another crucial historical moment during which France, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain<sup>18</sup> struggled to establish and maintain a political, economic, and cultural control over the Arab world not only materially but also ideologically through the construction of Orientalism. In this regard, Edward Said rightly notes:

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<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed description of the historical presence of Arabs in Sicily and Southern Italy, see Sybille Mazot (2004); Gabrieli and Scerrato (1979). The magazine of Arab and Mediterranean cultures *Qantara* dedicates a very interesting dossier on Islamic and Norman Sicily. See Bresc et al. 23-56.

<sup>17</sup> For a poetry collection by Arab poets in Sicily, see Corrao (1987).

<sup>18</sup> Morocco was a protectorate of France from 1912 to 1956; France extended its political and cultural power over Tunisia (1881-1956) and Algeria (1830-1962). After World War I, France obtained a mandate for Lebanon and Syria, while Great Britain gained control over the territory that was to be Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan. From 1914 to 1922, Egypt was a protectorate of Britain. Between 1911-12, Italy conquered a part of Libia; this possession was consolidated during the 1920s and 1930s. Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish enclaves on the north coast of Morocco and are the last traces of Spain’s expansion in North-Africa.

“Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (“From *Orientalism*” 1991).

During the two World Wars, North Africans were recruited by the French state to be employed in factories and in the army. Later on, during the post-war years, numerous bilateral agreements were signed between North-African and European countries and gave new impulse to the migratory flows from North-Africa to Europe. In particular, Germany drew up a series of agreements for the recruitment of the so-called *Gastarbeiter* [guestworkers] with Morocco in 1963 and Tunisia in 1965.<sup>19</sup>

Since the 1970s, various limitations and regulations have been implemented by the European states to stop the migration flows directed to Europe. This legal decisions have forced North-African migrants to find new ways to reach Europe such as family reunions, seasonal work, and illegal migration. As Philippe Fargues (2004) rightly notes, contemporary Arab migration to Europe is characterized by a “discrepancy between facts and policies” (1348) as migration is likely to grow, despite the limitations implemented by European and North-African countries. Moreover, rather than stopping the migratory flows directed to Europe, the existing legislation has only contributed to change the character of today’s migration and to increase the number of the so-called “illegal” migrants. As Fargues puts it:

Today’s estimates put the number of new irregular migrants (...) at a half a million per year, and an equivalent number of asylum seekers. It is probable that restrictions placed on the movement of aliens have done less to curb entries than to hamper two-way travel. They have encouraged the emergence of irregular stays. (1357)

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<sup>19</sup> These agreements were also drawn up with Italy in 1955, with Greece and Spain in 1960, with Turkey in 1961 and 1964, with Portugal in 1964 and with Yugoslavia in 1968. See Amodeo 395.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, European countries issued the first legislation to regulate migration. These are also the years when Arab-German writers started to gain visibility within Germany. In 1980, Rafik Shami and Suleman Taufiq together with Italo-German authors Franco Biondi, Vito d'Adamo and other writers and artists found the polynational association called PoLiKunst (Polynationaler Literatur- und Kunstverein) reuniting writers and artists belonging to seventeen different cultural communities (Amodeo, 2006). Writers such as Rafik Schami and Jusuf Naoum started to write in the 1980s but are still active today and have gained recognition inside and outside Germany. In more recent years, a younger generation of Arab-German writers has gained visibility: among them, there are Sherko Fatah and Kaouther Tabai. Tabai was born in Tunisia of Tunisian parents and has been living in Munich since 1984. My study focuses on her collection of short stories *Das kleine Dienstmädchen. Aus dem Leben tunisischer Frauen* [*The Little Maid. From the Everyday Life of Tunisian Women*] (2006).

In France, the period between the 1980s and the 1990s saw the flourishing of a body of works written by authors of Arab origin, with Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy* (1983) and Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) representing the turning point for the emergence of the so-called Beur literature (Hargreaves, 2005). These writers who belong to the second generation can be seen as, quoting Arab-French novelist Amin Maalouf, "êtres frontaliers" (11) [borderland beings] traversed by cultural, religious, and social differences and acting as "traits d'union" (11) [hyphens] between their ethnic community and France. Other Arab-French writers who have gained visibility inside and outside France are, among others, Assia Djebar, Leïla Sebbar, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Yasmina Khadra. This study addresses and analyzes the novel *Garçon Manqué* (2000) by Nina Bouraoui. Bouraoui is a lesbian writer, daughter of a French mother and an Algerian father; she was born in Rennes but lived in Algeria until the age of 13. *Garçon Manqué* belongs to the genre of auto-fiction:

it is a novel in which the author cunningly mixes autobiography and fiction, life and fantasy, truth and lies.<sup>20</sup> In her novel, Bouraoui addresses issues related to identity, sexuality, and belonging, and privileges an introspective prose and fast rhythm. Her style is impressionistic and constituted of rapid and vivid memories, feelings, and moods that follow one another on the page. Through the technique of the interior monologue, the writer moves across temporal borders, traverses geographical places, and dives in the consciousness of her characters.

Works by Arab-Italians begin to emerge in the 1990s: the autobiographical accounts *Immigrato* (1990), written by Salah Methnani with the collaboration of the Italian journalist Mario Fortunato, *Chiamatemi Alì* (1991) written by Mohamed Bouchane and edited by Carla De Giordano and Daniele Miccione, and *Volevo essere bianca* (1993) by Nassera Chora and Alessandra Atti di Sarro represent the landmarks of this new literature (Lakhous, “Maghreb”). In more recent years, Tahar Lamri *I Sessanta nomi dell’amore* (2006) and especially Amara Lakhous, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore in piazza Vittorio* (2006) and *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi* (2010) have distinguished themselves for the aesthetic and cultural value of their works, characterized by linguistic experimentations, original and intricate plots, and a mixture of imaginative and realistic prose. Among the women, Sumaya Abdel Qader and Randa Ghazy have taken up the challenge to use the genre of chick literature to narrate the ups and downs of their Arab-Italian female protagonists. These books attest to the growing interest of the Italian public for the writings of members belonging to the second generation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the protagonists of Abdel Qader and Ghazy’s novels are young women in their twenties or thirties who struggle to mediate between the demands of their Arab families and the expectations of the Italian society, and boldly fight social constraints and circulating preconceptions about Arab women as the title of Abdel Qader’s novel *Porto il*

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<sup>20</sup> Viart and Vercier use the term auto-fiction to indicate a specific genre based on the combination of autobiography and fiction. For a deeper analysis of this genre, see Viart and Vercier 29-31.

<sup>21</sup> The writings of members belonging to the second generation have been collected in two anthologies with evocative titles *Pecore Nere [Black Sheeps]* (2005) and *Quando nasci è una roulette [When you are born it’s like a gamble]* (2005).

*velo, adoro i Queen [I wear the hijab, I adore the Queen]* (2008) clearly suggests. Their style is chatty and informal, sometimes impulsive and irreverent; their tone is ironic, at times highly polemical, and in general light-hearted, as the following passage demonstrates: “La faccenda del velo è molto complicata. Io credo molte cose, ma la prima in assoluto è che gli uomini non ci devono mettere il naso (15) [The veil is a complicated matter. I have more than one opinion on it, but first of all, I believe that men must not poke their nose into it].

## 2. Materials and Methodology

Drawing from Said’s lesson that, “the idea of beginning, indeed the act of beginning, necessarily involves an act of delimitation by which something is cut out of a great mass of materials” (“From *Orientalism*” 2002), I have decided to focus my attention on works written by women and to consider this a provisional point of departure. This choice can be explained as follows: first, I share with Hélène Cixous the conviction that women writers should get recognition by other women, who should always seize upon the opportunity to speak and produce their own narrative by taking the writings of other women as a starting point (Cixous 2039); second, gender is an important axis of analysis around which this study is shaped and women writers foreground gender issues; gender allows me to highlight other socially constructed differences, such as ethnic and racial differences, and to analyze them intersectionally;<sup>22</sup> third, these writers concentrate on relational selves rather than on individual identities, and relationality plays a crucial role in this work, where diaspora is praised as a fertile terrain for the negotiation of intercultural affiliations and transnational coalitions.

Relationality but also contradictions, conflicting feelings, and a sense of dual belonging mark the writings of Arab diasporic women writers and shape the ambivalent

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<sup>22</sup> The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw at the end of the 1980s and has been used by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in the 1990s. Intersectionality indicates that constructed social and cultural categories such as race, culture, gender, class, nationality, and religion are not independent one from the other, but overlap and intersect on multiple levels. See Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995); Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and (2006).

relationship that they entertain with their ethnic group as well as with their country of residence. Such contrasting identities have been historically explored within the African-American community since W. E. B. DuBois' reference to the African-American identity as a *double consciousness*, fractured in two, both American and Negro (DuBois, 1903). In more recent times, Chicano writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes *mestiza consciousness*, as a mixed and 'impure' identity that emerges from and accounts for the intercultural and heterogeneous context of the American nation (Anzaldúa, 1987). Arab diasporic women writers inquire into the transformative and diverse character of identities and raise questions regarding the impact of circulating (mis)representations on processes of identity construction. Language is another constant dilemma for these authors: their writings often entail the ability of translation and the capacity of mediating among different and sometimes opposing instances, as the poem "Vocabulary of Dearness" (*Tender Spot* 95) by Nye suggests. This is how the speaker explains the fascination that words awaken in her: "How a single word / may shimmer and rise / off the page, a wafer of / syllabic light, a bulb / of glowing meaning, / whatever the word, / try 'tempestuous' or 'suffer', / any word you have held, / or traded so it lives a new life / the size of two worlds" (95). Arab diasporic women writers make tireless efforts to look for the right word, as the language in which they write shows its own limits and prevents them from finding suitable expressions to communicate Arab customs, stories, and experiences. They also aim to redress the unbalanced representations of Arabs and Arabness diffused by Orientalism and reinforced by the media and the Hollywood film industry. Instead, they promote new versions that privilege "a libertarian, or a non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective" (Said, "From *Orientalism*" 2009) through works in which fixed and biased images of Arab subjectivities and culture are questioned, altered, and substituted with fluid and complex ones that are drawn from the contemporary "creolized" and intercultural socio-political context that both the reader and the writer share, as for



example in *Crescent* by Abu-Jaber. Ghazy and Bouraoui voluntarily blur, alter, and complicate stereotyped images and biases affecting Arabs. This is how the protagonist of Ghazy's novel flings herself passionately into a virulent critique against a certain type of journalism that fuels divisions and racist views against Arabs: "Desidero (...) che le giornaliste furiose non sputino veleno su di noi, e che i razzisti, gli intolleranti e i timorosi non diano retta alle giornaliste furiose" (198) [I wish (...) that the furious journalists stop speaking spitefully about us, and that the racists, intolerants, and frightened stop paying attention to the furious journalists]. By making emotions circulate freely between the world within the book and the one outside, these authors struggle to connect the audience with the members of the community they represent. One of the goals that Arab diasporic women writers intend to achieve is to diffuse intercultural understanding and solidarity and to promote a more hospitable human community where differences are not assimilated or incorporated by the hegemonic group but acknowledged and recognized as vital aspects of the contemporary interconnected world. In this sense, what these writers envision in their works is "another possible community" (Deleuze and Guattari 1599) that is intercultural, peaceful, and hospitable.

In examining Arab diasporic literature, I employ an integrated approach since I believe that no single theory can be a valid instrument to interrogate and shed light on such a heterogeneous and complex field of study. In particular, my research includes theoretical means drawn from deconstruction, feminist and post-colonial theory, and creolization poetics with the aim to account for and highlight both the social as well as aesthetic value of the works under exam. Deconstruction is a method of analysis that allows me to produce a critical reading that is focused on the text and helps me reveal its double binds, contradictions, and complexities, while maintaining, at the same time, an awareness of the historic, cultural, and socio-political world that represents the background of the text. In particular, I read and

examine the literary works of Arab diasporic writers by employing two different deconstructionist approaches, as defined by Jacques Derrida: an *intrinsic* critique, that is a close reading and a critical examination of the texts, that considers the text from within, and an *exorbitant* investigation that acknowledges and gives relevance to the historical, social, and cultural context that constitutes its corollary. Deconstruction is fundamental in my writing as it represents a means that enables me to subvert and re-inscribe hierarchical and traditional oppositions that are crucial to the Arab experience, like the binarism Orient/Occident, Arab/Western, Self/Other. In addition, I use deconstruction to reflect on the complexity, double-bind, and openness that characterize textuality and its interpretation. Derrida's understanding of criticism as an unending surprise and an unpredictable and risky game (*Dissemination* 63) helps me keep in mind the fallability and precariousness of my own discourse and the necessity to penetrate the text with the same enthusiasm and concentration that characterize one's entry into a game. Finally, the understanding of deconstruction as "a corrective and critical movement" (Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic* 104) also helps me redefine those same literary works and question the limits of my own research and the implications of my position.

Post-colonial theory is an important part of this study, as I am interested in examining the legacy of European colonialism and to detect the traces of Orientalism in contemporary narratives. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said questions the predominant and oppressive role played by European knowledge in representing non-Western people and in establishing their histories. He further argues that the West has constructed 'the Orient' and 'the Orientals' in order to comprehend, assume power on, and exploit them for its own purpose. Said's analysis of the origin and nature of human and cultural representations and of the fatal relationships between power and knowledge is crucial to my work (1978; 1994; 1997). Another central aspect that I want to investigate in this research is the *worldliness* of literature. For Said

“society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together” (“From *Orientalism*” 2012) and the study of literature should move “from the formal and technical toward the lived, the contested, and the immediate” (2001, xxxi). This Saidean perspective deeply informs my own research.

Feminist theory plays an important role in this study as it allows me to analyze issues related to gender and sexuality and offers me the opportunity to examine gender at the intersection with other ethnic, racial, and social differences. In *Woman Native Other* (1989), Trinh T. Minh-Ha examines “the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender” (6) and manifests the difficulties experienced by a woman writer who has to deal with, integrate, and accord the same relevance to ethnic, gender, and racial claims. Feminism is a useful tool that I use to detect and examine the pervasiveness and heterogeneity of power and to reconfirm the centrality of the personal and the subjective in intellectual work. I share with feminism the will of challenging traditional forms of domination and the belief that it is possible to change the society we live in. In particular, I include in my work the critical voices of Ruba Salih and Sara Ahmed, Gayatri Spivak and Trinh Minh-Ha. Third World Feminism enters my discourse and gives me the opportunity to “inscribe difference” (Trinh Minh-Ha 35) within mainstream feminism and to resist its tendency to homogenize different instances and heterogeneous constituencies under one label.

Edouard Glissant’s poetics is privileged for its focus on relation and transformation. Glissant theorizes a poetics of relation that is “latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible” (*Poetics of Relation* 32). The term *creolization*, coined by Glissant, is employed in this study as a theoretical tool to read and illuminate the multiple and complex interrelations and “contaminations” that take place in the Arab diaspora and literature. By embracing creolization and by applying it to Arab literature of the diaspora, I intend to open up the local to the global and to dislocate creolization from its originary

context with the intention of demonstrating its efficacy in foretelling certain crucial features of the contemporary world. Nevertheless, aware of the danger of “appropriating [creolization] without recognizing or crediting it” (Arion 116), I want to underline once more the specificity of the historical, linguistic, cultural, and social context of the Caribbean, marked by “transatlantic slavery and colonialism” (Sheller 273), in order not to forget and to preserve its peculiarity and uniqueness. I intend creolization as a travelling concept,<sup>23</sup> a metaphor in motion that manifests and gives visibility to the constant relations and endless mutations that take place in the Arab diaspora. I share with Glissant the conviction that creolization can act as “a polyvalent idea that is capable of explaining and understanding the contradictory, ambiguous, or unseen features that have appeared in this (Martinican) experience of the global relationship between cultures” (*Poetics of Relation* 254).<sup>24</sup>

My research embraces an interdisciplinary approach and puts in dialogue literature with sociology and philosophy; this, not because I want to simply conform to a general trend that seems to gain ground especially in the US context, but rather because I strongly believe that we need to move beyond rigid disciplinary boundaries and that this crossing could only improve our understanding, open new ways of inquiry, and, in the last analysis, help us gain a deeper insight into our own specific discipline. Multilingualism is another crucial aspect of this work that takes into exam texts written in English, Italian, French, and German. I have personally translated the works that can only be found in their original language; as for the works *Garçon Manqué* by Nina Bouraoui and *Partir* by Tahar Ben Jelloun, I have preferred to use the existing English versions translated respectively by Marjorie Attignol Salvodon and Jehanne-Marie Gavarini, and by Linda Caverdale. These works will be mentioned by

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<sup>23</sup> The term “travelling concept” has been developed by the research group “Travelling Concepts” of the European thematic network in women’s studies Athena2 & 3. According to their reformulation, concepts are situated but can not be defined once for all because they are subjected to a constant redefinition, as they travel and cross temporal, cultural, and national borders. See [www.travellingconcepts.net](http://www.travellingconcepts.net).

<sup>24</sup> In *The Repeating Island* (1992), Antonio Benitez-Rojo describes the Caribbean as a mixed and chaotic archipelago that metaphorically replicates itself and affects other areas of the world until it reaches a continental and global dimension. See Benitez-Rojo 3.

using the English title, while the ones I personally translated will maintain their original titles throughout this work.

The chapters in this study discuss Arab diasporic literature by following a thematic pattern. The first chapter addresses issues related to home and belonging, with a particular focus on the lived experience of diasporic subjectivities and a special concern for the original modalities of regrounding that are promoted by Arab diasporic women writers. Far from embracing a-critical and a-historical celebrations of rootlessness, this study takes into consideration works that address and deal with the trauma of uprooting but privilege modalities of belonging that are inclusive and intercultural. In accordance with Brah, who views home as “the lived experience of locality” (192), this research focuses on the performance of socio-cultural practices through which diasporic subjectivities negotiate an imagined and temporary community and move beyond a univocal attachment to a particular nation-state or cultural group. Chapter two deals with the construction of identity and the representation of Arabness; in particular, it provides a critique of identity politics as a problematic strategy of identification menaced by essentialist claims and influenced by different power systems such as racism and patriarchy. This study proposes identity construction as a liberating and simultaneously destabilizing process that entails both loss and emancipation, vulnerability and empowerment. Starting from Stuart Hall’s idea that “identities are (...) constituted within, not outside representation” (“Introduction” 4), this research illustrates how Arab-American authors succeed in rehabilitating Arabness and in subverting current misrepresentations of Arabs inherited by Orientalism and diffused by the media and the film industry. It also raises questions regarding the production of othering in contemporary societies and sheds light on the transgression of racial and cultural boundaries that Arab diasporic women writers perform in their texts. Chapter three draws on multilingualism, vocality, and story-telling and raises questions regarding the impact of

diaspora on the self. In particular, it takes into consideration and critically interrogates the relation that the first and the second generation entertain with their respective language(s); it also interprets multilingualism as a symptom of the displacement suffered by diasporic subjectivities and as a political act. This study provides an investigation of the intricate and complex relation between power and speech, and explores the potential and limits of vocality, self-narration, and writing. Story-telling is interpreted as a fruitful means to reconstruct a collective memory, supplement History, and oppose power. It is a traditional practice that Arab diasporic women re-invent and that exemplifies the paradoxical and impenetrable character of both orality and writing. Chapter four explores the complex issues of the so-called illegal migration and hospitality from a literary perspective and raises questions regarding the metamorphosis of the Mediterranean sea from a crossroad of civilizations to an impenetrable frontier and the construction of Europe as a free market for goods and a fortress for human beings. By and large, this last chapter attempts to disrupt static narratives on (illegal) migration grounded on the dichotomies home vs. abroad, country of emigration vs. country of immigration, native vs. migrant, guest vs. host and to undo these dualities in the name of a hospitality to come.

## I. HOME AND BELONGING

Do transplants ever find home? Are we weakened by the ever-present feeling of not belonging in the west or the east, of having a foot in both worlds but no solid roots in either? Or are we stronger, more innovative and creative, able to make home in odd sites, able to survive in small, hard places, plants growing out of rock?

Joanna Kadi, 1994

This chapter focuses on questions of home and belonging and interrogates the ways through which Arab diasporic writers elaborate and promote non-exclusivist modalities of belonging grounded in the everyday life and renewed day-by-day. It also provides a critique of home as a fixed and unchanging site of inhabitation and offers a supplementary narrative that reconfigures home as a concrete and temporary locality where one invests time and energy and engages in the construction of a network of relations that give sense to one's existence. Rather than celebrating rootlessness as a crucial feature of the Arab diaspora, this study raises questions regarding the asymmetries of power that coerce movement and reconsiders staying as a form of resistance. It also provides a critique of exoticism as a sterile narrative that fails to acknowledge and account for the complexity and hybridity that characterize the contemporary world. As this chapter hopes to demonstrate, Arab diasporic authors elaborate non-violent and non-dominant tactics of re-grounding and privilege a sense of belonging based on the performance of socio-cultural practices and traditional rituals such as preparing and consuming food, brewing and drinking Arabic coffee. Belonging is therefore reframed as a fluid and inclusive affiliation to an imagined and temporary community, a gradual process that entails both inclusion and estrangement, affiliation and alienation. By and large, diaspora emerges as a fertile ground for the negotiation of inclusive and intercultural affiliations, but also as a dimension where social conflicts and cultural tensions of different kinds are particularly evident.

## 1. Home as an Unstable Site of Inhabitation

In *Arabian Jazz* (2003), Diana Abu-Jaber focuses on the everyday life of an Arab-American family living in upstate New York whose members struggle to come to terms with their in-betweenness. The novel develops around the figures of Matussem, a Jordanian widow who has married an American woman, and of his two Arab-American daughters Jemorah and Melvina. Jemorah is nearly thirty and uncertain about her future and her identity: she constantly questions her cultural background and is unsatisfied with her job; her sister Melvina, on the contrary, is self-centered and self-reliant: she is pleased with her work, completely absorbed by it, and happy to be all but a nurse. Matussem, in particular, is haunted by his past and country of origin. Although he has been living in Euclid for many years, he has never had the impression of “truly” belonging to that place and is tormented by visions of his homeland and ghostly Arab relatives who blame him for having married an American woman and having moved to the US:

Matussem was wondering if Fouad was right, if it really was just stubbornness, remaining in Euclid. Was he turning away from his origins, away from knowing? (...)

When both his parents and in-laws had died over a decade ago, it had been a release, he thought. But their ghosts returned to accuse him, bedevilling him with fears for the girls and their happiness. He would never throw them away into an unwanted marriage. But what was right for them? How could he ever know? (186-187)

Here, Matussem is assailed by doubts and second-thoughts regarding his decision to remain in the US. The narrator emphasizes the fact that Matussem has internalized the negative judgements expressed by his Jordanian relatives: verbs such as “accuse” and “bedevil” convey his sense of guilt, his confusion, and frustration. In particular, the term “stubbornness”



has a negative connotation and filters through the point of view of Matussem's Jordanian relatives who accuse him of acting unreasonably and blame him for his obstinacy. His decision to remain in Euclid is interpreted as a deviation from his origins, a voluntary separation and self-imposed estrangement from the country of his ancestors. The verb "tiring away" and the repetition "away" underline the geographical and emotional distance that has grown between Matussem and his Jordanian family. The tone of the narration is serious and melancholic, although the image of the dead relatives accusing Matussem with no mercy adds a slightly ironic vein to the story. Matussem appears confused and unsure about his home; his condition of in-betweenness makes him feel unsatisfied and torn. The term *double consciousness*, coined by DuBois to express the condition of fragmentation and inner conflict experienced by African-American subjectivities, can be transferred from the African-American context to the Arab-American one and is extremely useful to foreground Matussem's dual belonging. On the one hand, Matussem recognizes Euclid as his "new" home and deeply values his life there; on the other, he keeps questioning his attachment to Jordan and seems afraid of losing his origins. The dissonance that torments Matussem is highlighted by the contradictory feelings that he expresses towards the US, that are first defined as a "country of surprise and transformation" (263) and later reconsidered as a place of palpable loss and vulnerability. The following passage exemplifies my statement:

AMERICA WAS THE place where his world began, away from the webs of family. In this new, wild western country, family flew into particles, relatives moved, changed courses, sifted around each other like snow, the amazing interwoven flakes sweeping off the belly of Ontario that meteorologists called "lake-effect". (...) It shocked him awake; it was so dangerous to create a new kind of family, to be so vulnerable to the elements. This was the kind of living he had come to want for himself, the choice to live together, to love. (264)

Here, migration is outlined both as an opportunity of improvement and emancipation but also as a destabilizing and unsettling experience. Matussem considers his migration to the US as a kind of rebirth and a liberation from the claustrophobic familial net, but also as a shock and a sudden change that made him realize his vulnerability. The expression “it shocked him awake” refers to the upsetting feelings provoked by displacement and by the necessity of beginning a new life in a new environment. To understand Matussem’s discrepant feelings towards the US, it can be useful to refer to Ruba Salih’s analysis of the “sense of rupture and discontinuity” (78-79) that diasporic subjectivities endure. As she poignantly asserts: “Decision on where to invest might constitute a field of negotiation or contestation since transnational practices eventually lead to deeper anxiety on where home is and where one is supposed to build a future for children and their education, to acquire something more than material objects, i.e. long-term symbolic capital” (79). The theme of the anxiety provoked by a life conducted in between cultures and nations is further developed by Abu-Jaber in the episode of the airport. Matussem is initially happy to set off for Jordan, but all of a sudden, he falls prey to his contradictory feelings and refuses to leave. This is how the narrator outlines this dramatic and simultaneously comic scene: “‘Par-za-lyzed,’ he whispered. ‘Can’t hardly move my lips. Can’t go to Jordan, neither.’ Both his feet were planted on the floor, hands locked to the armrests” (267). In this scene, Abu-Jaber dramatizes Matussem’s contradictory feelings: verbs such as “paralyze,” “plant,” and “lock” stress his immobility and inertia and contribute to create a highly emotional and comic atmosphere. Matussem recalls an actor on stage who is immobilized by his stage-fright and speaks secretly with a soft and hushed voice. Through humour, Abu-Jaber raises serious questions regarding the dual belonging and dissonance experienced by diasporic subjects. This crucial theme is addressed both thematically and linguistically; in the following passage, for instance, Matussem’s divergent feelings are matched by a language that unevenly oscillates between two opposite registers,

formal and informal: “Return? What return? I maybe stay extra longer. Why come back? This place is A-okay great, not like olden days. They got VCR, every night big parties, food, dance. Heck with it all, Euclid is great place to leave, let’s face these” (305). The use of common exclamations such as “A-okay great,” “heck with it all,” “let’s face these,” typical of the spoken language, contrasts with the archaic and more literary word “olden” and the abbreviation “VCR” now fallen in disuse. By adapting her language to the theme of Matussem’s dissonance, Abu-Jaber reinforces and effectively communicates the idea that diasporic subjects are actually caught between two opposite homes and struggle to mediate them.<sup>25</sup>

Rather than representing home as “a mythic place of desire” (Brah 192), a legendary and idealized place of origin, Abu-Jaber reframes it as a site subjected to constant transformation and rethinking. It follows that Matussem must constantly negotiate between here and there, Euclid and Jordan, his new homeland and the country of his ancestors. Far from identifying home with a permanent location, Abu-Jaber refashions it as a site made by linking “threads” (265), a shifting place that changes according to one’s personal (e)motion and is the result of an emotional attachment rather than of a kinship to a nation-state. This idea also resonates in Farhoud’s novel *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante* (2004), where the protagonist explains that her home coincides with the place where her children and grandchildren live and feel happy. This is how the first person narrator expresses her original point of view: “Certains immigrants disent: 'Je voudrais mourir là où je suis né.' Moi, non. Mon pays, ce n’est pas le pays de mes ancêtres ni même pas le village de mon enfance, mon pays, c’est la où mes enfants sont heureux” (22) [Some migrants say: 'I’d like to die where I was born.' For me, it’s not like that. My country is not the country of my ancestors not even the village of my childhood, my country is there where my children are happy.] Both Abu-Jaber

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<sup>25</sup> On the relation between home and language, Sneja Gunew rightly notes: “languages with their inflections and rhythms, as much as their over signification, invariably function to remind one of home in palpable ways” (42).

and Farhoud do no longer consider home as a mythical, stable, and univocal place but rather liberally reinvent it as a plural and evolving site that is negotiated in a freeing though never final articulation.<sup>26</sup> The following passage, in which Matussem eventually abandons his quest for a univocal sense of belonging and learns to mediate between opposing instances, is particularly enlightening:

Matussem held sway over it all like a shaman transforming, wings unfolding from his back, lifting straight into the sky overlooking towns and countries, neighbourhoods, and private lives through the roofs. He could see it all when he was playing. He was home, at last truly home. (352)

Matussem is represented here like a shaman, a person with special powers considered capable of connecting the world of the humans with that of the spirits and of bridging the gap between these two apparently incompatible worlds. By comparing Matussem to a shaman, Abu-Jaber celebrates his capacity to traverse and relate the two imagined worlds that compose his identity and praises his ability to reconcile himself with the new (home)land in which he has chosen to live. This idea of mediation between two divergent and conflicting ideas of home is further developed at the end of the novel, when Abu-Jaber represents Matussem's restless daughter Jemorah, swayed back and forth by the beats of jazz and the pleasant sounds of Arabic music:

Jem moved closer, placing her head against his chest. They moved, ever so slightly, together, and it felt to Jem like they had begun wending their way along a path of music, finding their way. She could hear the sound of the drums through the movement of Ricky's chest, jazz and thrills of Arabic music, bright

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<sup>26</sup> The privileged position from which I speak induces me to reconsider home as an open and fluid space; I am aware that this theoretical elaboration overshadows and clashes with the experience of homeless, refugees, illegal migrants who are forced to abandon a secure and stable home. By emphasizing the fluidity and porosity of home, I intend to contest contemporary revivals of the nation and of home as fixed, homogeneous, and impermeable sites of dwelling.

as comet tails, and through this, the pulse of the world. All around her, through the thin, high basement windows, the maple trees shook; she watched them, their leaves turning desert red and gold. (374)

Through the representation of Jem approaching Ricky disarmingly and dancing with him in unison, Abu-Jaber constructs a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere and suggests feelings of serenity and comfort. The idea of a restored harmony is also conveyed by the expression “together” and by the image of the bright comet tails signalling that the moment is promising and favourable. Jem is not only in symbiotic relation with Ricky but also with the environment that surrounds her: she dances following the sounds of jazz, the “thrills of Arab music,” and “the pulse of the world.” This description imparts a sense of continuity and reconciliation that is reinforced by the image of the shaking maple trees that overlaps with that of the desert evoked by the leaves. In *Arabian Jazz*, home is reframed as a composite site and an imaginative dimension, a place of encounter and mediation that is open and avoids any synthesis, as the image of Jem and Ricky making their way across the music implies. The term *creolization*, coined by Glissant to illustrate “a limitless *métissage*” that gives birth to “a new and original dimension” (*Poetics of Relation* 34), is extremely useful to read and understand the encounters, interrelations, and exchanges that take place in the Arab diaspora where home is a matter of turbulent confrontation but also the result of a precarious mediation and never final articulation.

## **2. The Heritage of Orientalism : Home as a Distant and Exotic Place**

If Farhoud and Abu-Jaber represent home as a fluid and porous site of inhabitation subjected to a constant transformation and mediation, Tabai represents Tunisia, the country of her childhood and adolescence, as totally different and foreign with respect to Germany, her new homeland. In her collection of short stories, *Das kleine Dienstmädchen. Aus dem Leben*

*tunisischer Frauen* [*The Little Maid. From the Life of Tunisian Women*] (2006), Tabai illustrates episodes drawn from her childhood in Tunisia and focuses on the ups and downs of the everyday life of Tunisian women and men. In “Bauchtänzerin” [Bellydancer], for instance, Ariana, a little town near Tunis, is represented as a distant and backward place where time has come to a standstill and whose inhabitants are exhausted by the hot summer afternoons. This emerges clearly from the following passage, where the female protagonist and first-person narrator observes the empty and silent streets of Ariana from her window:

Man konnte durch den Spalt der Jalousie sehen, dass sich um diese Tageszeit keine Menschenseele auf die Straße traute, höchstens der Wasserträger hinter seinem trottenden Maultier mit dem türkisfarbenen Wassertank oder der alte, müde Straßenfeger, der den Müll an der Straßenecken zu Häufchen zusammenfegte. (8)

[One could see through the opening of the blinds, that no living soul would ever venture forth on the street on that moment of the day, except for the water-carrier, who walked with his turquoise blue watertank behind his trotting mule, or the old, tired road-sweeper who was sweeping the garbage in small heaps on the corners of the street.]

The impersonal construction and restricted perspective from which the female narrator observes the scene hint at her relegation and contribute to increase the atmosphere of segregation and stagnation that already pervades the scene. Words such as “old” and “tired” convey feelings of decadence and weariness, while the image of the water-carrier with his mule, of the road-sweeper, and the garbage on the streets contribute to reinforce an idea of backwardness and undevelopment. Ariana is represented here as a distant and exotic place, paradigmatic of that Orient that Tabai outlines in “Tanger” [Tangier]. The story draws on the holiday that the female protagonist and narrator spends with her German partner and other

tourists in Morocco. Throughout the story, Morocco is outlined as an *uncanny* place that raises in the protagonist contradictory feelings of familiarity and estrangement. As the following passage suggests, Morocco is first regarded as a piece of homeland, but also reduced to a delicious dish ready to be consumed by the tourists: “Ein Stück Heimat, eine Nacht im Orient, für meine durstige Seele wie eine andalusische Orange, in hauchdünne Scheiben tranchiert und mit Vanillezucker bestreut, von dem unvergesslichen Kellner Jose-Luis in seiner erhabenen und dezenten Art als Postre serviert” (93) [A piece of homeland, a night in the Orient for my thirsty soul similar to an Andalusian orange, cut up in extremely thin slices, powdered with vanilla sugar and served as a postre by the unforgettable waiter Jose-Luis in his noble and sublime manner]. Here, the narrator first identifies Morocco as an extension of her homeland and then equates it with a juicy orange. By representing Morocco as a succulent fruit, the writer reduces it to an object that can be incorporated and consumed; by comparing it to an Oriental night, Tabai stresses its sensual, mysterious, and obscure character, thus reactivating an Orientalist cliché that constructs the Orient not as “Europe’s interlocutor, but its silent Other” (Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered” 93). Exoticism and sexuality are tightly related in Tabai’s narrative, to the point that Tangier is compared to a mistress in the arms of two lovers. More specifically, the city is identified with “a powerful capricious mistress in the arms of her two lovers, who rest content to share [her] out, caressing her to all eternity with their azure fondling waters” (95) [eine mächtige kapriziöse Geliebte in den Armen zweier Liebhaber, die sich damit zufrieden geben sie zu teilen, um sie bis in alle Ewigkeit mit ihren azurblauen liebkosenden Gewässern zu streicheln]. The personification of Tangier as a voluptuous, sensual, and capricious mistress is meant to foreground the irrational, exotic, and passive character of 'the Orient'; this mechanism also contributes to freeze the city “to all eternity” and to confine 'the Orient' “into a kind of paradigmatic fossilization” (Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered” 94). This is particularly evident in the following scene, where the

narrator highlights Morocco's primitivity, poverty, and radical religious faith, and by so doing, outlines 'the Orient' as an enchanting place that is, culturally speaking, very distant from Europe:

Orient... Liebster Orient.

Fremd bist du.

Fremd... Fremd und herzerreißend.

Schaut her, wohlhabende Abendländerschar, das ist ein ganz bunter Orient mit langen, pechschwarzen, frommen Bärten, weißen Kaftanen, Suppe mit echtem Safran und Bettlern mit echtem Blut und Eiter. (100)

[Orient... beloved Orient.

You are unknown.

Unknown... unknown and excruciating.

Crowd of Western people look here! This is a completely multicoloured Orient with its long, black, and pious beards, its white caftans, its soups with authentic saffron and its beggars with authentic blood and pus.]

By manifesting the multiple colours of "the Orient" and the contradictory feelings that it awakens in her heart, the narrator underlines its traditional and disgusting elements such as the clothing of the Muslim devotees and the wounds of the mendicants. "The Orient" is further constructed as a curiosity and an inert and intriguing object displayed for the pleasure of Western tourists.

Rather than insisting on the geographical, historical, and cultural proximity between Europe and the Arab world, Tabai maintains that despite their adjacency, Morocco and in a larger sense the Arab world are "eine völlige andere Welt" (94) [a completely different world]. As these words suggest, Tabai seems less capable than Abu-Jaber to recognize diaspora as a site of encounter, relations, and endless transformation and to subvert rigid



binary oppositions such as home and abroad, country of origin and new homeland. Rather, she employs exoticist practices and delineates outlandish depictions of Arab places and people. As I have intended to demonstrate, in opposition to Abu-Jaber, who provides the reader with fresh and unusual conceptualizations of home, Tabai limits herself to reproduce Orientalist clichés and to represent Tunisia and Morocco as places that are, culturally speaking, very distant from her 'new' homecountry.

### 3. Belonging as a Choice Between Two Incompatible Terms

In *Oggi Forse Non Ammazzo Nessuno [I Might not Kill Anybody Today]* (2007), Ghazy describes the vicissitudes and bittersweet happenings of an Egyptian-Italian girl called Jasmine who lives in Milan and struggles to come to terms with the demands of her Egyptian parents and the expectations that the Italian society projects on her. The story is told by a first-person narrator in an ironic, dramatic, and irreverent tone. Apparently, the turbulent relationship that Jasmine entertains with her Egyptian parents reflects the interior conflict that the young protagonist endures. This is how Jasmine explicates her restlessness: “Dentro di me c’è la guerra. Dentro impazza la lotta. Ed è un turbinio, un uragano di neuroni cellule e cuori impazziti” (83) [Within me there is a war. Struggle is in full swing within me. It’s a swirl, a hurricane of crazy neurones cellules and hearts]. By activating an imagery of war, the writer foregrounds Jasmine’s inner conflict and tensions and compares her body to a battlefield where opposing forces fight one against the other. In *Oggi Forse Non Ammazzo Nessuno*, the protagonist intermittently identifies as a Muslim, as suggested by the subtitle *Storie minime di una giovane musulmana stranamente non terrorista [Very short stories of a young Muslim, strangely not a terrorist]*, an emancipated “Western woman” who professes her desire for independence, and a proud Arab woman who claims her cultural diversity. Throughout the story, belonging is conceived in exclusivist and oppositional terms, and Jasmine alternately

aligns herself with her Egyptian family or the Italian society. The following passage, in which Jasmine hurls an angry invective against her parents' homeland and by so doing, reaffirms her loyalty to Italy, is symptomatic of an exclusivist sense of belonging:

Pensa se vivessi in un paese dove, nell'università più prestigiosa, esiste un comitato che si premura di leggere i libri pubblicati ogni anno e censura quelli che non gli girano

Pensa se vivessi in un paese che si chiama repubblica democratica e da ventisei anni il presidente è sempre rimasto lo stesso (...)

Pensa se vivessi in un paese dove non esiste una classe media, zero, al punto che o vivi con centomila lire al mese oppure con dieci milioni (119-120)

[Imagine living in a country where the most prestigious university has a committee that hastens to read the books that are published each year and censures those they don't like

Imagine living in a country that is called a democratic republic and the president has been the same for twenty-six years (...)

Imagine living in a country where there is not a middle class, absolutely none, to the point that you either live with 100 liras or with 10 million.]

In this passage, the anaphora "pensa se vivessi" [imagine living] represents an effective linguistic tool through which Ghazy increases the throbbing rhythm of the narration, directly engages the reader with her obstinate hypothesis, and amplifies the impact of her accusations. The repetitive construction of this passage contributes to convey feelings of resignation and hopelessness: Egypt is represented as a country in which censorship, dictatorship, corruption and social inequality are in force. A similar negative representation is also accorded to Islam, a religion that is said to be backward and oppressive; in this regard, the narrator recalls the fatwa pronounced against sculpture by the religious authorities of Egypt (69-70), as an

evidence for Islam's intolerance. It is as if, in order to claim her Italianess and invoke Italy as her home, Jasmine were forced to disown and dismantle her parents' homeland. Far from bridging the gap between Egypt and Italy, the author reinforces the differences between the two countries and confirms the stereotypical representation of Islam already diffused in the Italian context by mainstream discourses and the media. Rather than circulating an alternative framework, Ghazy seems to confirm the myth of a clash of civilization and presents Italy and Egypt, 'the West' and 'the Orient' as incompatible worlds. In particular, Ghazy's writing appears still trapped in a series of oppositions, typical of a migrant literature at its first stages that views the country of origin as necessarily irreconcilable with the new country and the diasporic subject still pursuing a univocal sense of belonging and yearning for roots. However, Ghazy also advances a set of embryonic ideas that seem to contest and subvert the essentialist identifications and exclusivist forms of belonging implied in her narrative. Indeed, Jasmine compares members belonging to the second generation to passers-by, stateless subjectivities. This idea of in-betweenness is reinforced by the following passage in which Jasmine self-identifies with a jinn: "Sono come un jinn, un piccolo e innocuo jinn. I jinn appartengono a un mondo che non è nè quello degli uomini nè quello degli angeli. Stanno a metà, proprio come me" (122) [I am like a jinn, a little and harmless jinn. Jinnns do not belong to the human world nor to the angels' world. They stay in-between, just like me]. Here, Jasmine invokes the image of the jinn to explain her in-between condition and her strenuous efforts to mediate between the two divergent worlds that compose her identity. By and large, Ghazy succeeds in communicating in a light-hearted way the doubleness, interior conflicts and social pressures that an Arab-Italian girl may experience in her everyday life. Drawing her material from her personal experience and by adapting the genre of chick literature to her own needs, Ghazy successfully approaches her implied young Italian readers, conquers their

sympathy, and pushes them to acknowledge and show solidarity with the conflicts that haunt her protagonist.

#### 4. The Trauma of Uprooting and the Challenge of Regrounding

In *Oggi forse non ammazzo nessuno*, Jasmine longs for “another life, not this one, an easier, more linear one” [un'altra vita, non questa, una più facile, più lineare] and dreams about “a clear, precise, and uniform identity” [un'identità chiara, precisa, uniforme] (148). In Nye's poem “Someone I Love” (2008), the speaker expresses her desire for roots and her attachment to her garden. In a way, the care and devotion that she reserves to her flowers reveal her deep attachment to the land where she lives. Accordingly, when the speaker suddenly realizes that her “primrose patch” (131) has been uprooted, she is overwhelmed by a deep distress, as if somebody had violated her “sacred” land:

When I stood outside in my nightie the next dreamy-sweet morning at dawn  
after returning home on the midnight plane, watering my bluebonnets  
snapdragons butterfly bush lantana, wanting to feel tide to earth again, as I  
always do when I get home, rooted in soil and stone and old caliche and  
bamboo and trees a hundred years of memory in their trunks and bushes we  
didn't plant, and the healthy *esperanza* never losing her hope, and the banana  
palms just poking out their fine and gracious greenery, when I suddenly saw  
what was gone, what wasn't there, not there, impossible, I was so schocked I  
let the hose run all over my bare feet. (131-132, her emphasis)

Here, Nye conveys positive feelings of pleasure, rootedness, and security by using expressions such as “dreamy-sweet morning,” “feel tide to earth again,” and “rooted in soil and stone.” However, when the speaker suddenly realizes that her primrose patch has been uprooted, the meditative and absorbed tone of the first lines abruptly changes and becomes

disconsolate and sad. The acceleration of the rhythm, the compression of the speaker's thoughts in few words, and the disturbing repetition "what was gone, what wasn't there, not there, impossible" convey her apprehension and alarm. This idea of vulnerability is reinforced by her bare and exposed feet that are in contrast to the strong, deep, and solid roots of the plants, trees, and bushes that grow in her garden. In particular, the uprooting of the primrose patch is experienced by the speaker as a trauma, a physical mutilation that evokes the loss provoked by her displacement. In addition, by employing a traditional Palestinian trope,<sup>27</sup> Nye also alludes to the forced removal and dispossession of Palestinians. Interesting in this poem is that Nye does not refer to traditional plants of the Middle East, such as lemon, orange and olive trees. Rather, she mentions plants that are typical of the Southern part of the United States, thus blurring and overlapping the images of Palestine and Texas. If the plants mentioned in the poem recall Texas, her garden, because of its sacredness and violation, brings to mind Palestine.

Feelings of rootedness and attachment to a particular land can also be found in "The Garden of Abu Mahmoud" (1995). In this case, the setting of the poem is Palestine and not Texas, and the topic addressed is the sense of attachment that Palestinians feel towards their land. By celebrating Abu Mahmoud's devotion to his garden – a synecdoche for Palestine – and his non-violent and non-dominative sense of belonging, Nye praises his tenacious resistance and calls for peaceful and non-exclusivist forms of belonging that necessarily clash with the military occupation that the settlers carry out:

Across his valley the military

settlement gleamed white.

He said, That's where the guns live,

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<sup>27</sup> The celebration of the land and the reference to olive, orange and lemon trees are recurrent themes in Palestinian literature, especially in the poems and short stories of Palestinian writers such as Fadwa Touqan, Mahmoud Darwish, and Ghassan Kanafani. Palestinians' attachment to their land is also described in the film *The Lemon Tree*, directed by Israeli Eran Riklis, and in the film *Pomegranate and Mirrh*, directed by Arab filmmaker Najwa Najjar.

as simply as saying, it needs sun,  
a plant needs sun.

.....

He said every morning found him here,  
before the water boiled on the flame  
he came out to this garden,  
dug hands into earth saying, I know you  
and earth crumbled rich layers  
and this result of their knowing –  
a hillside which no inch went unsung. (124)

Here, Abu Mahmoud's emotional attachment to his garden is set in contrast to the military occupation implemented by the settlers. Feelings of impending disaster and irremediable loss pervade the poem: this idea is reinforced by Abu Mahmoud's straightforward and incontrovertible statement regarding the fact that violence and military occupation have become so natural for Palestinians as the sun for a plant. Moreover, by representing Abu Mahmoud speaking to the earth and digging his hands in the ground "every morning," the poet bears witness to his resilience, and celebrates his peaceful and non-violent tactics of regrounding. While settlers inscribe their presence on the land through the use of weapons, Abu Mahmoud expresses his sense of belonging through a genuine and corporal connection to the land. Through the image of Abu Mahmoud digging his hand in the earth, praising every inch of his garden, Nye contests and eventually deconstructs exclusivist claims over an originary home and violent national re-appropriations.

## **5. Rituals as Creative Strategies of Belonging**

In her poetry, Nye puts an emphasis on peaceful and inclusive forms of belonging and reconsiders the performance of traditional rites, such as preparing and consuming food, brewing and drinking Arabic coffee, as fruitful strategies through which diasporic subjectivities heal their sense of loss, reconstruct an imagined community, and negotiate a precarious sense of belonging. In “Arabic Coffee” (1995), the speaker recollects her father’s habit to prepare and serve Arabic coffee to his guests. In particular, the strong aroma of the coffee and the stories her father used to tell are outlined as the focal point around which an alternative sense of belonging and an imagined community can be negotiated:

It was never too strong for us:  
make it blacker, Papa,  
thick in the bottom,  
tell again how the years will gather  
in small white cups,  
how luck lives in a spot of grounds.

.....

The coffee was  
the center of the flavor. (130)

In this poem, feelings of inclusion and comfort are tightly related to the performance of brewing Arabic coffee and to the sensorial experience of inhaling its aroma. In particular, the flavor, color, and consistency of the coffee are evoked through adjectives such as “strong,” “black,” and “thick.” References to its intense smell intermingle with its black colour to combine with the stories told by the father. All this pervades the room to suggest that the piercing smell and taste of the coffee deeply affect the guests and are incorporated by them. In the final line, the coffee is accordingly identified as the centre around which all the guests converge and as the source of the distinctive atmosphere of inclusion, hospitality, and equality

that the poet wants to evoke. By and large, the ritual of brewing and drinking Arabic coffee is reframed as an effective strategy through which the speaker and her guests recreate a temporary sense of belonging and heal their sense of loss. This idea echoes Ahmed's theorization of home and belonging as a sensorial experience of inclusion. As she poignantly asserts: "The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*" (*Strange Encounters* 89, her emphasis).

The reconsideration of brewing and drinking Arabic coffee, as a creative practice to 'make home' and sooth one's sense of loss, is further developed by Abu-Jaber in *Crescent*. The novel draws on the encounter and love affair between Sirine and Hanif El-Eyad (Han), respectively an Arab-American chef and an Iraqi professor exiled to the US. As Gana notes, the "gravitational centre" ("In Search of Andalusia" 244) of the novel is Nadia Café, a Lebanese restaurant set in Los Angeles, where Arab migrants rush and gather to eat their favourite Arab dishes and sooth their longing for home. Really, Nadia Café is a Lebanese restaurant set in an Iranian area of Los Angeles and its clientele is very heterogeneous. As Gana suggests, "the setting of an ethnic community within yet another ethnic community is evocative of the concentric circles of belonging and the multiple dynamics of proximity and distance that both nurture and withhold the process of homecoming – of becoming rather than being Arab" ("In Search of Andalusia" 238). In this novel, the feeling of being at home, of belonging to a particular place is outlined as a gradual and evolving process that entails both attachment and estrangement, affiliation and isolation. At Nadia Café, individuals belonging to different ethnic, racial, and national groups gather, eat the food prepared by Sirine, and exchange conversations in a convivial atmosphere with the intention of soothing their longing for home. This is how the narrator describes Um-Nadia's habit to roast and brew coffee and the effects produced by this practice:



Um-Nadia waits until the air is roasted chocolaty, big and smoky with the scent of brewing coffee. Then she knocks the front door latch open. She holds the door wide and lets the older returning students, the immigrants and workingmen in, one by one, morning-shy, half-sleepy, hopeful from dreams, from the walk in the still-sweet air, not so lonesome this early in the day. Nothing a small cup of coffee and a plate of bread and olives can't cure. (42)

Here, Um-Nadia is waiting for the coffee beans to become dark and emit the smell of smoke. The scent, color, and flavor of the coffee become central aspects of the narration, as they activate feelings of inclusion and belonging. In particular, the narrator dwells on the intense and penetrating aroma of the coffee, alludes to its healing properties, and turns the drink into a kind of medicament that cures the diasporic subjects from their sense of loss and solitude.<sup>28</sup> Rather than identifying belonging with a feeling of kinship to a specific nation or group of people, Nye and Abu-Jaber equate it with a sensorial experience in which the subject feels included by and an integral part of an imagined community. Nye and Abu-Jaber's visionary conceptualization of belonging, as the lived experience of an emotional and sensorial attachment to a temporary community negotiated through daily convivial practices, echoes Brah's observation that "the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from being fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life" (183). By underlining the fact that communities are not static and immutable, but rather imagined and creatively negotiated, Nye and Abu-Jaber propose diaspora as a fertile terrain for the development of non-conventional modalities of belonging grounded in the everyday life and based on human agency. This idea echoes Salih's theorization of traditional rituals as stimulating and ingenious tools that diasporic subjectivities deploy to contest and transform

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<sup>28</sup> This positive illustration echoes Tabai's representation of coffee as a drink that gives exquisite pleasure and provides the drinker with a state of almost ecstasy. In "Die Kaffeegöttin" ["The Goddess of Coffee"], Arabic coffee is compared to "a divine grace, a sample and absolute proof of the truth of the promised Paradise" ["eine Gnade des Himmels, ein Vorgeschmack und absoluter Beweis für die Wahrhaftigkeit des versprochenen Paradieses"] (114).

fixed dichotomies. In her words: “far from being static, in this process rituals become fertile and creative terrains, whereby ideas of traditional or modern, Westernised or authentic are moulded, subverted and reformulated” (84).

Among the social practices that are invested with the role of reactivating a sense of community and belonging, the preparation and consumption of food plays a crucial role, especially in the case of *Crescent*.<sup>29</sup> In a way, the tasteful and flavoured meals that Sirine prepares for her guests help them recreate a temporary and imagined community to the point that in the following passage, Nadia Café is outlined as a surrogate for home:

Sirine rolled out dough early in the morning in her open kitchen behind the counter and discreetly watched the students sipping coffee, studying the newspapers, and having arguments. Everything about these young men seemed infinitely vulnerable and tender: their dense curling lashes, soft round noses and full-lips, winnowed-away faces and chests.

(...) For many of them the café was a little flavor of home. (22)

Here, the narrator lingers on the description of the young customers of the café and stresses their vulnerability and tenderness; the tone of the narration is compassionate and sympathetic, and reflects the author’s personal empathy and understanding for the sense of loss and homesickness that diasporic subjects endure. Nadia Café is represented as a place of encounter and exchange between subjectivities belonging to different ethnic and racial groups; yet, if we look more closely, we soon realize that Nadia Café is not immune from cultural insularity, and the various characters avoid, at least initially, any form of intercultural interaction. The following passage exemplifies my statement:

There are Jenoub, Gharb, and Schmaal – engineering students from Egypt;  
Shark, a math student from Kuwait; Lon Hayden, the chair of Near Eastern

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<sup>29</sup> Several studies point to this same conclusion. See Fadda-Conrey 187-205; Gardaphé and Xu 5-10; Mercer and Strom 33-46.

Studies; Morris who owns the newsstand; Raphael-from-New-Jersey; Jay, Ron, and Troy from the Kappa Something Something fraternity house; Odah, the Turkish butcher, and his many sons. There are two American policemen – one white and one black – who come to the café every day, order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions, and have become totally entranced by the Bedouin soap opera plotlines involving ancient blood feuds, bad children, and tribal honour. (23)

Although the clientele of Nadia Café is widely diverse, the syntactical construction listing individuals who belong to different cultural groups in perfectly symmetrical order conveys the impression that the various communities are separated and do not interact. The list of Nadia Café's customers separated by semi-colons and the absence of conjunctions suggest that affiliations and ties among them are temporary suspended. Even the two American policemen are separated by their contrasting racial categorization and are described as “totally entranced by the Bedouin soap opera plotlines,” an ironic reference that reinforces the idea that the interaction among the clients of the café is practically inexistent. Nevertheless, this condition of stasis and mere juxtaposition of diversities is overturned in the course of the novel by what Gana indicates as “a number of intraethnic and interethnic alliances and identifications of profoundly empowering effects, even if of unresolved tensions, contraries, and differences” (“In Search of Andalusia” 243). By punctuating the narration with the description of various convivial occasions, Abu-Jaber represents the everyday life of the Arab-American community as a fruitful site where subjectivities belonging to different cultural groups come together, interact, and share moments of peaceful coexistence, thriving to negotiate, what Gana interprets as “modalities of belonging beyond any uncritical longings for an originary home” (“In Search of Andalusia” 243). This emerges clearly in the episode of the Thanksgiving party that Sirine organizes at her uncle's house. In order to celebrate this traditional American

holiday, Sirine prepares some American dishes by adding to them Arab ingredients, while her South-American and Arab guests integrate her menu with their own typical food. At the end, on the huge Thanksgiving dinner's table, the traditional Iranian "fatayar" is displayed together with the American "cranberry sauce" and the South-American "roasted walnuts in chilli sauce" are exposed together with "three homemade pumpkin pies and a half-gallon of whipping cream" (216-217). In this scene, through the use of food and the image of a joyous and light-hearted banquet, Abu-Jaber constructs intercultural ties among these traditionally separated ethnic groups.

The idea that food promotes the relation and interaction between different cultural communities is further developed by Nye in "Gate A4" (*Tender Spot* 157-158). In this case, the focal point of the scene is a group of women of different cultural backgrounds waiting for a delayed flight in a foreign airport. By eating "homemade mamool cookies," this heterogeneous group of women, traversed by national, cultural, religious, and linguistic differences, eventually succeeds in overcoming the divisions that separate them and in negotiating a joyous and shared moment of peaceful coexistence. This is how the speaker praises the positive effects produced by this convivial occasion: "The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better Cookie" (157-158). Food and conviviality are celebrated in this case as a fruitful medium to overcome the divisions, hatred, and distrust provoked by the terrorist attack of 9/11. Accordingly, in the following lines, the speaker praises food and conviviality for their capacity to heal divisions and oppose the fatal effects in terms of fear and alarm produced by the war on terror: "And I looked around the gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person" (158). However, the positive effects of conviviality, underlined and

praised in these narratives, should not prevent us from recognizing the limits and biases that these representations conceal and the social and economic tensions that these writings undermine. In this regard, Brah's reflection on the power relations and social, economic, gendered, and cultural differences that traverse diaspora is particularly useful to put in perspective these narratives:

All diasporic journeys are composite in another sense too. They are embarked upon, lived and re-lived through multiple modalities: modalities, for example, of gender, 'race,' class, religion, language and generation. As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we.' (183-184)

The homogeneous and idealized communities displayed in "Gate 4" and in *Crescent* provide us with a partial and therefore limited point of view on diaspora, one that fails to recognize the conflicts and "uneven" intersections that characterize the diasporic space. This ideal paradigm based on conviviality and on the act of sharing food should be critically interrogated, by juxtaposing to these narratives the brutal episode of racism to which the Ramouds fall victim to in *Arabian Jazz*. Matussem and his family are gathered in a park and share food with other people, when two young men decide to sit together with the Ramouds and eat their food. All of a sudden, however, one of them asks Matussem where he and his family come from, and when Matussem tells them they are Arabs from Jordan, he reacts violently. This is how the narrator describes his outburst of anger: "'A-rabs!' he said, his eyes now full of what looked like twist of amusement and disgust. He turned to the other boy and said, 'Arabs, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their *food*.' The other boy grabbed his friend and tugged him away. As they left, Matussem heard them laughing" (361, her emphasis). Here, Abu-Jaber outlines a failed convivial occasion in which Matussem, his family, and their food are transformed into objects of disgust. If, in *Arabian Jazz*, food is the pretext of a

xenophobic attack, in *Crescent*, on the contrary, food works as a kind of bridge that connects different ethnic and linguistic groups and functions as “an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals” of the novel (Fadda-Conrey 196). For Abu-Jaber then, food represents a “human connector,”<sup>30</sup> through which the author effectively bridges the gap separating the Arab-American community displayed in her writings and her implied American readers,<sup>31</sup> and a fruitful metaphor through which she promotes intercultural exchange and understanding.

## 6. Conclusion

Arab diasporic women writers address questions of home and belonging in different ways. While Abu-Jaber represents home as a shifting and contaminated site of inhabitation haunted by memories of the past and images of the country left behind, Tabai outlines the country of origin as a remote place incompatible with the new homeland. If Ghazy insists on the conflicts endured by subjects belonging to the second generation, alludes to their in-betweenness, and hints at their unresolved sense of belonging, Nye and Abu-Jaber, on the contrary, praise diasporic subjects for their ability to perform non-essentialist and non-exclusivist modalities of belonging and to negotiate transnational and intercultural alliances. In particular, Abu-Jaber and Nye reframe interculturality as a verb (Covi, *Interculturality and Gender*), a quotidian performance of interethnic and interracial relations and exchanges that subvert binary oppositions and give birth to an imagined and temporary community that is intercultural and transnational. By preferring interculturality to the “sedative politics” (Kamboureli 83) of multiculturalism, these authors contest the reduction of cultures into

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<sup>30</sup> In the interview included at the end of *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber insists on this point: “food is such a great human connector, it’s so intimate. (...) And that’s why food has been such an important metaphor. To me, that’s one of the most immediate and powerful ways of creating the metaphor of the hearth and a gathering place, a place where the collective forms” (Shalal-Esa “Interview”).

<sup>31</sup> The activation of a food imagery to familiarize and draw connections with the audience is also a typical feature of Arab-American anthologies. See Kadi (1994); Orfalea and Elmusa (1988).

manageable differences and insular entities to be incorporated by the multicultural state, and elaborate “(new) 'grammars' of collective belonging” (Ahmed and Fortier, “Re-imagining Communities” 256) based on the cross-fertilization of cultures. Rather than promoting exclusivist and essentialist forms of affiliation, these authors reframe belonging as the situated and sensorial experience of feeling included and an integral part of the space one inhabits. By so doing, they contribute to fabricate and diffuse “counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries” (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 300). By and large, Arab diasporic authors represent diaspora as a site where subjects actively engage in practices of intercultural and peaceful coexistence, but also as a battleground for social, cultural, economic, and national conflicts. By showing the heterogeneity of these different perspectives, I have intended to highlight the specific location from which each of these writers speaks. In the United States, where migration and Arab-American literature have a longer history, where ethnic minorities like the African-American and the Chicano one have elaborated insightful and pioneering theories that put the accent on hybridity and doubleness, Nye and Abu-Jaber invoke and celebrate innovative strategies of belonging that move beyond the nation-state; in Europe, on the contrary, where the history of colonialism and the legacy of Orientalism are still vivid, where nation-states have historically been countries of emigration and have only recently been confronted with the breakdown of the illusion of *not* being countries of immigration,<sup>32</sup> Ghazy and Tabai find it more difficult to subvert rigid binary oppositions and to free themselves from essentialist forms of identification and belonging.

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<sup>32</sup> In this regard, Werner Sollors makes a compelling analysis of the evolution of the legislation on migration implemented by the German government. According to Sollors, the *Zuwanderungsgesetz* [law on immigration] introduced in Germany in 2005, represents a “historical turning point” in the sense that “it sheds the illusion that Germany is *not* a country of immigration.” See Sollors, “Goodbye Germany!”

## II. THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF ARABNESS

One of the central issues of crossing borders has to do with the classification and cataloguing of identities.

Ella Shoat, 2000

The construction of identity – for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, *is* finally a construction – involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretations and re-interpretations of their differences from ‘us.’ Each age and society re-creates its “Others.”

Edward W. Said, 1978

The construction of identity and the representation of Arabness represent two crucial themes addressed by Arab diasporic women writers in their works. In the “Introduction” of *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that ‘the Orient’ is a Western cultural production that has been used to implement and carry out European domination and control over ‘the East.’ In this groundbreaking work, Said also calls for “contemporary alternatives to Orientalism” (“From *Orientalism*” 2009) that would promote a model of coexistence and interactions between human beings based on solidarity, the recognition of a shared humanity, and mutual responsibility. In this chapter, I intend to take up Said’s challenge, and problematize the interpretation of knowledge as a tool for cultural, political, and economic domination. My aim is to foreground a non essentialist perspective that invalidates the myth of natural and pure identities, cultures, and nations and bears witness to their porous, transitory, and open character. Indeed, by producing literary works that are culturally, formally, and linguistically hybrid, Arab diasporic authors solicit us to reconsider identities, cultures, and nations as historically contaminated and constantly changing. By so doing, these writers contribute to a *worldly* literature that is imbued with specific political, social, and historical concerns and is



in a dialectic relation with the contemporary socio-political reality that both the writer and the reader share.

Starting from the consideration that being Arab is essentially “an image problem” (Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* 54), Nye and Abu-Jaber contest mainstream narratives that eclipse Arabness or associate it with negative features.<sup>33</sup> In particular, these writers make various efforts to contest the dangerous and “simplified type of thinking” engendered by Orientalism and diffused by the media (Said, *Covering Islam* 4) and show the fatal effects of stereotyping, a process that “*reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and 'fixes' difference*” (Hall, *Representation* 158, his emphasis).<sup>34</sup> The politics of fear diffused after 9/11 that associate Arabness with danger and terrorism have indeed brought this process to the extreme. In opposition to these reductions, I take Nye and Abu-Jaber’s writings as my point of departure to argue for a discourse that succeeds in rehabilitating the Arab identity, provides us with dignifying and familiar representations of Arabs, and proposes alternative perspectives on the Arab and Islamic history. As I hope to demonstrate, Arab diaporic literature accounts for and responds to precise and situated experiences of cultural domination, but can also be read as a potential site of liberation and empowerment.

Power plays a crucial role in this chapter; indeed, as Hall rightly notes, “every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet 'power/knowledge' (“Cultural Identity” 302-303). By comparing the works of Tabai, Bouraoui, and Abu-Jaber, this study raises questions regarding the impact of nationalism, patriarchy, and racism on identity construction and interrogates the effects of Orientalism on the politics of representation. On the whole, this chapter provides a critique of essentialist

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<sup>33</sup> On the degrading processes that Arabness has been subjected to in present times and on the difficulties and implications of being Arab today, see *Gana Arab Despise Thyself*.

<sup>34</sup> On the complex and evolving character of the Arab-American identity and on the manipulation that Arabness has been subjected to in the American context, see Kadi 146-187; 189-227.

identities and highlights how identity construction is tightly intertwined with and feels the effects of the circulating (mis)representations.

### 1. Identities in Flux

According to Hall, stereotyping is a “practice of 'closure' and exclusion” that “symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong” (*Representation* 258). In order to contest stereotyping, Arab diasporic authors foreground and reaffirm the open and heterogeneous character of identity. In “The Whole Self” (1995), Nye represents identity construction as a fluid, complex, and ever-changing process, a tiring and difficult itinerary whose destination is always deferred:

When I think of the long history of the self  
on its journey to becoming the whole self, I get tired.  
It was the kind of trip you keep making,  
Over and over again, the bag you pack and repack so often  
the shirts that start folding themselves the minute  
you take them off. (8)

Nye activates here an imaginary related to travel, motion, and change: expressions such as “long history,” “keep making,” and “over and over again,” underline the infinite and repetitive steps that characterize identity construction, a process that keeps unfolding and never ends. Later on, the poet compares identity to a “current, a fragile cargo, / a raft someone was paddling through the jungle” (8), thus putting the accent on its precarious and transitory character. If Nye reconfigures the construction of identity as a positive process that is liberating even if it exposes the subject to difficulties and a sense of disorientation and vulnerability, Bouraoui reframes identity as a site of exclusion and self-negation that intensifies feelings of discomfort and guilt. In *Tomboy* (2007), the protagonist and narrator of

the novel is Yasmina, a child of mixed origins whose national, cultural, and gendered identity unevenly oscillates between Algeria and France, Arab and French, girl and boy. This is how the first-person narrator stresses her plural identity that fluctuates between four different categories of identification: “I go from Yasmina to Nina. From Nina to Ahmed. From Ahmed to Brio. It’s an assassination, an infanticide, and a suicide. I don’t know who I am. One and multiple. Lying and truthful. Strong and weak. Girl and boy” (34). Here, the narrator calls into question the harmful effects produced by socially constructed categories that provide the subject with abrupt, partial, and oppositional self-images. Through the rhetorical technique of the interior monologue, Bouraoui annuls the distance between the reader and the protagonist to the point that the first sinks into the psyche of the second one. It follows “a pathological identification with the narrated world” [“un’identificazione patologica con il mondo narrato”] (Fusillo 142) that Bouraoui expressly develops to communicate the protagonist’s disorientation and discomfort. This is how Yasmina laments her doubleness and subsequent sense of rupture: “Forever split between this one and that one, enduring a fractured identity, seeing myself as divided. Who do I look like the most? Who has conquered me? Who has won over my voice? My face? My body in motion? France or Algeria? (*Tomboy* 10). Here, Yasmina reflects on the contradictory and discontinuous nature of her identity and manifests her fragmentation through expressions such as “split,” “fractured,” and “divided.” The verbs “conquer” and “win,” that pertain to the semantic field of war, reinforce the idea that the girl has fallen victim to an irreconcilable cultural conflict. By addressing a series of hammering and anxious questions to the reader, the author increases the level of tension and dramatically reveals Yasmina’s inner confusion and devastation. In *Tomboy*, identity formation is outlined as a destabilizing and harmful process that leads the subject to self-negation and hinders her self-recognition. This is particularly evident in the following passage where the narrator equates her malaise with a kind of death: “The idea of death comes with always feeling

different, not fitting in, not walking straight, being in the margins and feeling like an outsider, confined within myself. Alone. Not being part of the social order after all” (73).<sup>35</sup> Feelings of estrangement and alienation pervade Bouraoui’s writing and bear witness to the protagonist’s loss and disorientation. By comparing her condition to that of a dead person, who does not belong to the human community anymore, Bouraoui foregrounds Yasmina’s isolation and her exclusion from the social world. The adjective “alone” enclosed between two full stops highlights her confinement and estrangement. Her withdrawal and unease reveal the existence of impenetrable boundaries that keep her dis-connected from the society in which she lives. The following passage by Ahmed, who theorizes comfort as a feeling that presupposes a perfect integration between body and space, can help us interpret Yasmina’s unease:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surface of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. (*Cultural Politics* 148)

By stressing Yasmina’s withdrawal into herself and the fracture that separates her body from the social body of the nation, Bouraoui sheds light on the sense of alienation that members belonging to the second generation may experience in the diaspora. By employing a transparent language and a simple syntax, Bouraoui gives birth to a multi-layered and plural text in which the constant cross-references between text and context, interior and exterior world, reality and fiction amalgamate and communicate the complex national, cultural, and racial entanglements that members belonging to the second generation embody. It follows that, as Fusillo aptly points out: “through fiction, literature creates possible worlds that suspend the difference between true and false: these are imaginary worlds that can be

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<sup>35</sup> What the English translation defines as the social order, Bouraoui rather identifies as “l’unité du monde” [the unity of the world]. In my opinion, this expression aggravates her condition and takes her exclusion to the extreme. See Bouraoui, *Garçon Manqué* 121.

metaphorically real and have the potential for increasing our perception of the reality” [“attraverso la finzione la letteratura crea dei mondi possibili, in cui è sospesa l’opposizione vero e falso: mondi immaginari, ma che possono essere metaforicamente veri, e potenziare così la nostra percezione del reale”] (Fusillo 142). By constructing a fictional world in which the boundaries between truth and lies, reality and imagination, life and fiction are suspended, Bouraoui solicits us to consider and recognize the difficult condition of members belonging to the second generation and their strenuous attempts to come to term with the opposing categories of identification that are imposed on them.

## **2. Identity Politics: Free Choice or Coercion?**

In *Tomboy*, Bouraoui displays a subject who struggles to bridge the rift that separates her from the rest of society. In this section, I want to underline the importance of relationality for the self and the ambiguous character of identity politics that shifts between free choice and coercion. According to Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero, the self is located within an extended network of relations and this relationality represents a necessary condition for her/his existence. To quote Butler:

In stark contrast to the Nietzschean view that life is essentially bound up with destruction and suffering, Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, *exposed* to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle – and to honour – this constant and necessary exposure. (*Giving an Account* 31-32, her emphasis)

On a theoretical level, Butler foregrounds the precariousness and sociality of the self; on a literary level, Abu-Jaber manifests the exposure and interdependence that distinguish her characters. In *Crescent*, the author celebrates relationality, and stresses the damaging

outcomes produced by dependency. In the course of the novel, Sirine assists Han to overcome the harmful experience of exile and to find his place in the US society, while Han helps Sirine reconnect with her Arab side, gain deeper knowledge about her heritage, and recover parts of herself that she had lost. However, when Han leaves Los Angeles and heads for Baghdad, Sirine immediately feels “skinless, barely assembled” (347), a condition that clearly manifests her dependency from Han and her own vulnerability. Sirine suddenly understands that Han represents a precious part of herself but also realizes that she is paradoxically and vulnerably bound to him and to the other people who surround her. Abu-Jaber’s negative redefinition of dependency and celebration of interdependence can be read together with Glissant’s idea that “dependencies are infermities of Relation, obstacles to the hard work of its entanglement. Interdependencies, for the same reasons, despite being uncomfortable or precarious, are always worth something” (*Poetics of Relation* 155). In order to overcome her dependency from others, Sirine struggles to find new ways of identification and ends up committing herself completely to her work. By representing Sirine losing herself in cooking, Abu-Jaber demonstrates that forms of identification are constantly shifting, conjunctural, and based on human agency. This idea is clearly expressed in the following passage in which the narrator stresses Sirine’s well being and sensation of wholeness while she is cooking: “It comes back to her, the small secret that was always hers, for years, the only truth she seemed to possess – that food was better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching. As long as she could lose herself in the rhythms of peeling an onion, she was complete and whole” (217-218).

Both in *Arabian Jazz* and in *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber underlines the tribulations that members belonging to the second generation go through; nevertheless, she also bears witness to the opportunities and challenges that their in-between condition implies. According to Nasser, Jem’s 'Westernized' cousin, belonging to the second generation means above all being

“born homeless [and] bedouins” but also possessing a two-dimensional glance that allows subjectivities to “see far more than most ever do” (*Arabian Jazz* 330). This statement echoes Said’s reflection on the *contrapuntual* awareness of exiles who are conscious of and learn to negotiate multiple dimensions. By comparing individuals belonging to the second generation to “homeless [and] bedouins,” Abu-Jaber represents them as itinerant people who feel constantly out of place. Yet, by highlighting their capacity to “see far more than most ever do,” she also celebrates their in-betweenness as a privileged condition that allows them to give birth to new forms of identification and break free from the monolithic categories that construct Arabness as totally opposed to Americaness. Through her writing, Abu-Jaber shows the inadequacy of partial and fixed categories such as Arab or American, that are incapable of accounting for the complexity of the Arab diaspora, and reframes Arabness as a process and an ongoing production on which the subject can actually intervene and whose final articulation is always deferred. In this regard, Hall’s observation on the porous and temporal character of cultural identities is particularly illuminating:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being externally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (“Cultural Identity” 302)

Hall stresses here the historical and therefore changeable character of cultural identities. However, if we transfer this interpretation to the Arab identity, we soon realize that Arabness has been subjected to a series of (mis)representations to the point that, as Gana provocatively notes, today “it is an insult to be called 'Arab’” (“Arab Despise Thysel’”). Rather than

celebrating the fluidity and unpredictable character of identities, Gana puts us on guard against a-critical celebrations of identity politics that allow subjectivities of Arab origin to self-identify as “triumphantly American or as part-time American-Palestinian,” thus avoiding to mention their “incorrigible” Arabness (“Arab Despise Thyself”). Gana’s attack against freely chosen forms of identification raises important questions regarding the actual possibility for the self to be incorruptible and remain untouched by the systems of power that manipulate Arabness and favour or discourage the subject’s self-identification with it. In the light of Gana’s reflections, Abu-Jaber’s celebration of the ability of diasporic subjects to “see far more than most ever do” should be put in perspective and read by keeping in mind the blind dis-identifications that Gana denounces in his article and that are a direct consequence of the fluidity allowed by identity politics.

### **3. The Pervasiveness of Orientalism and its Impact on Arabness**

In the previous section, I have argued that identity is a socio-cultural construction and that the self can whether assume or reject the circulating categories of identification, and therefore appropriate, wrestle with, subvert or fall victim to the spreading representations. Indeed, as Salih rightly notes: “Reactions to stereotype and annulment are different, at times more active and other times more submissive. By and large, however, the prevailing sentiment is the inability to narrate the self, to explore one’s subjectivity challenging the overarching and imprisoning representations of the dominant society” (130). This pessimistic perspective that sustains the incapacity of the self to get rid of and eschew biased representations is shared also by Michelle Sharif who demonstrates that most of the prejudices that affect Arab people and their culture have been inherited by Orientalism and are very difficult to eradicate, as they confine the subject in an imprisoning frame (“Global Sisterhood” 151-159). In this regard, Marsha J. Hamilton underlines the fact that a wide range of people in the US share a limited



number of stereotypes about Arab women that reduce them to sensual, exotic or oppressed beings. This reading can also be applied to the European context where Orientalist clichés are still persistently used in contemporary narratives.<sup>36</sup> In “Kleopatras Hochzeitsnacht” (19-30) [“Cleopatra’s Wedding Night”], Tabai unfolds the story of Laila’s wedding proposal and recounts the hectic preparations and hopeful expectations that anticipate the ceremony and the wedding night. Laila is described as a mysterious and exotic beauty, a veiled and sensual woman who nourishes the desires of men and fuels the envy of women. This is how the narrator outlines her enchanting allure:

Dieses Mädchen wuchs tatsächlich heran zu einer sagenhaften Schönheit, und die revoltierenden Rundungen unter dem schwarzen Hischab waren nicht mehr zu übersehen. Ihr klarer weißer Teint und die großen schwarzen Augen, das Einzige, was man von ihr in den Gässchen zu sehen bekam, beschäftigten durchaus die Fantasien vieler junger wie alter Männer dieser kleinen Oase. Man sprach von ihrer Ähnlichkeit mit Kleopatra, von dem unglaublich weißen Weiß ihrer Augen und der Anmut ihrer einmaligen Pupillen. (...) Die Frauen, die sie ohne Hischab sehen durften, erzählten ferner von der wunderschönen Perlenkette in ihrem bezaubernden Mund und den zwei geschwungenen Halbmonden über ihren Augen mit den märchenhaften Scheherezade-Wimpern und ihrem verheißungsvollen Schlag. (20)

[This girl really grew to a legendary beauty and her revolutionary curves under the black hijab could not go unobserved. Her clear white complexion and her big black eyes were the only things that could be seen in the alleys

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<sup>36</sup> On the pervasiveness of Orientalist clichés in Europe, see Luz Gómez-García’s essay in Covi, Anim-Addo, Karavanta (2009). In her experimental and collaborative teaching practice on ‘the Arab Other’, Gómez-García asked the students to write down a series of words that would characterize Arabs. The results show a confusion between Muslim and Arab, a circulating vocabulary related to Islam(phobia), and a consistent number of exotic and racist terms of Orientalist derivation. See Gómez-García 161-181.

and occupied the imagination of the oasis' younger and older men. People mentioned her similarity with Cleopatra, the incredible white whiteness of her eyes and the elegance of her extraordinary pupils. (...) The women, who could see her without the hijab, talked about the wonderful necklace of pearls in her magic mouth and the two curved crescents above her eyes with their fabulous Sheherazade eyelashes and their promising swing.]

Here, the narrator highlights Laila's beauty and sensuality. The reference to the black *hijab* and to the gossips, that circulate about her, contributes to increase the aura of mystery that envelops her figure. In addition, by employing adjectives such as "legendary," "wonderful," and "fabulous," and by blurring Laila's image with that of Cleopatra and Sheherazade, the author contributes to construct Laila as an 'Oriental Beauty,' an unreachable and mysterious object of desire and a fascinating albeit impenetrable being. In particular, by drawing a connection between Laila and Cleopatra and by combining their images, Tabai underlines the charm and attractiveness of these legendary women, but also alludes to their doomed existence. Indeed, the writer exalts Laila's sensuality but also sanctions her beauty by turning her body into the object of her husband's violence and into the cause of her misfortune. Instead of underlying Sheherazade's role as a wise and creative woman, who saves herself and other women through the practice of story-telling, Tabai reduces her intelligence, her act of resistance, and her courage to the charm of her eyelashes, thus rinvigorating Sheherazade's classic representation as "the harem beauty" (Hamilton 175).<sup>37</sup> This is how Hamilton explains this paradoxical situation:

Most audiences, despite differences in age, education, and socio-economic background, tend to share the same narrow set of stereotypes about Arab women. This often includes association with the words harem, polygamy,

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<sup>37</sup> For an alternative representation of Scheherazade as a bright, strong, and well-educated woman, see Darraj (2004).

belly dancer, sexy, uneducated, oppressed, and veiled. These images are a result of the frequent representation of Middle Eastern women in the U.S. popular culture in terms of the character of the belly dancer and seductress Cleopatra of the Nile, the harem beauty, and the veiled with bewitching kohl-circled eyes. (174-175)

In her short stories, Tabai outlines very detailed and accurate representations that in certain cases, however, appear reductive. The instructive illustrations of the ups and down of the everyday life of Tunisian women are sometimes obscured by less refreshing and oversimplified representations. For example, in “Bauchtänzerin” [“Belly Dancer”], the narrator recounts the fascination that the beautiful belly-dancers broadcasted in TV during her Tunisian childhood awakened in her:

Mich faszinierten die Tänzerinnen mit ihrer Schönheit und der Geschmeidigkeit ihrer begnadeten, zum größten Teil entblößten Körper. Die glitzernden bunten Schleier, die sie in der Luft schweben ließen, um sie dann in einer plötzlichen Bewegung mit einem schlemischen Blick scheinbar nachlässig auf den Boden zu werfen, das harmonische Vibrieren der Hüfte, die wiegenden Schritte, die zauberhaften Armbewegungen, die Art, wie sie den Kopf genüsslich nach hinten schüttelten, dass ihre Haare flogen und wie sie ihr Lächeln voller Lebenslust um sich streuten wie Jasminblüten und damit ihre Zuschauer entzückten. (7)

[I was fascinated by the dancers and by the beauty and suppleness of their blessed and mostly uncovered bodies. I was attracted by the shimmering colorful veils that they left float in the air and then threw on the floor with a sudden movement and an apparent neglecting glance. I was charmed by the harmonious vibration of their thighs, the way through which they shook their

head in a sensual way, so that their hair would fly. I was impressed by how they would stray their smiles full of vivacity as if they were jasminpetals to enchant the audience.]

Tabai reproduces here the icon of the belly-dancer: by focusing on the beauty of the dancers' bodies and on the smoothness of their movements, Tabai reactivates an Orientalist myth that insists on the sensuality and harmless nudity of the Oriental Woman. Not only women, however, but also men are the target of negative and biased representations. In "Hänchenknochen" ["Chicken Bones"], for instance, the protagonist is Zitounas, a Tunisian policeman who is compared to a half-god and exercises his authority both in the streets and at home. The narrator stresses Zitounas' indifference and brutality and constructs his power in opposition to his daughter's weakness and submission.<sup>38</sup> In particular, Zitounas is represented as a misogynist who dislikes women, believes that his daughter is not worth education, and rules her with a rod of iron. When his son dies, after having eaten the leftovers of the chicken that his father has greedily stuffed himself with, the narrator implicitly condemns Zitounas' brutality and egoism. The message is clear: by highlighting the inhumanity and insensitivity of this Tunisian father, the author aims at denouncing the pervasiveness and damages of patriarchy. However, by representing most of the male characters in similar terms, Tabai provides the audience with a homogeneizing and unfair picture that erroneously covers and fatally misrepresents the totality of Tunisian men.

Even if Tabai's short-stories provide the reader with entertaining and vivid illustrations of the diversity and beauty that characterize Tunisia, the representations of the female characters, however, are still imbued with Orientalist clichés. In "Die Kamelstute Sagt Nein" ["The Female Camel Says No"], for instance, Tabai overlaps the image of an Arab woman

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<sup>38</sup> The relationship father/daughter reflects the unbalanced man/woman paradigm. Examples of this model can be found in numerous short-stories. See "Hänchenbonen" 67, 69-71; "Kleopatras Hochzietsnacht" 22, 29; "Das kleine Dienstmädchen" 14-16; "Die Kamelstute sagt nein" 106-107; "Erziehungskonflikt" 159-161. Men are described in positive terms in "Yasmina" 57-60 and "Die Kaffeegöttin" 109-116.

with that of a patient and stubborn female camel. In particular, the writer brings to the fore the strength and courage of this Arab woman who publicly rejects the practice of polygamy<sup>39</sup> that her husband wants to impose on her and declares: “Ich, deine Arabisch Frau mit der weiblichen Geduld einer Kamelstute, verzichte darauf, hier und jetzt, zu Beginn des dritten Jahrtausends, im Herzen Europas, im Vollbesitz meiner geistigen Kräfte, deinen Ehrentitel als “Erstfrau” anzunehmen und freiwillig in deinen Harem einzutreten” (107) [I, your Arab wife with the feminine patience of a female camel, renounce, in full possession of my strengths, hier and now at the beginning of the third millenium and in the heart of Europe, to accept the honorary title of “first wife” and to voluntarily enter in your harem]. By referring to Islamic fundamentalism and by mentioning harem and poligamy, Tabai reinvigorates mainstream perceptions of Islam as a patriarchal and backward religion, raises doubts about the compatibility of Europe and Islam, and constructs Europeaness and Arabness as irreconcilable terms. On the whole, Tabai’s short stories demonstrate that Orientalist stereotypes have not faded and are still alive. By retrieving the traces of Orientalism in Tabai’s narrative, I have intended to solicit a reflection on the persistency and pervasivness of Orientalism and on the need to acknowledge and surpass its fatal legacy, if we want to prepare the ground for an alternative point of view that critically interrogates and sheds light on what it means to be Arab in Europe today.

#### **4. The Re-appropriation of History and the Redemption of Arabness**

Tabai’s short-stories demonstrate that Orientalist clichés are still alive and affect in negative ways current representations of Arab men and women. According to Jack Shaheen, the media and the film industry still contribute to diffuse a full range of commonplaces and

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<sup>39</sup> Poligamy is a pre-Islamic practice that Islam has regulated by limiting the number of wives to four; according to the Qu’ran, the wives must be treated equally. In Tunisia the practice of poligamy has been abolished in 1956, in Turkey in 1924, in Iraq in the 1950s. In other countries poligamy is regulated by the State legislation or by clauses in the wedding contract. For a deeper examination of Islamic Law, see Schacht (1984).

prejudices about Arabs: the cinema, for instance, represents Arab men as patriarchal and oppressive sheikhs, Muslim fundamentalists, and cynical fathers or husbands who stand out for their violent and authoritarian behaviour.<sup>40</sup> Aware of this situation, Abu-Jaber intervenes to resist and subvert these misrepresentations and develops in her works a supplementary narrative that complicates mainstream discourse.<sup>41</sup> In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber intertwines the story of Sirine and Han with the oral tale of Abdelrahman Salahadin that Sirine's uncle recounts to his niece. Abdelrahman Salahaddin is a friendly Arab Bedouin who leaves the Gulf of Aqaba, dives into the Red Sea, re-emerges in Hollywood and goes back to Egypt. Abdelrahman's high-sounding name is in clear contrast to his hopeless and desperate condition;<sup>42</sup> the son of a slave and a slave himself, Abdelrahman wrestles against an adverse fate and hostile historical conditions. Accordingly, he is introduced to the reader as a desperate man with "an incurable addiction to selling himself and faking his drowning" (*Crescent* 17). Through the allegorical figure of the "drowned Arab,"<sup>43</sup> Abu-Jaber retraces the millennial history of the cultural and historical relations between 'the West' and the Arab world and the subsequent removal and silencing of Arabs from History. On a literary level, the act of drowning signifies death by submersion and asphyxia; on a figurative level, however, it evokes oppression, subjugation, and annulment. This implicit meaning has driven

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<sup>40</sup> For an overview on the diffusion of stereotypes about Arabs and Islam in the Hollywood film industry, see Shaheen (2008).

<sup>41</sup> The capacity to contest mainstream discourse is not a prerogative of Arab diasporic writers. A contemporary Arab film production has recently flourished and has made itself known for its capacity to redress negative representations, provide the audience with an alternative point of view on contemporary problems, and educate a worldwide public about Arab experience and culture. Among others, the Annual Arab Film Festival held in San Francisco, Berkley, San José and Los Angeles from October 15<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> 2009 showed a wide-ranging selection of Arab films. The 2009 theme was "Bridging Cultures:" films have been selected according to their capacity to cross divisions, challenge Western prejudices, and illuminate with responsibility and professionalism the experience of Palestinian people under occupation. For more on the Festival, consult [www.aff.org](http://www.aff.org).

<sup>42</sup> As Gana explains (2008), the name Abdelrahman Salahadin condenses "mythical, historical, and cultural forces that factor in the makeup of an Arab and an Arab American identity" ("In Search of Andalusia" 239). The name Abdelrahman refers to the last Omayyad emir who survived the slaughter carried out by the rival Abbasids and escaped to Andalusia where he grounded an emirate that is still famous today for the peaceful co-existence between cultures and religious tolerance. Salahadin was a Kurdish Muslim who led the Islamic opposition during the Crusades and conquered Jerusalem. See Gana, "In Search of Andalusia" 239.

<sup>43</sup> Abu-Jaber employs this expression in different parts of the novel and transforms it into a category imbued with representative and universal meanings. See *Crescent* 318, 347.

Gana to interpret the character of the “drowned Arab” as a figure that dramatically manifests “the difficulties, implications and risks of the very fact of being Arab” (“In Search for Andalusia” 240). No wonder then that in the course of the tale, this allegorical figure becomes the emblem of Arab subjectivities whose identity and culture have been dissimulated and submerged by a flood of stereotypes. By supplementing History with story-telling, Abu-Jaber replaces the hegemonic narrative imposed by the 'West' with the imaginative adventures of Abdelrahman and by so doing, redeems the Arab history and identity in a fruitful manner. This is how the story-teller retraces back the richness of Arab and Muslim culture and informs his audience about the glory and fame of the Arab empire: “The story that you are not going to believe goes like this: There were once an Arab empire that dominated the world: the glorious Abbasid Empire reigned from the eighth until the thirteenth centuries – five hundred years. And Baghdad was its celestial capital” (*Crescent* 171). By highlighting the powerful history of the Abbasid Empire, Abu-Jaber rescues the illustrious Arab past from oblivion and reaffirms the dignity of the Arab culture and identity.<sup>44</sup> In particular, the author raises questions regarding the exclusions that Arabs have been victim to, and the episode that draws on Abdelrahman’s trip to Hollywood and his failed attempt to become a movie star is paradigmatic of the denigrating campaign that Arabs have been subjected to:

He gradually got more ambitious, wanting bigger parts, so he started asking around and heard about this and that. He also heard tales about a movie that had been made before his time that was called *El Shaykh*.

*The Sheik.*

Yes. That. A plum role. Arab incarnate. But they’d given the part to an Italian! Some know-nothing named Rudy So-and-So, because no one in Hollywood wanted anything to do with an actual Arab. Back then the

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<sup>44</sup> In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant considers the oral tale as a useful medium to contest an imposed History and subvert power. The oral tale is further redefined as “anti-History” (*Caribbean Discourse* 93).

directors and producers didn't think of Arabs as terrorists, they thought Arabs were more like something from the Bible. Of course, they didn't have time for that sort of nonsense. Besides, they thought someone with actual dark skin might run amok, do something unpredictable. So there were other Arab movies with great parts which went to Italians, some Irish, even a Spaniard or two, I hear. (336-337)

Here, the narrator sarcastically denounces the racism circulating in the Hollywood film industry in the 1920s by effect of which Arabs have been gradually turned into invisible bodies or violent beings, fossilized in a distant past and remote place. By showing how Arabs have been historically misrepresented and let down by the film industry, Abu-Jaber solicits the reader to take into consideration the pervasiveness of power and its damaging implications.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the reference to Hollywood is just a calculated procedure through which Abu-Jaber strategically manipulates a medium that is familiar to her implied American reader, in order to capture her/his attention and effectively communicate her message.<sup>46</sup>

The story of Abdelrahman Salahadin is narrated in a fantastic, highly coloured, and ironic way; nonetheless, the questions and problems that the writer raises are real and highly contentious. Some parts are certainly exaggerated and some features are amplified; yet, the facts that are brought to surface are actual and legitimate. Through the oral tale of Abdelrahman, Abu-Jaber critically interrogates and manipulates circulating prejudices about Arabs and Arab culture showing us that power is imbricated in different settings and exerts its influence throughout different historical periods.

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<sup>45</sup> Although many Arab-Americans, such as Ahmed Ahmed and Aron Kader, have successfully entered the film industry of Hollywood, Arab films are still marginalised and their inclusion in the world-wide market and distribution is still difficult to achieve. This problem has been raised at the opening night of the 13<sup>th</sup> Arab American Film Festival that was held in Los Angeles at the Writers Guild of America Theater on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010.

<sup>46</sup> In the interview with Robin Field, Abu-Jaber insists on this point and states: "If there's any social agenda in what I do, that is probably the number one thing: trying to counteract the media portrayals – the terrorist for the Arab man and the oppressed, hidden, exotic Arab woman. I talk about them in terms of diversity and humanity. I think the best way that comes through is by addressing vulnerability" (219).



## 5. The Impact of Gender and Race on the Construction of Identity

Arab diasporic writers explore the construction of 'difference' and address gender and race intersectionally. As Tiffin and Lawson note, in colonial times, race was "the obvious and immediate marker of difference" (8) and its harmful implications are still alive today. Through the construction of 'colored' races, different systems of power from colonialism to the present time have exerted dominion on the bodies constructed as non-white, condemning them to silence and invisibility (Tiffin and Lawson 1994; Spivak *A Critique*; Trinh Minh-Ha 1989). In their works, Nye and Abu-Jaber address the controversial issue of Arabs' racial ambiguity and subvert the dichotomy white vs. black on which racial difference is constructed. In *Arabian Jazz*, for instance, when Jem decides to resign from her work, she is verbally attacked by Portia, her white American boss, who insults her because of her Arab origins. In her racist discourse, Portia activates both gender and racial differences that are meant to confine Jem to an inferior position and re-establish her boss' control on her:

Look at what *I've* done with my life. You know, it's not too late for you. Oh, sure, you're tainted, your skin that color. A damn shame. But I've noticed that in certain lights it's worse than in others. Your mother could have made such beautiful children – they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose. Still, it could definitely have been worse for you, what with *his* skin. Now, if you were to change your name, make it Italian maybe, or even Greek, that might help some. I'm telling you this for love of your mother. I'll feel forever I might have saved her when the Arab man took her and you kids back to that horrible country of his over there. It's a wonder any of you survived that place, so evil, primitive, filled with disease! (294)

Here, Portia constructs Jem's body as "tainted," thus implying that her physical appearance and status have been corrupted by her father's race. Matussem is reduced to "his skin" or to

the generic category of “the Arab man,” while Jem’s American mother is compared to “a white rose,” an image that evokes her purity and delicacy and accordingly constructs Matussem as an usurper that has taken advantage of her innocence and kindness. Portia considers the colour of Jem’s skin and her family name a shameful stain that she has inherited from her Arab father. Jem’s body becomes the object of Portia’s disgust as hate has moved from her father’s body to her own. Indeed, as Ahmed rightly notes, racism is activated by hate whose circulation is never finite but endless; besides, its tendency to construct objects of disgust and hate “is never ‘over,’ as it awaits others who have not yet arrived” (*Cultural Politics* 47). Accordingly, Portia blames Jem because of her Arab origins, constructs her body as repulsive, and forces her to disown her origins; at the same time, she offers to save her from her Arabness, thus activating a traditional colonial and imperialistic model that sets the White Subject as the establisher of a good society and constructs the Racial Woman as her “object of protection from her own kind” (Spivak, *A Critique* 291). However, Jem’s “tainted body” appears slippery and hardly manageable and represents a device through which Abu-Jaber troubles and blurs Portia’s narrative. Jem’s undefined race muddles the binary constructions of pure white vs. pure black and unsettles the oppositions American/Arab, familiar/stranger, pure/contaminated, reputable/repulsive that are contained in Portia’s racist discourse. By demonstrating that Jem’s *opacity*<sup>47</sup> cannot be summed up or turned transparent in order to clearly posit her on one side or the other of the duality, Abu-Jaber asserts the subject’s complexity and her/his “right to opacity” (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 190). Both Glissant and Abu-Jaber refuse to suppress difference, reframe it as *opacity*, and celebrate it as an essential aspect of the contemporary world, one of the “unforeseeable and foretellable” forms of *Chaos-monde* (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 138). In their works, opacity cannot be appropriated and “must be preserved” (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 111) in order to conserve

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<sup>47</sup> In *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Glissant theorizes *opacity* as an obscurity that grounds relation and represents it as one of the necessary conditions for human recognition and solidarity to take place. See Glissant 190-194.

the vitality of exchanges and relations between human beings and their cultures. This idea is shared by Nye who reconceptualises white as a colour that has different shades and is accordingly “white, black, and all the grey neighbourhoods in between” (“Defining White” 109); the poet also underlines the fact that “people are none of these colors” (109) and by so doing, manifests the mystification implied in the construction of white.

Abu-Jaber and Nye demonstrate that race and gender are socio-cultural constructions that block subjectivities in fixed images, limiting their self-determination. This is how, in *Arabian Jazz*, Fatima sarcastically comments on the condition of women: “Weren’t women like black orchids, in the sorrow of their bodies, meant to be used up, to wither like roses, left in rockers, over sewing and TV, left without men or children, knowing their lives had never really been their own?” (337). Women are here constructed as passive and weak subjects expropriated by male authority, relegated in their homes, and confined in pre-given roles. These affirmations, however, are double-edged: the writer presents them as doubtful questions, as evident generalization, and dismantles them through the use of irony. In her novel, Abu-Jaber critically questions and openly rejects patriarchy and also subverts the circulating commonplaces about arranged marriages. The writer addresses this contentious issue through the character of Fatima, a busybody who interferes in Matussem’s relation with his daughters and is constantly looking for eligible Arab husbands for her nieces. In one particular scene, the narrator represents Fatima momentarily yielding after Jem’s rejection of Mr Farah Farah and then immediately running around the reception hall in search of a substitutive Arab husband for her niece:

Fatima reluctantly surrendered Farah Farah. As the party progressed, she moved through the crowd with predatory concentration, scanning tables, her hand grazing a shoulder here, an arm there. She moved like a sheikh, with

the sword of her gaze tearing away veils, appraising family trees, bank accounts, and social standing. (62)

Fatima's farcical representation has different results: by capturing the readers' attention through the use of irony, Abu-Jaber succeeds in connecting the audience with her Arab characters; moreover, by stressing Fatima's affiliation to the Syrian Orthodox Church, the author also thrives to subvert the link Islam/arranged marriages that circulates in mainstream discourse. Fatima's hectic and unsuccessful attempts to marry off her nieces ridicule her behaviour and induce the readers to critically question and reject a practice that voluntarily bypasses the person concerned. Moreover, by portraying Fatima's determination and her supremacy over her brother, who does not interfere in his daughters' life and is not interested in marrying them off, the author also blurs the connection patriarchy/arranged marriages and provides the audience with a different conception of Arab women, one in which women are not simply the victims but can also become the perpetrators of patriarchal power. The fatal implications of gender on the life of women are exemplified in yet another passage, in which the narrator recounts the machinations that Jem's aunts plan to marry her off: "When Jem turned nineteen, the earth made a quarter turn. The aunts got back on the phone and declared that Jem was ready for the altar. College had been innocent play for a semester or two, they said, but enough was enough, she'd have to shape up now, get serious about marriage and babies while there was time" (10). Through the technique of free indirect discourse, Abu-Jaber allows us to gain access to the manoeuvres that Jem's aunts carry out, hitting their niece from behind. The hyperbole of the globe making a quarter of turn is highly ironic and reveals an implicit critique. In addition, the representation of the aunts, stating officially that Jem should start behaving responsibly and sensibly, ridicules their behaviours and sanctions their interference. Still, by portraying the aunts as a committee or a court of law, the author also foregrounds the potency of gender and the legitimacy that the society grants it.

In this section, I have intended to demonstrate how Abu-Jaber represents and dismantles race and gender construction by employing different strategies and by demonstrating the inner limits, porous borders, and tricky ambivalence of the circulating categories. By so doing, the writer urges us to realize that ‘difference’ is inscribed on the subject by exterior social forces and accordingly interiorized by the self; she also bears witness to the subject’s ability to resist and repudiate those constructions and demonstrates that literature can effectively contribute to their detection and neutralization.

### **6. The Rehabilitation of Arabness**

Far from being complicit with power, Abu-Jaber and Nye use their art as a means to question, manipulate, and fracture different power systems. In “The Sweet Arab, the Generous Arab” (2008), Nye substitutes the inimical images of Arabs circulated by the media and the film industry with more familiar depictions of Arab men and women drawn from the everyday life:

Since no else is mentioning you enough.

The Arab who extends his hand.

The Arab who will not let you pass

his tiny shop without a welcoming word.

The refugee inviting us in for a Coke.

.....

Fathers and grandmothers,  
uncles, the little lost cousin who wanted only  
to see a Ferris wheel in his lifetime, ride it  
high into the air. (141)

Nye portrays here cordial, generous, and helpful Arabs who normally do not hit the headlines; by so doing, the poet restores the positivity of Arabness and rehabilitates the Arab identity. By highlighting the generosity, hospitality and kindness of the people mentioned in the poem, Nye succeeds in resisting and subverting hegemonic discourses that tend to uniform Arabs in a homogeneous and threatening category, by manifesting their human face. The poet circulates humanity through her art and provides the audience with a humanizing paradigm. Her poem functions as a *supplement* (Derrida, “From *Of Grammatology*” 1824-1825), a substituting narrative that invalidates stereotyped depictions of Arabs and complicates mainstream discourse(s) by providing an additional point of view. Similarly, in “He Said EYE-RACK” (2008), Nye interweaves the official discourse held by former President George W. Bush with the images of peaceful and innocent Arabs and contributes to diffuse familiar and affectionate representations of Arab men and women. By so doing, Nye provides the reader with a humanizing framework, that annuls the President’s attempt to dehumanize Arabs in order to legitimize the war on terror:

On St Patrick’s Day

2003, President Bush wore a blue tie. Blinking hard,

he said, ‘We are not dealing with peaceful men.’

He said, ‘reckless aggression’.

He said ‘the danger is clear’.

.....

He said, ‘We are

against the lawless men who

rule your country, not you.’ Tell that

to the mother, the sister, the bride,

the proud boy, the peanut-seller,

the librarian careful with her shelves. (142)

The attitude and words of former President Bush are in clear contrast to the Arab men and women mentioned by Nye. In particular, by referring to his “blue tie,” “his hard blinking,” and his pitiless words, Nye foregrounds Bush’s stiffness and anger, thus inviting us to dissociate from his position. The repetition of the expression “he said” and Bush’s sententious and terse declarations convey the impression that his voice is the only one that can be heard. In particular, his harsh announcements recall a death sentence that is pronounced in a law court to punish a criminal; this idea is reinforced by the fact that Bush associates Arabs to law-breakers, violent and irresponsible individuals. The representations outlined by Bush are very different from the innocent and defenceless portrayals sketched by Nye. As this poem demonstrates, the poet understands literature as a space where mainstream discourse can be contested, where ordinary people with their daily lives finally get recognition and are allowed to speak up, where a more democratic and responsible knowledge and more human and positive representations can be developed. Through her writing, Nye disturbs power, openly disagrees with it, and articulates an alternative narrative. As Gana observes, contemporary Arab-American writers conceive literature as a means to develop a counter-discourse that invalidates “the inimical image of Islam and Arabness as well as the continual violence of which it is simultaneously the target and the product” (“Introduction” 1573). This is particularly true in the case of “Words Under the Words” (1995) in which Nye represents her Palestinian grandmother Sitti Khadra:<sup>48</sup>

My grandmother’s hands recognize grapes,  
the damp shine of a goat’s new skin.  
When I was sick they followed me,  
I woke from the long fever to find them

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<sup>48</sup> The relationship between Arab-American women writers and their grandmothers is a crucial theme in Arab-American literature. For an overview on this issue, see Kadi 3-63.

covering my head like cool prayers.  
My grandmother's days are made of bread,  
a round pat-pat and the slow baking.  
She waits by the oven watching a strange car  
circle the streets. Maybe it holds her son,  
lost to America. More often, tourists,  
who kneel and weep at mysterious shrines. (36)

Nye describes here the rural environment in which her *sitti* lives and carries out her quotidian activities. In particular, by stressing her unsophisticated and spartan lifestyle, the poet praises her simplicity and humbleness. The focus on her hands alludes to the manual jobs in which Sitti Khadra is involved, while the reference to her genuine attachment to the land implicitly calls to mind the Palestinian plight. By comparing Sitti Khadra's hands to "cool prayers," Nye foregrounds her ability to offer relief and her proximity to God, thus enveloping her in an aura of holiness. Interesting in this poem is that Nye suggests that Sitti Khadra finds the sacred in the quotidian and therefore constructs her religiosity as opposed to the exaggerated and codified religious acts of the tourists. On the whole, this poem can be read as a hymn that praises Sitti Khadra's dignity and humbleness, rehabilitates Arabness, and celebrates the holiness of human life.

### **7. The Construction and Representation of Others**

Nye and Abu-Jaber use their writing to redeem Arabness and provide the reader with more positive and familiar representations of Arab men and women. If Nye connects with her readers by sketching empathic portrayals, Abu-Jaber uses humour and outlines in *Arabian Jazz* highly ironic and brisk representations:



Jem had just justified a food-wide stack of filing, there were a variety of ink blotches on her hands, one heart-shaped dot near her nose; her wild hair was gnarled into a bun and speared by a pencil, and her lower lip was caught in her teeth, her expression something close to a perpetual surprise. In contrast, Melvie – skin, hair, uniform, even her mind – seemed sleek as stainless steel. (5)

Abu-Jaber sketches here two opposite representations that are very effective: while Jem is described as a messy and clumsy young woman, whose marks of colour on her hands and nose reveal a lack of discipline and self-control, Melvina is represented as a strict and severe nurse who wears a pure white uniform and is extremely neat, smart, and confident. By focusing on Jem's untidy and twisted hair, the narrator underlines her oddity and peculiarity; by comparing Melvie to a "stainless steel" (5), she highlights her rigid and austere character. Yet, in the course of the story, the inner conflicts and unresolved questions that haunt each character are gradually revealed and the one-dimensional representations, that are outlined at the beginning of the novel, are completely subverted and gain depth.<sup>49</sup>

Abu-Jaber does not only blur, manipulate, and substitute negative and unfair representations with more familiar and comic ones but also manifests the danger enclosed in biased images and exclusivist forms of identifications. In *Arabian Jazz*, for instance, the narrator reveals and implicitly condemns Fatima's dislike for Americans and criticizes her efforts to preserve her cultural 'purity.' Fatima constructs Americans as inferior, refuses to mix up with them, and blames them for not having the culinary and cultural knowledge of Arabs:

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<sup>49</sup> As Pauline Kaldas rightly notes, one of the most controversial aspects of *Arabian Jazz* has been the ways through which Abu-Jaber has chosen to represent members belonging to the Arab-American community. Her depictions have been criticized and accused to "invite ridicule" (171); however, as Kaldas aptly points out her portrayals are only apparently oversimplified and monolithic and gain depth as the story develops. On this contentious issue, see Kaldas 167-185.

She lived among Americans, in places they had built, among their people, but despite this she wanted to keep herself, her family, and a few friends apart from the rest. She wanted what the Americans had, but at the same time she would never relax her hold on herself. It was not appropriate to mingle. Americans had the money, but Arabs, ah! They had the food, the culture, the etiquette, the ways of being and seeing and understanding how life was meant to be lived. (360)

Abu-Jaber illuminates here the negative implications of Fatima's exclusivist identification; she also critically questions the danger involved in cultural representations that construct certain subjects as superior and more cultivated than others. By transferring "the production of othering" (Spivak, *A Critique* 215), that normally affects Arabs, on American subjectivities, Abu-Jaber demonstrates that stereotypes and inhuman constructions continually shift across time and space, touching different subjects and turning them into threatening or inferior others.<sup>50</sup> In *Crescent*, for instance, Abu-Jaber reverses the production of othering and constructs 'Western' women as lazy, capricious and infantile young girls who live at the expenses of others and conduct a spoiled life. This is how American and European women are described:

Most of the women at the pool had no jobs or income of their own. They oiled themselves and read romance novels and tilted mirrors under their chins. Han had trouble imagining that they could be of the same species as the women in his village – women constantly at work clearing rice, threshing wheat, sweeping the floors, embroidering sheets, their skin

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<sup>50</sup> In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed argues that hate is at the origin of the erection of impermeable boundaries and the fabrication of threatening Others. She adds: hate "is involved in the very negotiation of boundaries between selves and others, and between communities, where "others" are brought into the sphere of my or our existence as a threat" (51).

toughened, eyes radiating lines from years of looking across fields and high walls of camel thorn climbing into the sun.

The women at the pool seemed half-formed to Han, caught between childhood and adulthood – they were clearly older than he was, yet as slender as children, their skin tender as larvae. And they had the petulance of children – they would egg on Han and Sami, coaxing them to do their tricks in the water, until inevitably they grew bored and turned back to their magazines. (244-245)

Here, American and European women are represented as economically dependent on their husbands and in opposition to the local women who work with no pause in the fields and at home. They are further compared to bad tempered and immature children with “half-formed” bodies; the simile of the larva stresses their immaturity and regression into childishness and is a calculated procedure that strips them of their human qualities. By representing American and European women as fanciful and moody girls, Abu-Jaber implicitly denounces the striking economic and social differences that separate them from local women and implicitly condemns the *unevenness*<sup>51</sup> of the contemporary world. If Abu-Jaber constructs European and American women as Others, Bouraoui reverses the process of othering that Algerians have been victim to, and equates French people with monstrous vampires who suck and appropriate Algerians’ histories, impressions, and memories:

You’ll be afraid of French people, their violence, their thirst for blood, and their thirst for stories. You will be afraid of those vampires, afraid of those who want to know everything, make sense of everything, understand everything about Algeria’s mystery and situation. They will ask you. They

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<sup>51</sup> The term “uneven” has been used by Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan to underline the unbalanced and asymmetrical relations that distinguish the contemporary globalized world. See Radhakrishnan 2003.

will feed off of you without ever devouring you, capturing you, or understanding you. (52)

By comparing French subjectivities to blood-thirsty and violent vampires, who feed themselves on Algerians' memories, answers, and narratives, Bouraoui constructs the French as abominable beings, "who are beyond the very category of 'the human'" (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 3). By constructing French people as threatening monsters and by dehumanizing them, Bouraoui reverses and replicates the production of othering that is normally directed against Arab subjectivities. In fact, Arab diasporic women writers normally undertake the task of forging responsible and human representations but at the same time show us that the fabrication of Others is not a one-way process and can affect different people in different times and places. By and large, Abu-Jaber and Bouraoui put us on guard against processes of dehumanization that construct others as inferior and intrinsically different from 'us'.

### **8. The Transgression of Cultural and Racial Boundaries**

Arab diasporic women writers reveal and raise questions regarding the process of othering; they also manipulate and move beyond socially constructed categories of gender, race, and culture, by bridging cultural, racial, and social divisions. For example, in *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber transgresses racial and cultural categorizations and strategically connects her Arab-American characters to the poor white American community of Syracuse and to the African-American group. Accordingly, when confronted with a racist attack, Jem openly asserts her black inheritance, strategically identifies with her African grandmother, and proudly affirms: "My father's mother *was* black. (...) Yeah, a former slave. She married her master who had twenty-six other wives. They were black, brown, and yellow, and some didn't even *have* skin" (295, her emphasis). By stressing the connection between the Arab-American and the African-American group, Abu-Jaber asserts the permeability of racial boundaries,



don't wanna be  
your erotic  
not your exotic

Since the beginning, the poet establishes her authority by stating firmly what she is not; she also dismantles the image of the exotic woman as a “delicate fragile colourful bird” and the representation of the Oriental Woman as a “belly dancer” and a “harem girl”. By referring to the “venus hottentot” and the “geisha girl,” the poet draws a connection between Arab, African, and Asian women who have been victim to similar denigrating representations. By so doing, Hammad moves beyond her cultural identity, aligns herself with women belonging to other cultural and racial groups, and adds new power and legitimacy to her denunciation. The poet also draws a connection between colonial and domestic oppression and criticizes in an energetic way a whole bunch of Orientalist clichés and current labels that reduce women to mere objects of pleasure. Through the use of piercing words, Hammad destroys the monolithic representation of the (Arab) woman and provides the audience with a self-representation that oozes with confidence and power. As I have meant to show in this section, both Abu-Jaber and Hammad contest and redress unfair and denigrating representations and promote through their art intercultural and interracial alliances. By breaking free from their cultural group, they revitalize their claims and construct powerful and irreverent portrayals that shake our assumptions and subvert stereotyped representations.

## **9. Conclusion**

Arab diasporic women writers explore issues related to the construction of identity and the representation of Arabness and investigate the impact of socially constructed categories such as gender and race on the self. Both Nye and Bouraoui describe identity construction as a process that is evolving and shifts between different forms of identifications; in particular,

Bouraoui insists on the sense of rupture and loss experienced by diasporic subjects, while Abu-Jaber foregrounds the relationality and interdependence of the self. If Tabai tends to re-propose a narrative imbued with traditional Orientalist stereotypes, thus demonstrating that Orientalism is still alive and well received in the European context, Nye contests negative and inimical images of Arab men and women and substitutes them with more familiar and dignifying pictures. Moreover, Abu-Jaber and Nye voluntarily alter and overturn Orientalist clichés and contest circulating stereotypes that block Arab subjectivities in predetermined roles. Far from reconfirming the uniform, simplistic, and abstract representations circulated by the media and the film industry, Arab diasporic women writers turn to the concrete everyday life of the Arab diaspora and shape dignifying and powerful representations, putting their art at the service of intercultural coexistence. Finally, by showing us the fatal effects of the production of othering, they also warn us against the dehumanization and subsequent degradation of others. On the whole, Arab diasporic women writers show that identities are plural and in flux and demonstrate that fixed categories such as Arabness, Americanness, and Europeaness are inadequate to express the intertwined reality of the Arab diaspora. Indeed, as Glissant reminds us, “the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” (*Poetics of Relation* 145), their interrelations, and interdependencies open the way to a new re-consideration, one that affects identities and representations, nations and intercultural affiliations. By highlighting how identities and representations, subjectivities and nations change under the influence of their reciprocal connections, Arab diasporic women writers reframe Arabness as an evolving category of identification that reflects and diffracts foreign and traditional elements, and refashion identity as “a capacity for variation (...), a variable - either under control or wildly fluctuating” (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 144).

### III. MULTILINGUALISM, VOCALITY, AND STORYTELLING

I have only one language and it is not mine; my “own” language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.

Derrida, 1998

This chapter analyses the uses and functions of multilingualism, vocality, and storytelling in Arab diasporic literature. By comparing the works of Farhoud, Abu-Jaber, and Bouraoui, I intend to demonstrate that these authors combine different languages in order to challenge monolingualism and its destructive implications,<sup>53</sup> cross linguistic, ethnic, and national boundaries, and foster intercultural exchange and mutual understanding. I also take into exam and critically interrogate the relation that members belonging to the first and the second generation entertain with their respective language(s); in particular, I argue that Abu-Jaber and Farhoud shed light on the alienation and vulnerability that members of the first generation may experience with respect to English and French, while Bouraoui and Nye bring to the fore the frustration, sense of guilt, and uncanny feelings that the second generation may feel with respect to Arabic.

I will then stage a dialogue among the philosophical works *For More Than One Voice* (2005) by Adriana Cavarero and “An Account of Oneself” (2008) by Judith Butler and the novel *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante* by Farhoud with the aim to foreground the relational character of language, highlight the uniqueness of the self, and reflect on the limits of accountability. Drawing from Farhoud’s novel, I also intend to analyse and critically question the impact of patriarchy on women’s speech, and to demonstrate that diasporic women are not immune from social pressures within their families and community as well as in the “new”

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<sup>53</sup> According to Derrida, monolingualism degrades language to a homogeneous system and is implemented through violent linguistic impositions and interdictions. He adds, “the monolingualism imposed by the other operates by relying upon that foundation, here, through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogeneous” (*Monolingualism* 39-40).



country. As I hope to show, Farhoud's novel is a complex and multi-layered text that blurs the boundaries separating orality from writing, voice from speech, and explores the functions and limits of accountability and writing.

In the last part, I will focus my attention on story-telling and examine the fundamental role played by this popular oral practice in Abu-Jaber's novels. My aim is to demonstrate that Abu-Jaber recovers the traditional practice of story-telling, introduces it into the American context, and transforms it into a resistant and liberating activity.

### **1. Monolingualism or Multilingualism?**

Arab diasporic women writers show different attitudes towards multilingualism: Tabai and Ghazy, for instance, tend to keep their language intact and 'pure,' while Farhoud and Abu-Jaber contaminate English and French with foreign terms and expressions. Monolingualism is clearly predominant in Tabai's collection of short stories, where Arabic is restricted to the names of the characters and to the toponyms of the cities in which the action takes place. Monolingualism is also prevailing in Ghazy's novel, where Arabic words are circumscribed to Islamic terms such as "fatwa" (69, 146), "Allah" (89, 110), "ijtihad" (146), "umma" (146), and "sheikh" (147), a procedure that reinforces the association between Arabness and Islam already widely diffused in the Italian context. Ghazy and Tabai's inclination towards monolingualism may be explained as an attempt to sound 'authentically' Italian and German writers in order to speed up the recognition and inclusion of their works within the privileged category of national literature. The homogeneity of their language may also be interpreted as a cautious operation through which these writers avoid that their linguistic experimentalism be turned into a battleground for literary as well as social confrontations. As Peter Auer and Li Wei explain: "Language purism is nothing but a symbolic battle field for social conflicts; but the fact that it is a powerful weapon, that it makes sense as an argument at all in the public

debate, shows that the normative pattern against which language is discussed continues to be that of a 'pure,' monolingual language” (3). Auer and Wei further develop this idea by noting that since the 19th century, multilingualism has been interpreted as a linguistic disorder and a “degeneration” (2). It follows that today, monolingualism is still considered the norm on which writers, especially transnational, diasporic, and exiled writers, are expected to conform. Considering how recent and rare writings by women of Arab origins living in Italy and in Germany are, and how inadequate national categories are to classify works that in fact exceed clear-cut national categorizations, Ghazy and Tabai may have chosen to employ a 'safe' monolingualism in order to avoid contaminating the alleged purity of European languages and be quickly acknowledged as members of the privileged group of national writers.<sup>54</sup> Rather than inscribing their cultural peculiarity on their works, Ghazy and Tabai prefer to use a convenient monolingualism instead of a contaminated language that would daringly reflect the distinctiveness of their in-between condition and foreground the particularity of their literature.

Unlike Ghazy and Tabai, Abu-Jaber and Farhoud manipulate and alter the language in which they write by punctuating it with foreign words, expressions, and exclamations, or by troubling its normativity with foreign grammatical constructs. In *Crescent*, for instance, Abu-Jaber interrupts her narration with Arabic words such as *labneh*, *mjeddrah*, *roasted kharuf* (56), indicating typical Arab dishes, *rai* and *maqaams* (311, 312), referring to Arab music, *hejjab* and *iftar* (186, 273), denoting typical Islamic religious practices. She also introduces in her narration Arabic transliterations of English terms, as in the case of “*Hal’Awud*, *Dar’Aktr*, and *Fil’Imm*” (336), and by so doing raises questions regarding the distortions and legitimacy

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<sup>54</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, a Croat-Dutch writer who lives in Amsterdam, laments the use of national categories as a valid term of reference to judge and classify literary works and their authors. She adds: “While we concern ourselves with questions regarding the literary, historical, national, ethnic and European identity, a wide grey zone of non-territorial literature is growing in the interstices of the literature of Europe (as well as of other geographical areas). This zone is inhabited by 'ethnically inauthentic' authors, émigrés, migrants, writers in exile, writers belonging simultaneously to two cultures, bilingual authors who write 'neither here, nor there' and in any case beyond the boundaries of their national literatures” (Ugrešić 53, my translation).

of the various acts of translation and transliteration. Furthermore, in *Arabian Jazz*, Matussem expresses himself through a broken and multilingual speech. These are just two of the numerous examples that bear witness to Matussem's contaminated and 'disturbed' language: "My friend, if you caring to tangle, then *vaya con dios*, but if she ask, *I* knows nothing!" (17, her emphasis); "This goes to my two beyootiful daughters, *ach du liebe, Augustin*, they are cute! And to the favorite movie star of Big Daddy Ramoud, who is Myrna Loy!" (149, her emphasis). Matussem's broken language can be interpreted as the living symbol of his *double consciousness*; it is also a cunning procedure through which Abu-Jaber attempts to challenge linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries, and accounts for the interethnic affiliations and interracial alliances that are negotiated in the Arab diaspora.<sup>55</sup> In other words, by opening English up to and mixing it with other languages, Abu-Jaber celebrates multilingualism as a potential that resides in each language and as a device that the speaker uses to ally with other minority groups. This idea is shared by Auer and Li who consider multilingualism as a useful device to negotiate intercultural and transnational affiliations. In their words: "multilingualism offers society a bridge-building potential—bridges between different groups beyond the artificial boundaries of a nation, and bridges for the cross-fertilization between cultures" (12). Moreover, by using a mixed language and by subjecting one single word to multiple variations, Abu-Jaber asserts multilingualism as a technique meant to disturb and contest language purism. Accordingly, in the following passage, Abu-Jaber subjects the word "daddy" to a whirling variation: "Calls me Big Daddy," Matussem chanted on. "I am Père, Abu, Fader, Senior, Senior. Call me Pappy, Pappa, Padre, Paw Paw, Sir!" (148).

Similarly to Abu-Jaber, Farhoud inserts in her narrative Arabic words, translated proverbs and tales. The novel is written in French but is far from being monolingual:

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<sup>55</sup> Pia Quist and J. Nomann Jørgensen (2007), for instance, maintain that speakers tend to use fragments of foreign languages to negotiate new alliances. They add, "rather than fitting into or representing one ethnic category, speakers [use] language to negotiate these affiliations and to challenge them in ways that sometimes [make] new meaning or 'new ethnicities' become possible" (373).

Québécois slang (*joual*) is intertwined with standard French and interrupted by untranslated Arabic words, such as *sitto* (20) or *hoummos bi tahini* (23), and calques of traditional Arabic sayings and tales. In particular, Arabic proverbs are disseminated in the novel and displayed in a bilingual version at the end of the book.<sup>56</sup> These are just few of the numerous examples of Arab traditional sayings interspersed with the text: “une main vide est une main sale” (23) [an empty hand is a dirty hand], “Allah est avec le faible pour étonner le fort” (34) [Allah is with the weak to astonish the strong], “un jour feu, un jour cendre” (137) [a day fire, a day ash]. These traditional dictums represent colorful and vivid gem stones of popular wisdom that provide the reader with a fascinating glimpse on the popular common sense of the “Old Country” and contribute to broaden his/her knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

Farhoud and Abu-Jaber harmoniously blend Arabic with English and by so doing, they shed light on the contacts, mutual influences, and reciprocal changes that characterize the relation between languages.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, by inserting Arabic words without accompanying them with any explicatory note or translation, they “inscribe alterity” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 71) within the English and French language and contribute to solicit the readers’ curiosity and extend their cultural background. In this regard, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the introduction of untranslated words within a text reproduces and communicates a “sense of cultural distinctiveness” (63), forcing the reader to overcome the limits of her/his own culture. Yet, for readers who are not familiar with Arabic and the Arab culture, the inclusion of foreign words in the narrative could provoke a certain irritation as it obligates them to interrupt their reading to guess or gather the meaning of the untranslated words from the context. Accordingly, I believe that, in order to avoid confusion and disorientation, the

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<sup>56</sup> See the section “Léxique” at the end of the book (161-167).

<sup>57</sup> For more on Arab proverbs, riddles, jokes and curses, see Reynolds 111-118. As Reynolds points out, proverbs should not be considered the ultimate proof of a community’s overview and perspective on life, as each proverb can easily be contradicted by another saying that circulates a completely different set of beliefs.

<sup>58</sup> According to Eva Hoffman: “Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the Other relative” (466).

injection of untranslated words should be carefully calibrated, if the author wants to stimulate rather than hinder intercultural understanding. On the whole, Farhoud and Abu-Jaber's multilingualism takes the shape of *a hospitable language* (Zaccaria 2004) that is open to foreign words and expressions, is receptive to the impulses of diaspora, and is attuned to the sounds and melodies of the languages that coexist in that space.<sup>59</sup> On the whole, by choosing multilingualism, Abu-Jaber and Farhoud account for and celebrate the contaminations and entanglements that characterize the Arab diaspora, develop original multilingual experimentations, and map new language territories.

## 2. Multilingualism as a Political Act

Similarly to Farhoud and Abu-Jaber, Bouraoui intersperses her text with Kabyle and Arabic terms, and raises questions regarding the linguistic dispossession suffered by Algerians during colonialism and by Kabyles after the independence of Algeria. Kabyle and Arabic words such as *Ava inouva*, *rawa*, *abou*, *el Djazair*, and *yahya* are introduced in the narration and hint at the complex and intermixed reality of contemporary Algeria. By introducing these terms in her narrative, Bouraoui gives visibility to two local languages that have been subjected to various attacks during the French colonialism and Algerian nationalism.<sup>60</sup> In particular, by shedding light on the vacillating and mimicked linguistic re-appropriation that Yasmina and Amina carry out in their games, the author implicitly condemns the linguistic dispossession that the two girls have been victim to, and represents it as a permanent mutilation:

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<sup>59</sup> I here transfer the articulation of the Chicano language elaborated by Anzaldúa and interpreted by Zaccaria as a *language that hosts* [una lingua che ospita] to the Arab-American and Arab-Canadian contexts and use it as a term of reference to illuminate Farhoud and Abu-Jaber's mixed and diversified writings. See Zaccaria (2004).

<sup>60</sup> Derrida makes a compelling argument about the ways through which different cultural systems implement their power through the imposition and interdiction of a given language. On the problems related to the complex history of Algerians' linguistic dis-appropriation, see Derrida (1998).

We repeat the Kabyle words without understanding. It's a language that already sings without a music. It's a language for children. "Ava Inouva," our lullaby. We dance as best as we can, with our laughter and our sadness. Still, excluded from this foreign land, we find it impossible and closed to us. We don't know the Kabyle language; we mimic it. Like the Arabic language, it's our invention and misfortune. (31)

Yasmina and Amina have been deprived of their language and attempt through their games to re-appropriate it. By portraying the girls repeating Kabyle words perrot-fashion, Bouraoui bears evidence to their linguistic alienation and denounces the fatal effects of language imposition and interdiction.<sup>61</sup> By introducing Kabyle and Arabic words in her writing, Bouraoui attacks colonialism for having reduced language to the homogeneity and hegemony of French and for having dispossessed Algerians and torn apart their intimate bond with their mother-tongue. If Bouraoui denounces the linguistic dispossession that Algerians have been victim to during colonialism, in "Copulation in English," Mohja Kahf<sup>62</sup> attacks the uncontested supremacy and 'purity' of English and cunningly contaminates her poem with Arabic verses:

We are going to dip English backward  
by its Shakespearean tresses  
arcing its spine like a crescent  
.....  
We are going to give English the makeover of its lifetime,  
darkening the rims of its eyes with Hindi antimony,

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<sup>61</sup> In *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998), Derrida draws a clear connection between the interdiction to use a particular language and self-negation. As he puts it: "One forbids access to speech [*au dire*], that is all, a certain kind of speech. But that is precisely the fundamental interdiction, the absolute interdiction, the interdiction of diction and speech. The interdiction from which I tell, tell myself, and tell it to myself, is then not simply one interdiction among others" (32).

<sup>62</sup> Mohja Kahf was born in Syria and emigrated with her family to the US when she was 3.

making it blush Farsi roses

— اليل ليلي ليل ليلي ليل ليلي ليلك — (71)

English is compared here to a noble and reputable girl with “Shakespearean tresses” (71) who is maltreated and tormented by a group of “new bullies” (71). Verbs such as “dip”, “arc”, “rewrite” and “darken” highlight the subjugation and passivity of English that appears helpless and incapable of reacting to the abuses. The personal pronoun “we” as opposed to “English” reveals an unbalanced and asymmetrical power relation. The tone of the poem is irreverent, scornful, and impertinent; the style is inflammatory and provoking. The insertion of Arabic verses in the poem, is a calculated procedure through which Kahf contests the homogeneity of English and attempts to redress the unbalanced relation between the two languages. Arabic functions as a virus that infects and shakes the entire composition; it is a powerful language, that corrupts the respectability of English, weakens its power, and intoxicates its linguistic system, forcing “nouns and adjectives / and onomatopoeics and objective correlatives” (71) to rotate and twist. In another stanza, by referring to the “biblical heart” of English and by unveiling its “blades,” Kahf calls into question and sarcastically derides the supposed missionary and civilizing objectives of the colonial enterprise and, in a spectacular way, unmask the knives and weapons through which colonialism has been carried out. Kahf openly attacks English and declares her contempt; the colonial enterprise is the object of her ridicule and scorn. Nevertheless, in the penultimate stanza, the confrontation between English and Arabic is substituted by the depiction of a tumultuous passion between the two languages that personify two proud and stubborn lovers:

We are going to make English love us

and kiss us and explore us with its tongues

Then we will play hard-to-get

and English will have to phone

and leave message after message of desire on our machines

English will have to learn what to say to please us

(71) تذ للت, تذ للت حتى رق لي قلب حاسدي

Kahf's poem can be read as an assault directed to English and, at the same time, as the confession of a non-reciprocated love and irresistible attraction. Derrida's interpretation of the operation directed against monolingualism as a gesture guided both by affection and hostility, can help us illuminate the double bind embedded in Kahf's writing. In Derrida's words:

This gesture is itself plural, divided, and overdetermined. It can always allow itself to be interpreted as an impulse of love or aggression toward the body of any given language that is thus exposed. Actually, it does both things; it surrenders itself, devotes itself, and links itself together with the given language (...). It caresses with claws, sometimes borrowed claws.

*(Monolingualism 65-6)*

As I have intended to demonstrate in this section, Bouraoui and Kahf address the complex topic of the relation between power and language and attempt to overturn the mechanisms that establish the social appeal, hegemony, and visibility of one language over another. In their works, multilingualism is reframed as a political act aimed to undermine the homogeneity and hegemony of English and French and openly contest and transgress the norms that preserve language purism.

### **3. First Generation and Linguistic Alienation**

Abu-Jaber and Farhoud explore the impact of dislocation on the self and manifest the linguistic alienation that members belonging to the first generation may experience with respect to their second language. In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber stresses Matussem's grammatically disordered language and contaminates his English with the tone and syntax of



Arabic. This is particularly evident in the following scene in which Matussem tells the fantastic story of the moon and the gazelle to his daughters:

“Now, well, girls,” Matussem said, his English at the time unwieldy.

“Tonight I tells you about moon and gazelle. There was and there was not one nights when the gazelle see these moon in water place, a lake, like ink these lake. The gazelle she ask moon in sky, 'Whad now? Who these in water?’” (76)

Matussem’s grammatically incorrect and syntactically disturbed language is clearly influenced by the tone and structure of Arabic, as the expression “there was and there was not” and the omission of the verb “to be” indicate. Matussem’s language is a cumbersome system where Arabic and English chaotically mix, thus provoking comic and humorous effects. In fact, his speech unveils a linguistic discrepancy that is symptomatic of his *double consciousness* and unresolved sense of belonging.<sup>63</sup> In particular, Matussem’s patchy idiom can be interpreted as the living symbol of his conflictual relation with his “new” language and country of adoption. Indeed, as Derrida reminds us: “The accent indicates a hand-to-hand combat with language in general; it says more than accentuation. Its symptomatology invades writing” (*Monolingualism* 46). By stressing Matussem’s linguistic alienation, Abu-Jaber manifests Arabic as a *clandestine* language that is hardly dissimulated and abruptly comes to surface and manifests itself whenever he takes the floor. In addition, Matussem’s deviation from a perfectly balanced and symmetrical bilingualism seems to confirm Tzvetan Todorov’s conviction that a perfect bilingualism is illusory and exceptional.<sup>64</sup>

Matussem’s language alternation appears in clear opposition to his daughter’s normative and 'pure' English. Let me underline that this rigid linguistic demarcation is artificial and instrumental in manifesting the intergenerational divide between first and second

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<sup>63</sup> This idea is confirmed by Pauline Kaldas who observes that “all of Matussem’s comic qualities point to something deeper, which is his awkward relationship with the American society” (169).

<sup>64</sup> On the impossibility of a perfectly balanced and symmetrical bilingualism, see Todorov (1985).

generation, and in addressing a central theme of Arab diasporic literature. Such intergenerational fracture is exemplified in the following dialogue, in which Melvina is in full command of English and interrogates her father about his night out, while Matussem appears completely helpless and speechless:

Melvina glowered, eyes blackening, waiting in the doorway for her father late Monday evening. «Tell me why,» she said as he entered the house. «Why must you go to that snake pit at all hours of the night? What attracts you?»

«Snake pit? What snakes? Where? Show to me.»

Melvie crossed her arms. «You know who I'm talking about – Joe Brummett, Ricky Ellis, Sam Otts; it's chock-full of shady characters and troublemakers. Don't play dumb A-rab with me, Mr. Ramoud.» (20)

The relation between father and daughter appears completely reversed. Melvina is represented as a worried parent who angrily awaits the arrival of her teen-age son, overwhelms him with questions, and disapproves of his friends. Her agitated words and rigid attitude manifest her rage for what she considers to be unacceptable behaviour. Moreover, the comic quality of the scene is increased by the misunderstanding about what a “snake pit” is: while Melvina uses the expression figuratively to allude to the hole where Matussem and his friends hide, her father interprets her remark literally. This discrepancy foregrounds their different command of English and their asymmetrical relation; accordingly, Matussem's linguistic deficiencies relegate him to an inferior position and expose him to his daughter's allegations. Matussem's estrangement from English and his subordination to his daughter reveal his impotency and vulnerability. These are two features that Matussem shares with Dounia, the protagonist of Farhoud's novel *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*. Dounia is illiterate both in Arabic and French and clings to the other members of her family to complete even the simplest of tasks.

This condition of total dependency makes her feel helpless and totally estranged from the reality in which she lives. Her incapacity to speak French is reframed as a language barrier that segregates her in her house and isolates her from the rest of the world. Dounia feels estranged both from the people in the streets and from her children who have been raised in Canada and speak a language that is different from her own. In the following passage, Dounia reflects on the ambivalent feelings of proximity and distance that characterize her relation to her daughter:

Je ne la comprends pas toujours très bien. Elle non plus, peut-être. Nous avons toutes les deux la même langue maternelle, mais que d'années elle a passées à étudier une autre langue. Myriam a vécu presque toute sa vie ici.

De tous mes enfants, c'est elle que je sens la plus loin de moi et en même temps la plus proche. (...) Même si je l'aime et qu'elle m'aime, j'ai l'impression parfois d'être en présence d'une étrangère: sa façon d'hésiter, de chercher ses mots quand elle parle l'arabe, d'y mettre des mots de français et surtout sa manière de penser qui ne ressemble pas à la mienne.

Moi aussi, j'hésite, je cherche mes mots, mais ce n'est pas pareil, moi, j'ai perdu quelque chose en chemin, tandis que Myriam a emprunté une autre route. (24-25)

[I don't always understand her very well. Maybe, neither does she. We share the same mother-tongue but she has spent many years learning another language. Myriam has lived almost her entire life here.

Of all my children, she is the one I feel more close to and at the same time more distant. (...) Although I love her and she loves me, I sometimes have the impression to be in company with a stranger: the way she hesitates,

looks for words when she speaks Arabic, puts French words in it, and most of all, the way she thinks that is completely different from mine.

I hesitate as well, I look for words, but it's not the same thing. In my case, I have lost something on my route, while Myriam has taken another road.]

Dounia laments here the existence of a profound linguistic fracture that separates her from her daughter and interprets Myriam's unfamiliarity with Arabic as a guilt and a betrayal that inexorably casts her apart. The term "étranger" [stranger] has negative connotations and conveys a sense of non-belonging and exclusion. Also noteworthy is the use of the metaphor of the journey that clarifies how the two women have undertaken two opposite itineraries in the course of their lives and have reached different destinations.

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, language symptomatically reveals a generational divide: Myriam's unfamiliarity with Arabic and Dounia's ignorance of French corrupt their relation. If intergenerational understanding has reached the end of the line, the relation between Dounia and her husband Salim, who belongs to the same generation and speaks the same language, is not much better. This is how Dounia reflects on the gradual deterioration and final rupture of their marital relation: "Les premières années passées ici, nous étouffions tous les deux, lui regardant vers l'extérieur, et moi le regardant. Lui éclatait par en dehors en frappant, en cassant tout ce qu'il touchait, et moi, j'éclatais par en dedans, ne sachant où déverser ma peine" (41) [During the first years that we spent here, we were both choking, Salim looking outside and I looking at him. He was going into pieces from the outside, hitting and breaking all the things he touched; as for me, I was cracking inside myself and didn't know where to pour out my pain]. As this passage suggests, Dounia and Salim suffer from the same sense of alienation but experience it in silence and in solitude. The verb "étouffer" [choke] conveys feelings of discomfort and anxiety and hints at the claustrophobic dimension

in which Dounia and Salim have withdrawn. The parallel construction of the sentences and the dichotomy “en dehors” as opposed to “en dedans” [outside/inside] alludes to their divergent attitude and total isolation.

By illuminating the linguistic alienation experienced by Dounia and Matussem vis-à-vis their second language, Abu-Jaber and Farhoud raise questions regarding the impact of diaspora on the self. In their works, language symptomatically reveals the unresolved sense of belonging that members of the first generation endure: while Matussem’s linguistic deficiencies reveal his discomfort and in-betweenness, Dounia’s asphyxia and silence disclose her overwhelming and suffocating sense of loss.

#### **4. Second Generation and the Estrangement from Arabic**

Nye and Bouraoui explore the difficult relation that members belonging to the second generation experience with respect to Arabic.<sup>65</sup> In “Arabic”, the speaker openly declares her embarrassment and sense of guilt for not being able to speak Arabic fluently. This is how she confesses her uncanny feelings towards Arabic: “I admit my / shame. To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging / its rich threads without understanding / how to weave the rug... I have no gift. / The sound, but not the sense” (*Red Suitcase* 19). The speaker reluctantly admits her poor command of Arabic and explains that instead of crossing and arranging the “rich threads” of Arabic, she limits herself to “tug” its strands. The ellipsis in the final line emphasizes the concise and incontrovertible pronouncement on her imperfect command of Arabic. In this poem, Arabic is reconfigured as an uncanny idiom, simultaneously familiar

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<sup>65</sup> Among others, in “Boundaries: Arab/American,” Lisa Suhair Majaj expresses her longing for Arabic and interprets her unfamiliarity with the language of her father as the cause of her sense of isolation. She explains, “though I learned 'kitchen Arabic' quite early, and could not speak with my grandmother on an elementary level, I never became proficient in the language that should have been mine from childhood. This lack resulted in my isolation from the culture in which I lived. (...) As a result I remained trapped in a cultural insularity – articulated through the American school, American church, and American friends constituting my world – which now mortifies me” (73).

and foreign, and as a difficult language that the speaker does not master. This theme is further developed by Bouraoui in *Tomboy*, where Yasmina laments her incapacity to speak Arabic fluently and explains that her numerous attempts to become a proficient speaker have remained ineffective. Arabic appears highly appealing to Yasmina but completely inaccessible and constantly vanishing in front of her eyes. This is how she expresses her frustration and disappointment: “I do not speak Arabic. (...) Despite our hopes, it’s a language that does not stick. I take courses in classical Arabic. They are required. They call us the Arabists. I learn the grammar and forget it. It’s a fleeting language that escapes me. I pronounce the very difficult *hâ* and the *rhâ*. I recognize the sounds, *el chekl*. But the meaning escapes me, leaving me empty” (5). Yasmina expresses here her desire to learn Arabic and admits her disappointment. Arabic is reconfigured as a slippery and indomitable language that cannot be fully possessed; it as an elusive and treacherous idiom that cuts her off from the people who surround her and sets her at odds with her origins. Let me underline that it is not my intention here to reinforce the common idea that Arabic is an obscure and abstruse language, as implied in the Italian familiar expression “parlare arabo” [to speak Arabic] used to indicate that a person expresses her/himself in an incomprehensible way. Rather, my aim is to shed light on the uncanny feelings that members belonging to the second generation may experience vis-à-vis the language of their parents and to foreground the elusive character of language in general. In this regard, Derrida argues that language and even the mother-tongue cannot be comfortably inhabited and fully possessed. As he aptly points out: “The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable. To inhabit: this is a value that is quite *disconcerting* and equivocal; one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting” (*Monolingualism* 58, his emphasis).

In their works, Bouraoui and Nye do not only express the frustration and distance that members belonging to the second generation may experience with respect to Arabic, but also

their profound affection. In the following passage, for instance, Arabic is infused with positive features and reinvented as a sonority, an emotion, and a physical and intimate presence that enlives and inspires Yasmina: “Arabic is an emotion, expressed in the voices of Faïruz and Abdel Wahab. It’s another self that I shelter, a small wound. Algeria does not flourish on my language; it takes root in my body. Algeria does not shape my words. Algeria surfaces in what devours me. Algeria is in my body” (100). By comparing Arabic to a feeling, a grief, and a melody, Bouraoui discloses Yasmina’s intimate and visceral relation to Arabic, thus reconfirming it as a constitutive and vital part of her. Similarly, in “Holy Land” (*Red Suitcase* 23), Nye compares the language spoken by her Palestinian grandmother to a system of magical sounds that exerts a secret power on her and bewitches her with its enchanting melody. Arabic is redefined as “the magic” (23), an entrancing language by effect of which single linguistic units turn into “petals parched by sun” (23) and common everyday words are transfigured into marvelous formulas that connect to God. By underlining the fascinating music of Arabic, Nye insists on its exceptional beauty and on the irresistible attraction that the language exerts on her. On the whole, Bouraoui and Nye demonstrate that, from a linguistic perspective, diaspora is a trouble-spot, where opposing forces, unsettled questions, and haunting desires come into being; it is a contact-zone where multiple idioms overlap and merge, and where language is never unilaterally or undoubtedly possessed.

### **5. Mastery, Aphasia, and the Interdiction to Speak**

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Farhoud explores the impact of patriarchy on women’s speech. Dounia’s muteness is constructed in opposition to Salim’s loquacity and her introspection is set in contrast to Salim’s oratory skills. While Salim conquers his audience with colorful tales and breathtaking accounts, Dounia remains silent, immobile, and impassive. This is how she describes their opposite attitudes: “Salim, mon mari, trônait au

bout de la table. Comme d'habitude, il parlait, gesticulait, moi, je ne parlait pas, j'écoutais."

(12) [Salim, my husband, was towering over the table. As usual, he was talking and gesticulating; I, on the contrary, didn't speak and was simply listening]. Salim is represented here as the indisputable actor on stage, while Dounia withdraws into the background. From her semi-darkness, Dounia registers Salim's unquestionable superiority and records his powerful position, his frantic and exaggerated hand gesticulations, and the interminable flow of words that comes out of his mouth. In fact, Dounia's speech is annuled by Salim's intrusive presence and her intention to speak is neutralized by his constant interferences. This mechanism is clearly illustrated in the following passage in which Dounia expresses her frustration and resignation:

Le pire, c'est quand je veux raconter une histoire que je connais bien, que j'ai vécue. Quand Salim est là, il reprend l'histoire du début. Il prend tout son temps, arrondit les mots, donne tous les détails, même ceux que j'avais oubliés ou pensé qu'ils n'étaient pas importants. Il se lève, fait les gestes qu'il faut pour donner de l'ampleur aux choses, pour les mettre en évidence. Tout le monde est accroché, suit l'histoire. Même moi. Soudainement, cette petite histoire de rien du tout devient importante. Même pour moi qui l'ai vécue. Je ne sais pas comment il fait. Je l'envie. Je l'admire aussi. (15)

[The worst thing happens whenever I want to tell a story, that I know well, that I have experienced. If Salim is there, he takes up the story from the beginning. He takes his time, makes his words resonate in the room, gives all the proper details, even those that I had forgotten or considered unimportant. He stands up, makes all the necessary gestures to amplify things, to highlight them. Everyone hangs on his lips, follows the story. Even I. All of a sudden, that little story about nothing becomes important.



Even for me, who has experienced it. I don't know how he does it. The only thing I know is that I envy him, I also admire him.]

The representation of Salim is filtered through Dounia's eyes: he is portrayed as a talented story-teller who consciously masters his story and provides his audience with breathtaking accounts. Salim's theatrical behaviour differs from Dounia's silent observation and veneration. In particular, Dounia admires him for his capacity to feel totally at ease in front of his audience and be in full command of his speech. Salim's intrusive presence is reflected by the unbalanced amount of space that his description occupies on the page: while Salim's performance is the object of a long and detailed description, Dounia's reverence is condensed in few lines. The verbs "je l'admire", "je l'envie" denote a mixture of surprise, discontent, and longing, and are in clear opposition to the verbs "je veux" and "j'ai vécu" that open the passage and indicate Dounia's desire and initial intention to narrate her story. Moreover, the expression "meme moi" [even I], enclosed between two full stops, suggests Dounia's confinement and isolation. In particular, her abdication from speech and her relegation are exemplified in the following scene where she sits in a rocking chair, endlessly chewing the left-overs of her life:

Et moi, assise dans ma chaise berçante, je rumine plus que je ne croasse...

Si j'avais à me lever et à dire à haute voix ce que je pense, aucun mot ne sortirait de ma bouche ou peut-être quelques mots hésitants. Si j'arrêtais un jour de ruminer, je pourrais commencer à être ce que je suis et je n'aurais plus peur de parler...

Je creuse et je creuse ce qui me reste dans le creux de ma mémoire, espérant trouver un jour la paix dans cette tête pleine de trous et de crevasses. (112-113)

[And I, sitting in my rocking chair, I ruminate more than I croak... If I had to stand up and explain by raising my voice what I'm thinking about, no word would come out from my mouth or maybe just some hesitating words. If one day I stop ruminating, I will finally start being who I am and won't be afraid of speaking anymore...

I mull and mull what remains in the hollow of my memory, hoping to find one day the peace in this head full of holes and cracks.]

In this scene, Dounia is moving backwards and forwards in her rocking chair; her physical movements are duplicated by her repetitive hypotheses and vacillating intentions. The symmetrical construction of the sentences, the anaphoras, and the reiteration of the verb “je creuse” [I mull] can be interpreted as formal devices through which Farhoud reproduces the regular and slow movement from side to side of the rocking chair in which Dounia sits. Through the parallel construction of the sentences, the writer also conveys the monotony of Dounia's routine and the hammering nature of her thoughts. Finally, by only slightly varying the verbs “rumine”, “croasse”, “creuse”, the writer effectively emphasizes her colourless and flat everyday life. The verb “creuse” [mull], in particular, associated through an assonance with “creux” [hollow] conveys the idea that Dounia is digging up her recollections from the place where she had buried them, that is in the hollow of her memory. This passage bears witness to Farhoud's extreme attention for the aesthetic quality of her work: far from limiting herself to address the topic of the alienation and subjugation experienced by her protagonist only thematically, Farhoud devotes her energies to adapt the form and language of her novel to that specific theme. Moreover, by constructing Dounia's narration as a whispered monologue, that originates from the claustrophobic dimension of her mind, Farhoud highlights Dounia's aphasia and quiet introspection, and raises questions regarding the role of patriarchy in determining women's voicelessness. In particular, by stressing Dounia's inclination to express

herself by using proverbs and dictums, the writer openly denounces patriarchy for having substituted women's free opinions with ready-made formulas and having annulled their thinking and voice.<sup>66</sup> This is how Dounia reflects on the machinations that have been carried out by patriarchy and have prevented her from speaking freely:

Ce père et toute sa communauté d'hommes, et de femmes aussi, nous ont appris à plier, à nous taire, à ne rien dévoiler, à avoir honte, à tout endurer.

Sans même nous en apercevoir, notre muselière grandissait à mesure que nous grandissions... Laisse ton mal dans ton coeur et souffre en silence; le mal dévoilé n'est que scandale et déshonneur... Toutes les femmes étaient pétrées de ces mots et les murmuraient en silence. J'étais l'une d'elles et je le suis encore! (143)

[This father and all his community of men and women have taught us to bend, keep silent, conceal everything, be ashamed, endure.

Without even being aware of it, our muzzle was getting bigger as we were growing older... Leave your pain in your heart and suffer in silence; a revealed suffering is only scandal and infamy... All women were petrified by these words and were murmuring them in silence. I was one of those and I still am!]

Here, Dounia strategically identifies with other women who have been forced to substitute their speech with pre-fabricated idiomatic expressions imposed and circulated by patriarchy. Traditional sayings, such as "laisse ton mal dans ton coeur et souffre en silence" [leave your pain in your heart and suffer in silence] or "le mal dévoilé n'est que scandale et déshonneur" [a revealed suffering is only scandal and infamy], function as ready-made constructions that are mechanically absorbed by women, a-critically employed, and used to replace their personal

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<sup>66</sup> This idea echoes Cavareto's conviction that for patriarchy "the perfect woman would be mute – not just a woman who abstains from speaking, but a woman who has no voice" (117).

opinions. The paratactic construction of the sentences, the accumulation of verbs such as “plier” [bend], “nous taire” [keep silent], “endurer” [endure], that denote resignation and patience, contribute to increase the speed of the narration and convey the urgency of Dounia’s rebellion.

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, speech is represented as men’s land, the site where patriarchal authority is clearly perceptible and omnipresent, and language is reframed as an instrument for the domination of women. By and large, Dounia is outlined as an oppressed and voiceless woman whose aphasia and relegation uncover the authority of patriarchy over women and the pervasiveness of patriarchal power. Diaspora is commonly considered as a site where women’s emancipation is encouraged but in fact women’s lived lives are much more complex than this simplification may imply. Farhoud captures such complexity effectively by reframing diaspora as a site where women’s right to speak and freedom are still at stake. Indeed, as Salih explains, in diaspora, women are not immune but still subjected to the power of patriarchy and to other social pressures. As she poignantly asserts: “In the context of migration, where insecurities and uncertainties intensify, women’s bodies and behavior become the centre of attention and subject to various forms of social control” (133).

Farhoud takes Dounia’s voicelessness and submission to the extreme as can be seen if we juxtapose and compare her representation to Fatima’s description in *Arabian Jazz*. Fatima is outlined as Matussem’s quarrelsome and chatty sister, a strong and combative woman who abhors silence (2) and is endeavoured with an “orator’s voice” (149). By including in her narrative a belligerent and loquacious woman, who towers above her husband and brother, imposing her will on them, Abu-Jaber disrupts the stereotypical representation of the Arab Woman as a subjugated and weak being. In fact, Fatima’s portrayal is far from being free of prejudices, as it activates commonplaces about women being gossipy and nerve-racking. By comparing Dounia and Fatima’s portrayals, however, I have intended to show that these two

exaggerated and antagonist descriptions represent only the two extremities of a wide range of variations; these are fictional fabrications that testify to Abu-Jaber and Farhoud's extraordinary fantasy and artful prose, and are astute representations through which these authors address and reveal the intricate and complex relation between power and speech.

## 6. Failed Accounts of Oneself

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Farhoud retraces the history of Dounia's gradual renunciation from speaking and follows her slow itinerary towards the recovery of her voice. In the course of the novel, Dounia offers various accounts of herself to her daughter Myriam, a famous writer who wants to write a book on her mother. Dounia's self-reflection and subsequent narration are tightly linked to Myriam's address.<sup>67</sup> This is how Dounia reflects on how Myriam's questions have actually stimulated her self-reflection: "Depuis ce dimanche où j'ai parlé de l'hospice devant mes enfants et depuis que Myriam m'a posé des questions parce qu'elle s'inquiète pour moi, je n'ai pas arrêté de penser à ma vie" (45) [Since this Sunday, when I talked about the nursing home in front of my children and Myriam asked me some questions because she worries about me, I haven't stopped thinking about my life]. By effect of Myriam's address, images, thoughts, and feelings start to condense confusely in Dounia's mind. Through the cracks, fissures, and holes of Dounia's memory, lost episodes are recovered, images of her past are brought to surface, and repressed emotions gradually materialize and gain consistency. Myriam's address plays a crucial role in this process: thanks to her daughter's attention and curiosity, Dounia recovers and re-appropriates her story; at the same time, thanks to Dounia's account, Myriam can complete her book. This is how Dounia expresses her gratitude to Myriam for having helped her disentangle her story:

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<sup>67</sup> Cavarero offers a thought-provoking argument about the tight connection between vocality and address. She explains: "in the etymology of the Latin *vox*, the first meaning of voice is 'to call,' or 'invoke.' Before making itself speech, the voice is an invocation that is addressed to the other and that entrusts itself to an ear that receives it" (169).

Avec du café ou du vin, des questions et de la patience, Myriam m'aidait à dérouler le fil de ma vie. J'étais nerveuse au début, mais Myriam a réussi à me mettre à l'aise. Je racontais mes souvenirs. Petit à petit, j'y prenais goût. Quand je n'étais pas avec elle, je pensais aux histoires que j'allais lui raconter. (118)

[With some coffee or wine, some questions and patience, Myriam helped me unfold the thread of my life. I was nervous at the beginning, but Myriam has been able to make me feel at ease. And so, I told her my memories. Little by little, I have acquired the taste of it. When I wasn't with her, I thought about the stories I would tell her.]

Here, Dounia outlines an idyllic condition of address in which she feels totally at ease and offers with no hesitation her account to her daughter. By effect of Myriam's presence and interrogation, Dounia's lived experience gains transparency and intelligibility. In particular, Dounia compares her life to a spool of thread that her daughter helps her unravel. Nevertheless, this idyllic and extremely pleasant situation is suddenly interrupted by what Dounia interprets as Myriam's misbehaviour; accordingly, Dounia's trust towards her daughter metamorphoses into a devouring suspicion and Myriam's address and hospitality are immediately recognized and interpreted as new suffocating prisons. The following passage exemplifies my statement:

Myriam est très curieuse... elle veut savoir qui a pondu l'oeuf et qui a bâti le poulailler... Tout allait bien jusqu'au jour où elle est devenue très exigeante. Toujours plus exigeante. Elle voulait savoir ce que je ne savais pas, que je me souviens de ce que j'avais oublié.

Parfois, elle voulait que je pense comme elle, que je lui dise ce qu'elle voulait entendre. Elle me mettait les mots dans la bouche.

Ce que je ne comprends pas, c'est qu'elle voulait connaître ma vérité, toujours plus loin, toujours plus au fond, toujours plus au coeur, et en même temps on aurait dit qu'elle voulait la déguiser, la changer, la rendre plus extraordinaire.

Et puis il y a des choses dont je ne veux pas parler. C'est pour cette raison que je suis partie. Je veux bien l'aider, pas devenir son esclave! C'est son livre, pas le mien. (118-119)

[Myriam is very curious... she wants to know the slightest of details... Everything was going well until the day she became very insistent. Always more insistent. She wanted to know what I didn't know, what I had forgotten.

Sometimes, she even wanted me to think what she thought, to tell her what she wanted to hear. She was putting her words in my mouth.

What I don't understand is that she wanted to know my truth, always further, always deeper, always to the very heart of it and at the same time she wanted to conceal it, alter it, make it more impressive.

And then, there are topics that I don't want to discuss. That's why I left. I want to help her but I refuse to be her slave! It's her book, not mine.]

Here, Dounia appears suddenly disoriented and baffled: her gratitude towards Myriam has been substituted by an unconcealed rage and her desire to speak has been converted into an urgent need to escape. Myriam's eagerness is set in contrast to Dounia's circumspection; her insistent questions collide with her mother's natural introspection. The numerous ellipses marks suggest Dounia's reticence and refusal to collaborate; the accumulations of repetitions in asyndeton and the disturbing climax "toujours plus loin, toujours plus au fond, toujours plus au coeur" [always further, always deeper, always to the very heart of it] communicate

Myriam's importunity and intrusion and Dounia's unease and agitation. Through Dounia's irritation, Farhoud brings to the fore a divergent and desperate (af)filiation; by stressing her disillusion and annoyance, the writer sanctions the failure of accountability.

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Farhoud sheds light on the double bind enclosed in (self)-narration: initially, Dounia seems to master her language and has full control over her story; as the narration progresses, however, she feels subjected to Myriam's power and dispossessed of her own story. This idea echoes Butler's theorization of self-narration as a practice that entails dispossession and loss. This is how she explains the paradoxical character of accountability:

I give an account to someone, and the addressee of the account, real or imaginary, thus interrupts the sense of this account of myself as my own. If it is an account of myself, and it is an accounting to someone, then I am compelled to give the account away, to send it off, to be dispossessed of the very moment that I establish it as my account. No account takes place without a structure of address, and in this sense no account belongs to the person who offers it. ("An Account" 36)

In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Farhoud outlines Dounia's self-narration to her daughter as a liberating and simultaneously alienating practice that entails dispossession; she also underlines the opacity of narration and its fragmentary and imperfect quality. This is why Dounia insists on the fact that there are things that cannot be uttered and proclaims: "Il y a des choses que l'on ne peut pas dire, que l'on ne dit pas, même pas à soi-même, des choses que l'on voudrait enfouir loin. (...) Il y a des choses que l'on ne peut ni raconter ni dire à voix basse tant on en a honte" (141). [There are things that cannot be said, that we cannot say, not even to ourselves, things that we would like to bury far away (...) There are things that we cannot tell or whisper because of the shame.] In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Farhoud



reframes narration as a partial and defective practice. She also suggests that life exceeds accountability and can never be fully comprehended by it. In this sense, Dounia's final reflections echo Butler's idea that the human body exceeds accountability and "that to be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life" ("An Account" 36-37). It follows that Dounia's narration is represented both as a projection through which the protagonist reaches out to her daughter and at the same time as an opaque shelter behind which she conceals herself.

By and large, Farhoud's novel is an exploration of the potential and limits of vocalicity, self-narration, and writing. It is an outstanding work in which the boundaries between writing and orality, voice and speech blur and overlap to celebrate the uniqueness of the subject and shed light on the alienating and imperfect character of any kind of narration. Through a receptive and attuned language that muddles fiction and real life, past and present, objective reconstruction and subjective deformation, Farhoud reveals and illuminates the paradoxes of (self)-narration and in the final analysis of writing itself.

## **7. Story-telling and the Crossing of Borders**

In *Arab Folktales* (1986), Bushnaq retraces the history of story-telling in the Arab world and outlines its distinctive features.<sup>68</sup> According to Bushnaq, women were traditionally amateur storytellers who would perform in the domestic space to entertain children; by contrast, the professional story-teller was always a man who would tell his stories in a coffeehouse to a male audience. Arab diasporic women writers blur and overturn this rigid

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<sup>68</sup> For a list of books about story-telling in the Arab world, see Gerhardt (1963), Bushnaq (1986); El-Shamy (1999); Reynolds (2007). El-Shamy focuses on story-telling as a useful means for the transmission of social norms and collective knowledge, while Bushnaq gives a wide-ranging overview on the practice of storytelling in the Arab world and explores its main themes and characters. Gerhardt takes into exam the structure and content of the *Thousand and One Night*; Reynolds elaborates a compelling analysis of the complex genealogy and multi-layered structure of the same collection. In particular, he considers the *Nights* as "a fascinating case study of cultural contacts, translation, folklore and fakelore, ethnic stereotyping, European colonialism, Orientalism, and the influence of capitalism and marketing on the creation of culture" (80). He also takes into exam the different oral narrative traditions of the various Arab countries.

dichotomy and introduce in their novels male and female story-tellers who weave their colorful tales as professional embroiderers for a diverse audience gathered in their homes. In *Arabian Jazz*, for instance, Matussem is compared to Shahrazad for his ability to narrate breathtaking accounts and keep his audience under siege:

Matussem flickered thin in the family mind, every step always the first, poised over his drums, raveling beats through the air, telling story after story through them, like Shahrazad, giving life. When he wasn't telling fables, the girls heard their father's stories about his childhood, about the way the enchantment of America had eventually drawn him across an ocean. (99)

The narrator celebrates Matussem's ability to revive ancient tales and bring back to life memories of his childhood and his migration to the US. By blurring the image of Matussem and Shahrazade, Abu-Jaber reaffirms the combination between story-telling and life and recovers a controversial figure of the Arab tradition that has been alternately interpreted as a feminist heroine and a submissive victim of patriarchy.<sup>69</sup>

In *Crescent*, Sirine's uncle weaves his multicolored story for his niece, decorates it with fantastic elements, and inserts fanciful details as an embroiderer who embellishes her needlework. Moreover, by disseminating the story of Abdelrahman Salahadin at the beginning of each chapter, Abu-Jaber craftily interlaces the oral tale into the written story as if it were a vivid and scintillating thread. Each episode appears like a colorful and brilliant patch that is skilfully woven into the text and contributes to its beauty and completeness. Through her writing, Abu-Jaber transgresses fixed gender boundaries, by presenting fathers and uncles narrating their stories to their nieces and daughters in the domestic space. She also muddles the rigid demarcations between traditional oral genres and the difference between frame and inserted story. According to Reynolds (2007), in traditional Arab collections such as *'alf layla*

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<sup>69</sup> On the controversial figure of Sheherazade, its revival, and opposing reinterpretations in contemporary Arab diasporic literature, see Matar (2007), Darraj (2004), Kahf (2003).

*wa layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights*), inserted stories were less relevant than the frame story and served mainly for entertainment. In *Crescent*, however, Abu-Jaber blurs this distinction: the oral tale of Abdelrahman Salahadin is neither a frame story nor an inserted story but somehow in-between the two; in addition, it mirrors in an allegorical way the main story and represents a fundamental key for its interpretation. Furthermore, Abu-Jaber combines and harmoniously blends a variety of genres that were kept strictly separated in traditional story-telling.<sup>70</sup> In the story of Abdelrahman, the writer fuses the fairy tale, the *qissa*, and the personal narrative, so that the story functions simultaneously as a fictional tale with mythical and magical beings, an ethical story with a teaching, and a personal narrative about the recovery of the protagonist's Arabness. In fact, the oral tale of Abdelrahman is not just a superficial "story of how to love" (17) but a cryptic and bewitching account that narrates Abdelrahman's itinerary towards self-recognition. Abdelrahman's self-discovery matches Sirine's quest for identity and his faked drowning accompanies Sirine's descent into the abyss of herself from which she re-emerges with a regained self-awareness. Accordingly, Abdelrahman is first represented as an Arab Bedouin, who escapes slavery by faking his drowning, then as an adventurous traveller who dives into the Red Sea, meets the Mother of all Fish, and is seduced by a mermaid, and finally as a Hollywood movie star who dissimulates his Arabness in order to pursue a successful acting career. At the end of the story, however, Abdelrahman finally recognizes and reconciles with the Arab side he used to keep concealed within himself. This is how Abu-Jaber, by combining typical traits of the fairy tale, the *qissa* (story with a moral), and the personal narrative in disguise, represents Abdelrahman's awakening:

Abdelrahman Salahadin was the first person in the world to see this particular crescent. It hung over their heads, slim as an eyelash, bright as

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<sup>70</sup> For a detailed description of the traditional Arabic story-telling genres and their rigid division, see Reynolds 87-103.

quicksilver, emanating faint music from the cosmos. He smiled happily and Dino, seeing through his drunken haze this tender, yearning smile – the first honest smile he'd seen in years – bent over and whispered to his friend, “You know, sometimes a fella's got to know when to go home.”

That night, Abdelrahman sent a telegram to his friend, the Egyptian director Jaipur al-Rashid – also known as Crazyman al-Rashid – who was beginning auditions for his production of a play called *Othello* written by a mad Englishman. (...)

And neither Abdelrahman nor al-Rashid had any inkling that, having seen the publicity posters, two special women would be in the audience for the opening night: a mermaid poet and a proud mother. And, well, what can I say? The rest was history. (383-384)

Rather than conceiving story-telling as a quiet and relaxing activity meant for children and carried out by women in a quiet and isolated domestic space, Abu-Jaber reframes it as a practice that is pregnant with political implications and breeds insurgent effects. Through the fantastic and intriguing tale of Abdelrahman, Abu-Jaber raises cultural and political questions and by retracing his adventures, she rereads the history of partial obscuration and distortion that Arabness has endured so far, educating her audience about the “real story” of the relations between 'the West' and the Arab world.<sup>71</sup> Far from offering an absolute view on History, Abu-Jaber uses the tale of Abdelrahman as a pastime and a game, but also as a strategic deviation from traditional understandings of History as a mechanical system of causes and effects. Story-telling is invoked here as an imaginative and resistant practice aimed at re-appropriating facts and events that have been wiped out from the collective memory, and

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<sup>71</sup> In an interview with Robin Field, Abu-Jaber reiterates this point and says: “I wanted the story to have the flavor of the oral narrative, and the surprises and nuances of the spoken voice. (...). Can you read this story, and see how it reflects on the reality, on the real story?” (221).

as a creative procedure to reconstruct “a sense of the collective” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 86) and prepare the ground for a more democratic and hospitable community.

On the whole, through the oral tale of Abdelrahman, Abu-Jaber blurs gender/genre divisions, disrupts hegemonic and homogeneous historical accounts, and reconfigures story-telling as a resistant activity and a catalyst for change. By fusing story-telling and writing, she also overlaps the image of the *hakawati* (the story-teller) with that of the writer, and celebrates their art as a means to oppose power, preserve the collective memory, and heal divisions. Trinh Minh-Ha’s fascinating interpretation of the story-teller as a person who embodies a plurality of functions can help us illuminate the crucial role played by the contemporary Arab diasporic writer. In her words: “The storyteller, besides being a great mother, a teacher, a poetess, a warrior, a musician, a historian, a fairy, and a witch, is a healer and a protectress. Her chanting or telling of stories, as Marmon Silko notices, has the power of bringing us together, especially when there is sickness, fear and grief” (140). Similarly to Glissant, who views story-telling as an “anti-History” (*Caribbean Discourse* 85) and praises its interruptions, “asides”, and “twists” (85), Trinh Minh-Ha celebrates the potential of story-telling and sees it as a fruitful means to revitalize past memories and facts, instruct, oppose power and redress biased historical accounts, preserving and curing the community from divisions and conflicts. As I have intended to demonstrate in this section, the original reflections on story-telling elaborated by Caribbean, Native American, and Asian-American theorists reverberate through the American context and have reached Arab-American women writers who have taken up the challenge to retrieve this traditional Arab practice, introduce it in their works, and mould it according to the needs of the present time.

## **8. Story-telling as a *Pharmakon***

In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber explores the intricate relation between writing and story-telling and sheds light on the ambiguous and enigmatic nature of this traditional practice. By outlining story-telling as an art that is simultaneously transparent/opaque, moral/amoral, beneficent/maleficent, trustworthy/unreliable, Abu-Jaber attributes to it the qualities of Derrida's *pharmakon*, and thus transforms it into a practice that is based on a series of oppositions "which can neither be reduced to unity, nor derived from a primary simplicity, nor dialectically sublated or internalized into a third term" (*Dissemination* 24-25). At the beginning of the novel, Sirine's uncle introduces Abdelrahman as his "favorite cousin" (17), thus creating a clear connection between himself and the protagonist of the story; this is a cunning procedure through which the story-teller seals his story and reaffirms his authority:<sup>72</sup>

When Aunt Camille was a very, very old woman and I was a very, very young boy, we happened to be on the earth at the same time for a short period. She took that opportunity to tell me about my cousin Abdelrahman. She told me about his drowning career, and her search for her naughty son, and so on and so forth.

She told you herself? But, you mean they're true, those stories?

You're going to get philosophical on me? True, not true, real, not real.

Who knows what's what? (308)

By unfolding the genealogy of Abdelrahman's story to her niece, Sirine's uncle persuades her of the authenticity and trustworthiness of his account. Still, Sirine's critical questions clearly threaten his credibility and sabotage his construction. Her intervention corrupts her uncle's story and brings to the fore its porosity,<sup>73</sup> suggesting that the authority of the *hakawati*

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<sup>72</sup> This technique draws back on the so-called "witnessing system," a traditional practice used to conserve and legitimate the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, by grounding their credibility on a concatenation of witnesses. In fact, the "witnessing system" is re-employed and subverted by Abu-Jaber who uses it to safeguard and validate a patently fictional and fabricated story. For more on the "witnessing system," see Gerhardt 378.

<sup>73</sup> According to Reynolds, Arabic oral tales are "porous" accounts in the sense that they are traditionally interrupted and questioned by listeners. On the porosity of traditional Arab oral tales, see Reynolds 103.

necessarily depends upon the fidelity and loyalty of his listeners. Indeed, story-telling presupposes an interdependent relation in which both parties agree on a series of rules: on the one hand, the teller generously accepts to share his story with his audience; on the other, the listeners agree to devote their time and attention to what the story-teller says. Authority and reverence, power and surrender are crucial and interconnected components of story-telling. Accordingly, in the following scene, Sirine's uncle scornfully addresses his niece and by observing an artificial formality and ceremoniality openly reaffirms the indisputable power of the *hakawati*. In particular, by accompanying his storytelling with ostentatious gestures, he clearly posits himself as the master and natural owner of his narrative:

“If you behave,” he tells his thirty-nine-year-old niece Sirine, “I’ll tell you the whole story this time.”

“You always say I’m too young to hear the whole story,” Sirine says. (...)

Her uncle looks at her over his glasses. The narrow ovals slide down his nose; he tries to press them back into place. “Do I say that? I wonder why. Well, what are you now, a half-century yet?”

“I’m thirty-nine. And a half.”

He makes a dismissive little flick with his fingers. “Too young. I’ll save the juicy parts for when you’re a half-century.”

“Oh boy, I can’t wait.”

“Yes, that’s how the young are. No one wants to wait.” He takes a ceremonial sip of coffee and nods. “So this is the moralless story of Abdelrahman Salahadin, my favorite cousin, who had an incurable addiction to selling himself and faking his drowning.” (17)

The *hakawati*'s pretentious acts provide his practice with the quality and form of a solemn ceremony. Story-telling is reframed here as a ritual, requiring devotion and faith, a bewitching

art, fascinating and overpowering the listener, and a game whose rules and laws both the listener and the story-teller have agreed on. Abu-Jaber further represents Sirine's uncle as a professional story-teller who can decide to break up his narrative, suspend it, and retard its closure at any time.<sup>74</sup> This happens, for instance, in the following scene, where Sirine's uncle interrupts his story at the highlight and slyly uses this interruption to extort sweets from her niece and satisfy his sweet tooth; Sirine, as if under the influence of a malign spell, surrenders to his power and can't help satisfying his requests: "I would just like to point out at this moment, for the record, that accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry. For the record. Then we can get on with our story" (38). By interrupting his story, Sirine's uncle keeps his niece under siege and Sirine automatically obeys his orders as if she were hypnotized by his narration. Trinh Minh-ha's reflection on story-telling (1989) as a combination of black and white magic, as a beneficial and malign spell-working is a key for the understanding of this passage. This idea echoes and expands Derrida's definition of writing as a *pharmakon*, "a philter, which acts both as a remedy and a poison" (*Dissemination* 70). Both Abu-Jaber and Farhoud insist on the beneficial and malign qualities of story-telling. In *Crescent*, for instance, Abu-Jaber represents it as a powerful and astute art through which the *hakawati* exerts his influence on his audience, makes his listeners burn with curiosity, and reaffirms his authority. If Abu-Jaber exalts the power of the *hakawati*, Farhoud, on the contrary, represents the crisis and collapse of his authority. As soon as Salim reaches Canada, his natural endeavour to tell stories suddenly turns against him and oppresses him. In Canada, his ability as a storyteller is disregarded and completely neglected by his children and his compatriotes. In a cruel twist of fate, the gift that once had granted him admiration and power, unexpectedly boomerangs against him and oppresses him. This is how Dounia retraces the story of Salim's tragic decline:

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<sup>74</sup> As Bushnaq notes, the professional story-teller would interrupt his narration "at the same cliff-hanging moment to sip from a glass of tea" (xvi).



Ah Dieu! Qu'il savait bien parler. Et raconter des histoires. Il savait faire oublier son pays à un étranger... Il nous séduisait avec des histoires anciennes et d'autres qu'il inventait. En sa compagnie, personne ne pouvait s'ennuyer. La moindre anecdote dans sa bouche devenait un conte des *Milles et une nuits*, parfois drôle, parfois émouvante, toujours captivante. (...)

Au Canada, plus de place de village, plus d'oreilles attentives pour l'écouter, plus d'yeux pour le regarder. Plus personne pour comprendre ses histoires. (...)

Les histoires restaient prises dans sa gorge et l'étouffaient. (40-41)

[Oh God! He was really a talented speaker. And a gifted story-teller. He could make foreigners forget their country... He seduced us with ancient tales and new stories he himself made up. In his company, nobody would get bored. The least anecdote evolved into a tale of *The Thousand and One Nights*, sometimes comic, sometimes moving, always capturing. (...)

In Canada, no more village square, no more careful ears to listen to him, no more eyes to watch him. No more people to understand his stories. (...)

Stories remained caught in his throat and suffocated him.]

Here, story-telling is represented first as a beneficial medicine, that heals the foreigner's displacement, and then as a poison or evil spell, that infects Salim's existence with alienation, impairs his functions as a storyteller, and suffocates him. Derrida's interpretation of the *pharmakon* as a spell that "can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent and maleficent" (*Dissemination* 70) helps us illuminate the paradoxical and unpredictable nature of story-telling. Although Derrida attributes these qualities to writing, I suggest that this interpretation can also be ascribed to story-telling. The ambivalent and contradictory character

of story-telling is exemplified in the following passage in which Abu-Jaber reinvents this popular practice into a fascinating albeit tricky game in which the distinction between explicit/implicit, transparent/opaque, moral/amoral is suspended:

Are you paying attention? The moralless story requires, of course, greater care and general alertness than your run-of-the-mill, everyday story with a moral, which basically gives you the Cliffs Notes version of itself in the end anyway. A moralless story is deep yet takes no longer to tell than it takes to steep a cup of mint tea. (88)

By interlacing orality and writing and by highlighting the ambiguous and oppositional character of oral tales, Abu-Jaber reaffirms the “logic of *play*” (Derrida, *Dissemination* 64, his emphasis) that governs both story-telling and writing. By keeping the oral tale of Abdelrahman voluntarily vague and by endlessly postponing its fulfilment, the author, like a skillful *hakawati*, preserves the seduction and pleasure embedded in her account and keeps her audience under siege. By and large, Abu-Jaber highlights the vagueness<sup>75</sup> and incompleteness of both oral and written stories and celebrates story-telling and writing as pleasant and intriguing activities whose principles and code remain forever inscrutable.

## 9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have intended to shed light on the roles that multilingualism, vocality, and storytelling play in Arab diasporic literature. Multilingualism, as opposed to monolingualism, is interpreted as a valid linguistic technique through which Arab diasporic authors account for and respond to the complexity and creolization of the Arab diaspora. It is

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<sup>75</sup> In this regard, Inea Bushnaq observes that the atmosphere of ambiguity is a crucial aspect of story-telling and a fruitful technique through which the story-teller avoids speculations regarding his/her honesty and trustworthiness. In her words: “what never changes is the suggestion of vagueness – there was and there was not, neither here nor elsewhere. This shrouds the narrative that follows in a veil of doubt and uncertainty. The teller avoids the judgement that what she is saying is a chain of lies, for after all, maybe such things did happen – or maybe not” (66).

a fruitful strategy through which the writers contest the myth that sustains the 'purity' of languages, cultures, and nations, solicit the reader's curiosity, and broaden his/her knowledge. Furthermore, multilingualism is interpreted as a vital component of Arab diasporic literature and as a cunning procedure directed to undermine the homogeneity and hegemony of English and French; it is an imaginative practice reproducing the tentative intercultural alliances that are negotiated in the diaspora space. Glissant's theorization of multilingualism as a crucial step that leads to the "explosion of cultures" and as a "sign of their consensual, not imposed sharing" (*Poetics of Relation* 34) is particularly enlightening to understand the hospitable character of these language cohabitations.

Vocality is another fundamental aspect of Arab diasporic literature and especially of Farhoud's works. By taking into consideration Dounia's voicelessness, I have meant to raise questions regarding the impact of diaspora on the self and the pervasiveness of patriarchy in regulating women's speech. By focusing on accountability, I have also intended to foreground the sociality, uniqueness, and opacity of the self but also to illuminate his/her radical alienation from language. Indeed, as Cavarero reminds us: "Speech, understood as speech that emits from someone's mouth, is not simply the verbal sphere of expression; it is also the point of tension between the uniqueness of the voice and the system of language" (14). Cavarero emphasizes the antagonism between the self and the linguistic system through which she/he tells him/herself. This idea is confirmed by Derrida who considers language to be the origin of an "inalienable alienation" contained in any linguistic act (*Monolingualism* 25). It follows that to explore vocality means above all taking into consideration the pressure that the subject feels vis-à-vis an imposed linguistic system and shedding light on the forces that coerce his/her (self)-expression. This is how Butler explains this paradoxical situation in which the socially imposed norms that regulate language exceed the self and hinder her/his self-recognition: "The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine.

They are not born with me; the temporality of their emergence does not coincide with the temporality of my own life” (“An Account” 35). In *Le Bonheur a la Queue Glissante*, Frahoud elaborates this paradoxical situation and represents self-narration both as an empowering and emancipating activity, but also as an impossible enterprise that entails dispossession and is destined to fail. By so doing, she confirms Butler’s observation that “it is only in dispossession of myself that I can and do give an account of myself” (“An Account” 36).

The paradoxical and contradictory character of accountability can also be found in story-telling. By analysing and interrogating the uses and functions of story-telling in Abu-Jaber’s novels, I have intended to highlight the ambivalence and playfulness that distinguish both writing and story-telling. In *Crescent*, story-telling functions as a pedagogical, entertaining, and resistant activity, where reality and fiction, past and present, history and fantasy come together and merge; it is an intriguing and opaque practice, that seduces and enchants, and a tricky game whose rules and laws can never be fully grasped. On the whole, story-telling is reinvented as a fruitful strategy to surpass gender/genre boundaries, develop fascinating and multi-layered tales, and celebrate the porosity, playfulness, and inaccessibility of both orality and writing, the oral tale and the written story. This idea reconfirms Derrida’s theorization that, “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text, remains, moreover, forever imperceptible” (*Dissemination* 63). On the one hand, Derrida highlights the inscrutability of the text; on the other, Butler manifests the partiality and imperfection of (self)-narration. Aware of the double binds that constitute both writing and speech, literature and story-telling, Arab diasporic women writers experiment with and reinvent the practice of story-telling with the intention of exploring language and writing from different perspectives, thus providing

readers with a new image of speech and writing, one that reveals and illuminates their complexity, entanglements, and paradoxes.

#### IV. BORDERS, CROSSINGS, AND HOSPITALITY

Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.

Jacques Derrida, 2000

This chapter analyzes and interrogates the potential of literature to address and investigate complex issues such as illegal migration and hospitality. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's conviction that "the problem of cultural interaction emerges only at the signifying boundaries of culture" ("Commitment to Theory" 2394), I focus on works written by authors of Arab origin who present the Mediterranean sea as an enigmatic border(land) that is simultaneously a barrier and a fertile ground for the creolization of cultures. As I hope to demonstrate, in Arab diasporic literature, the Mediterranean sea is reframed both as a crucial frontier along which the majority of illegal crossings directed to Europe takes place,<sup>76</sup> and also as a fruitful terrain for the elaboration of non-conventional views and narratives on migration and hospitality. Historically, the Mediterranean has been the focal point of a variety of exchanges, borrowings, and contacts that involve different populations and three continents (Khachani, 2006). On the contrary, today, it has become a hazardous and unsafe boundary patrolled to prevent exchanges and crossings. Russel King (2001) equates the Mediterranean with the Río Grande, the fast-track through which the so-called "illegal" migrants cross the Mexican-American border to enter the US.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in *Crossing*, Arab-American artist Abdelali Dahrouch represents the Mediterranean as a deep-blue space and juxtaposes it with

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<sup>76</sup> As Iain Chambers rightly observes (2010), the majority of migrants actually enters Europe by using international flights and tourist visas. On the one hand, by focusing on the Mediterranean, Arab diasporic writers seem to reaffirm the phobia alimented by the media regarding the danger of an invasion of 'illegal' migrants coming from the sea. On the other, their inclination to take into consideration the Mediterranean sea, may also be explained as a way to foreground the liquidity and therefore porosity of frontiers and to draw the attention of the reader to one of the most desperate and upsetting forms of migration, that of trafficking. For a compelling cultural analysis of the metamorphoses that the Mediterranean has undergone in recent times, see Chambers (2010).

<sup>77</sup> For an extensive analysis of the Mexican case, see David Spener (2009).

the Mexican-American border outlined as a red-hot stretch of desert.<sup>78</sup> By blurring and overlapping the liquid and sandy borders that illegal migrants incessantly cross to reach Europe and the US, Dahrouch bears witness to the artificiality of these two frontiers imposed as natural and legitimate by hegemonic powers and consistently contested and transgressed by migrants. According to Anzaldúa, “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge” (*Borderland* 25, her emphasis). Drawing from Anzaldúa’s reflection on the divisions and dualistic thinking engendered by borders and by taking the works of Arab diasporic writers as my point of departure, I intend to alter mainstream narratives on illegal migration trapped in the dichotomies home vs. abroad, staying vs. moving, migrant vs. native, guest vs. host, and to deconstruct and rethink these negative polarities with the aid of the texts under exam. Not only migration but also hospitality represents the core of this chapter, and because hospitality, as Derrida reminds us, is necessarily related to power and sovereignty, I will also consider and critically interrogate the practices through which sovereignty currently exercise its power “by filtering, choosing and thus by excluding and doing violence” (*Of Hospitality* 55).

This chapter interweaves a variety of texts and examines fictional works together with autobiographical reports, literature joined with sociology and philosophy. Because of the scarcity of fictional and non-fictional texts that address the topic of illegal migration and the even more sporadic existence of a body of literature written by women and dealing with this issue, I have chosen to include in my study works written by Arab diasporic men writers and predominantly featuring male characters. The absence that this incorporation attempts to fill, however, should be critically questioned. In this regard, Rutvica Andrijasevic (2003) rightly notes:

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<sup>78</sup> Dahrouch is a Moroccan artist; he was born in Tangier and moved to the US in 1984. For a more comprehensive look at Abdelali Dahrouch’s art, see Mikdadi 36-37.

The prevalent absence of women from visual depictions of border-crossing comes with a discursive scenario where migrant women are figured not as protagonists but as characters endowed with little or no agency: while male migrants are portrayed as central characters of border-crossings, migrant women tend to fall out of view and gain visibility when portrayed as war refugees and/or victims of trafficking. (256)

The absence of women lamented by Andrijasevic affects also the texts under exam: most of the works focus on male characters who cross the Mediterranean sea to pursue the dream of a better life. Women, on the contrary, play a secondary role and are almost uniformly represented as care-takers, victims of physical and mental abuses, prostitutes, and passive subjectivities who do not follow an independent and personal migratory plan but move in the train of the protagonists.<sup>79</sup>

In the first part, I take into exam the works by Rawi Hage, Laila Lalami,<sup>80</sup> and Tahar Ben Jelloun, with the intention of manifesting the social, political, and economic pressures and inequalities that underpin migration and determine who/what can travel and who must stay at home. I then move on to analyse the autobiographical accounts of Salah Methnani and Mohamed Bouchane and put them in dialogue with the novels by Ben Jelloun and Hage, with the aim to reveal and critically question the *derealization* (Butler, *Precarious Lives*)<sup>81</sup> and dehumanization that illegal migrants endure in contemporary societies and to reflect on the frail boundary that separates hospitality from injustice. In the last part, I focus on the works of

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<sup>79</sup> In Laila Lalami's novel, Halima migrates to Spain in order to escape from a violent and possessive husband, while Faten leaves Morocco to avoid an arrest for political reasons and ends up working as a prostitute in the streets of Madrid. In Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, Siham works in Marbella as a nurse and takes care of a disabled girl, while Azel's sister leaves Morocco only after having been united in a fake marriage with Miguel, her brother's lover.

<sup>80</sup> Laila Lalami is an Arab-American writer. She emigrated from Morocco and currently lives in Los Angeles.

<sup>81</sup> With the term *derealization*, Butler (2004) indicates the mechanisms through which public discourse deprives a human being of her/his humanity to the point that her/his life becomes unworthy and his/her death passes unnoticed. In her words: "Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (32).



Bourauoui, Abu-Jaber, Nye and Farhoud who shift the point of view from migration to hospitality and by so doing, open up a space that allows us to move beyond the ground of opposition and to explore the potential of literature in shedding light on overlooked dimensions of the social.

### **1. Blurred Images of Home and Abroad**

In *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (2004), Abdelmalek Sayyad argues that in order to avoid a partial and ethnocentric perspective, one should study migratory phenomena by taking into consideration the relation and interdependence between the country of emigration and that of immigration. As he puts it: “if we mutilate the migratory phenomenon by ignoring part of it, as we usually do, there is a danger that we will constitute the population of immigrants as a purely abstract category, and the immigrant as a pure *artefact*” (178). Drawing from Sayyad’s warning against the danger of transforming the migrant into an inert object of scrutiny or a theoretical construct, I turn to the novels of Hage and Ben Jelloun that provide us with depictions of illegal migrants that are so fresh and profoundly human to prevent their transformation and that of their countries into mere ornaments.

In *De Niro’s Game* (2008), Hage represents Lebanon as a war-torn country and its inhabitants as devastated survivors who live under siege and are constantly threatened by imminent deaths, shortages, and destructions. The story is set during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and draws upon the childhood friendship of Bassam and George and the adverse fate that conjures against them: when George joins the militia and is sucked into the infernal and violent underworld of the war, Bassam leaves Lebanon and enters France as an illegal migrant. The first scenes of the novel draw on the representation of Beirut as an unsafe and dangerous place with streets filled with lacerated and mangled bodies and people assailed by

hungry dogs and killed by falling bombs that hit randomly anyone. This is how the first-person narrator expresses his exhaustion and resignation:

Ten thousand bombs had landed, and I was waiting for George.

Ten thousand bombs had landed on Beirut, that crowded city, and I was lying on a blue sofa covered with white sheets to protect it from dust and dirty feet.

It is time to leave, I was thinking to myself.

My mother's radio was on. It had been on since the start of the war, a radio with Rayovac batteries that lasted ten thousand years. (11)

The massive reiteration “ten thousand bombs” contributes to construct an atmosphere of monotony and weariness; in particular, the specificity of the expression clashes with the chaotic representation of the city. Moreover, through the hyperbole “ten thousand,” the author dramatizes the number of explosions and destructions that hit Beirut; this rhetorical device also contributes to intensify the unstoppable force of the war and to amplify its overpowering repercussions on its victims. The incongruity between the ten thousand bombs falling randomly everywhere and the white sheets covering the sofa to protect it “from dust and dirty feet” stresses the absurdity and nonsense that pervade the scene. The symmetrical construction of the sentences and the formal order and organization of the passage clash with the chaotic image of Beirut that we visualize while reading these lines. The verbs “I was waiting for,” “I was lying,” “I was thinking to myself” effectively communicate the illogic passivity and impassibility of the protagonist and his unreasonable apathy in front of a world falling apart. By referring to the eternal (“ten thousand years”) duration of the batteries, the writer explicitly refers to the immutability and indifference of war paralleled by that of time and to the obstinacy of humans who cling on to their everyday life no matter its absurdity.

It is indeed a careless and pitiless world that the author describes here, one that is governed by brutality, revenge, and violence. Rather than representing home as a pleasant and safe place, Hage reframes it as a hostile and inhospitable universe, that is cruel and merciless.

This can be inferred from the following passage:

Summer and the heat had arrived; the land was burning under a close sun that cooked our flat and its roof. (...) Cars were parked on both sides of the street, cars that climbed sidewalks, obstructed the passage of worn-out, suffocating pedestrians whose feet, tired feet, and faces, long faces, cursed and blamed America with every little step and every twitch of their miserable lives.

Heat descended, bombs landed, and thug jumped the long lines for bread, stole the food of the weak, bullied the baker and caressed his daughter.

Thugs never waited in lines. (11-12)

The narrator describes Beirut as a no-man's land where confusion and violence reign. The terms "bully" and "thugs" allude to the daily abuses and aggressions that its inhabitants endure. The city is outlined as an inhuman and alienating place where cars have replaced humans, and pedestrians are "cooked" by the violent heat of the sun like sinners condemned to the eternal flames of hell. This idea of death is reinforced by the verb "obstruct" and the adjective "suffocating" suggesting an idea of asphyxiation.

In order to compensate for and escape from the hopeless situation in which he finds himself confined to, Bassam dreams to emigrate and imagines to start a new life in Rome, a city that in his hopes will grant him peace and tranquillity. This is how he daydreams about his future life in Italy and finds in his reverie a temporary relief from the despair that assails him at home:

Bombs were falling like monsoon rain in distant India. I was desperate and restless, in need of a better job and money. (...) I was sitting in my room, looking at a wall filled with foreign images, fading posters of teenage singers, blondes with shiny white teeth, Italian football players. I thought, Roma must be a good place to walk freely. The pigeons in the squares look happy and well fed. (19)

In his fantasy, Bassam reconfigures Italy as an attractive and inviting country. In particular, the rich and successful football players, the beautiful women and carefree teenagers depicted on the posters that hang in his room are highly captivating and tempting. In fact, Italy's attraction appears highly illusory and chimerical and Bassam's journey seems to be grounded on frivolous and precarious factors such as the happiness of the pigeons, the immodesty of women, and the success of football players. By highlighting Bassam's irrational desire to migrate, Hage stresses the stagnant and unbearable condition in which he finds himself confined to and expresses a harsh critique of the stasis that affects his homeland.

Similarly, in *Leaving Tangier* (2009), Ben Jelloun outlines Morocco as a hostile and unrewarding place that neglects its youth forcing its young inhabitants to leave. The novel draws upon the migratory project of Azel, a young Moroccan man who is ready to do everything to leave his homeland and eventually accepts to become the lover of a rich Spanish man called Miguel. The story of Azel interlaces with the experiences of other migrants such as Nouredin, who dies during his illegal crossing from Tangier to Tarifa, Siham, who works in Marbella as a nurse and takes care of a disabled girl, and Abbas who enters Spain in a truck full of goods.

The novel opens with a group of Moroccans sitting on a bar's terrace and looking intently at the horizon imagining their future life in Spain. These men are compared to patient children in need of soft stories that would calm their uneasiness and restlessness. In

their fantasy, the Mediterranean sea is refashioned as a treacherous and unpredictable spider that tempts them with its fascination and swallows them up with no pity (1-2). Moroccans' desire to migrate is equated with a spreading disease and an obsession. This is how Azel expresses his desire to leave Morocco and imagines his migration as a sort of rebirth and a liberation: "Being reborn elsewhere. Leaving by any means possible. Spreading your wings. Running along the sand shouting out your freedom. Working, creating, producing, imagining, doing something with your life" (35). Here, Ben Jelloun stresses Azel's determination and through the metaphor of the bird spreading its wings suggests feelings of freedom and release. This idea of liberation and vigour is further elaborated through the image of the young man running on the beach and shouting. Noteworthy is also the list of verbs in asyndeton through which the writer constructs an atmosphere of dynamism and energy. If Spain represents a dreamland, a country of rebirth and fulfilment, a place of activity and vitality, Morocco is the place of stasis, a corrupt and economically weak country whose stagnation deeply afflicts its inhabitants. In this sense, Azel embodies the hopelessness and lack of prospects that affect young Moroccans and proclaims his resentful feelings towards his homeland as follows:

that's it my friends, that's Morocco, where some folks slave like maniacs, working because they've decided to be honest, those fellows, they labour in the shadow, no one sees them, no one talks with them, when in fact they should get medals, because the country functions thanks to their integrity, and then there are the others, swarming everywhere, in all the ministries, because in our beloved country, corruption is the very air we breath, yes, we stink of corruption, it's on our faces, in our heads, buried in our hearts (...)! I'm in a rocket, I'm escaping into space, don't want to live anymore on this earth, in this country, it's all fake, everyone's cutting some deal, well, I refuse to do that, I studied law in a nation that knows nothing of the Law even while it's

pretending to demand respect for our laws, what a joke, here you have to respect the powerful, that's all, but for the rest, you're on your fucking own...

(6)

Here, migration is reframed as the only possible escape from a country governed by depravity and dishonesty, the only way out for people who want to remain honest and loyal to themselves. Morocco's corruption and moral dissolution are embodied by Al Alfia, the smuggler, a cruel and ruthless man who overloads his boats with desperate Moroccans causing them to drown. Apart from being a trafficker of human beings, Al Alfia is also a drug dealer who lives in a rich neighbourhood of Tangier and makes money out of the desperation of young Moroccans.<sup>82</sup> By outlining Al Alfia as a ruthless man, Ben Jelloun denounces and condemns the illegality and criminality spreading all over Morocco thus raising uncomfortable questions regarding the incapacity of Morocco's political elite to grant security and well being to its citizens.

In both novels, the young protagonists are oppressed by a stagnant and unbearable situation and dream to pursue a better life in Europe. The boundaries between home and abroad, travel and immobility, country of emigration and immigration appear blurred and merge. In *De Niro's Game*, Lebanon is depicted as a war-torn country where violence and chaos reign and the young protagonist dreams about escaping to Rome; in *Leaving Tangier*, Morocco is represented as a dissipated and corrupted country and its inhabitants are obsessed by Spain. The hybridity of the domestic space finds expression also on a formal level: Hage's dense and highly imaginative prose recalls the daring experimentations of a visual artist,<sup>83</sup> while the fast rhythm of the narration and the precipitating events evoke the power of cinema. In particular, the exciting and tense successions of actions condensed in the first part of the

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<sup>82</sup> The figure of the *porteur* can be compared to that of the anonymous Islamist recruiter who takes advantage of the disorientation of young Moroccans, drives them to join an Islamist organization, and pushes them to sacrifice their lives on foreign missions. See Ben Jelloun 11.

<sup>83</sup> As Hage explains in an interview, his activity as a visual artist and a photographer has deeply influenced his writing. See Faustus Salvador's interview to Rawi Hage.

novel and drawing on war activities, smuggling, and treason reproduce the sombre atmosphere of a thriller.<sup>84</sup> If Hage mixes different artistic languages, Ben Jelloun amalgamates realism and psychological analysis and explores with great care the interior world of its characters. By using a highly evocative language and by mixing reality with fiction, realism with reverie, both writers represent the domestic space as a hybrid and porous site. Rather than outlining Morocco and Lebanon as totally opposite to Italy and Spain, both authors refashion the two shores of the Mediterranean as tightly related and mutually influenced by each other. These writers refashion home as “a site of unrestful differences” (Clifford, “Routes” 85), and by so doing confirm Ahmed’s observation that “there is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation” (“Home and Away” 340). By outlining home as a hybrid space, Hage and Ben Jelloun oppose and dismantle traditional constructions and interpretations of the domestic space as a uniform, impermeable, and comfortable place, and refashion both home and abroad as porous and instable locations that are contingent and interdependent.

## **2. The Tourist vs. the Migrant**

In *Questions of Travel* (1996), Caren Kaplan argues that despite the proliferation and popularity of “metaphors of travel and displacement,” “displacement is not universally available or desirable for many subjects, nor is it evenly experienced” (1). This idea is shared by Clifford who takes into consideration the cultural, political, and economic factors that coerce travel, and draws a distinction between “materially privileged” and “oppressed” travelers (“Routes” 35). Arab diasporic authors represent different bodies and categories of people who move across national borders with different degrees of freedom. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Lalami outlines the Mediterranean as a border dividing “not

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<sup>84</sup> The title of the book, in particular, refers to the 1978 movie *The Deer Hunter* in which the two protagonists (Robert De Niro and Christopher Malen) play Russian roulette as George and Bassam do at the end of the first part of the novel.

just two countries but two universes” (1). The novel opens with the description of the perilous and illegal trip that four Moroccans undertake in order to reach Spain. Among the migrants, there are Faten, who leaves Morocco in order to escape an arrest for political reasons, Halima, who is running away from a life of domestic violence and poverty, Aziz and Murad who pursue the dream of a stable and well-paid job. The first scene of the novel focuses on the “inflatable boat” (3) on which the four protagonists attempt to cross the Mediterranean and reach Spain. The immigrants’ unsafe means of transportation is clearly contrasted with the “afternoon ferry” (95) that takes the tourists daily and in total safety to Tangier. Day and night underline the opposition when the four protagonists are represented while reluctantly climbing on the boat and embarking on their journey in the middle of the night. Their crossing is in darkness, while the comfortable trip that American and European tourists carry out to reach Tangier is in broad daylight. Furthermore, the light-heartedness of the tourists, who are represented as “free from the burden of survival” (109), clashes with the gravity that characterizes the journey of the four Moroccans. The tourists’ unquestioned and legal transition enlightens the risky, unsafe, and clandestine expedition of the four Moroccans and raises questions of privilege and exclusion, entitlement to move and unauthorized mobility. By and large, Lalami refuses to embellish and celebrate migration as a progressive path towards happiness and fulfilment and rather invites us to consider the political, social, and economic inequalities that are embedded in trafficking<sup>85</sup> and in illegal migration. Her novel provides us with human and responsible depictions of illegal migrants, thus allowing us to virtually participate in their enterprise and eventually show solidarity with them. As Lalami indicates in her blog, the novel was inspired by real news she read on *Le Monde*, reporting the death by drowning of fifteen Moroccans who were attempting to reach Spain by crossing the

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<sup>85</sup> For a compelling analysis of trafficking as a phenomenon that blurs the boundaries of legality and illegality, see Rutvica Andrijasevic 251-271.



Mediterranean.<sup>86</sup> The title of the novel evokes the mixture of hope and despair, expectations and illusions that characterizes migration; her prose, by contrast, is very specific and concrete as if she wanted to give a human face to her characters to prevent their reduction into the abstract category of illegal migration. However, her portraits are sometimes one-dimensional and summarily sketched: Faten, for instance, is initially identified as “the Fanatic” and later as “the Odalisque.” These labels confine her characters into pre-given and imprisoning categories and provide the reader with representations that lack depth.

If Lalami juxtaposes the illegal journey of the four Moroccans with that of European and American tourists, Hage sets Bassam’s desperate and clandestine journey to France in opposition to the carefree holiday that tourists spend in the French capital. This is how the narrator describes his illegal arrival in Marseille:

When the boat arrived in port, a group of the sailors led me down to the engine room. I stayed behind the boiler, sweating, and hid from the inspector who checked the cabins. When the inspector left, Moustafa and Mamadou ran to me and brought me water, laughing at my wet hair and clothes.

That night, Moustafa and I sailed to shore in a small boat. We crossed a fence and some train tracks. Then Moustafa smiled and said, You are in Marseille. You are on your own now. (190)

In this scene, Hage describes Bassam and Moustafa’s gradual approach to Marseille, and by representing them reaching Marseille at night and breaking through a fence, the writer constructs an atmosphere of mystery and illegality. The final sentence pronounced by Moustafa sounds like an irrevocable condemnation and an anticipation of Bassam’s bleak and lonely condition. Indeed, as soon as Bassam arrives in Paris, he is overpowered by feelings of

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<sup>86</sup> See [www.lailalalami.com/blog/](http://www.lailalalami.com/blog/)

abandonment and exclusion; his estrangement and solitude clearly differ from the tourists' gregarious habits and their inclination to move in groups "like little ants" (243), posing in front of the camera "like smiling statues" (243). This is how the narrator records the tourists' light-hearted life-style and disapproves of their presumptuous attitude:

I saw tourists landing in their buses, bouncing like astronauts, with bags filled with maps and guidebooks that might give them clues to the mystery of the moon. Those books talked about the importance of choosing the right restaurants and gave directions to the right museums, where the residues of history and the theft of empires were boxed in glass menageries suitable for their visits in the morning after tiny French breakfasts, which they ate while feeling nostalgic for lines at the buffet, and long stainless-steel containers, and wrinkled eggs, and over-easy eggs, and tasteless potato chunks, and neon-coloured jams, and chewy Wonderbread, and diluted coffee, which they sipped in sync with the big band music that filtered through from the kitchen, spiced by the humming of the black cook behind the swinging doors with the round boat windows that also swing on the Mississippi in ships that carry the tourists' flour, corn, and greasy bacon. (243-244)

Bassam's reproachful look clearly betrays his condemnation and his despise. Tourists are initially compared to aliens landing unexpectedly like invaders in troops from other planets, and then equated with astronauts who float lightly and gracefully immersed as they are in a weightless and therefore untroubled life. In particular, Bassam ridicules their absolute faith in guidebooks and maps, their meticulous plans, and scrupulous choices: through the repetition of the term "right", he makes fun of how tourists regard their trip as if it were a serious and moral matter. Through the accumulation of food, the writer suggests the tourists' greed and hunger, while through the reference to the "tasteless potato chunks," the "neon-coloured

jams,” and the “diluted coffee,” he conveys an idea of artificiality that is reinforced by the simulated happiness of the black cook humming a song in absolute accord with the beats of the big band music and the swinging of the kitchen doors. In fact, the representation of the abundant buffet and the happy Mississippi boat loaded with hungry tourists is set in contrast to the desolate and miserable dinner served to Bassam on the boat that takes him to Marseille. The protagonist eats food contained in “plastic bowls” (187) and silence reigns on the boat; the reference to the rocking boat and the representation of the food shifting side to side in the passengers’ mouth suggest feelings of nausea that anticipate the disorientation and aversion that Bassam will endure in France.

Both Hage and Lalami raise questions regarding the discrepancy between the life of the tourist and that of the illegal migrant and show us that the tourist can move freely and is invited to do so, while the migrant must stay at home and his/her act of crossing is necessarily sanctioned. In their works, the tourist moves in broad daylight, is clearly visible, and conducts a carefree life; on the contrary, the illegal migrant withdraws to the margins of the society, becomes gradually invisible, and is rejected by the social body of the nation. If tourists are represented as authorized travellers and their economic power grant them the right to move, illegal migrants can only move clandestinely as unauthorized travellers. By and large, Hage and Lalami call into question the social, economic, and political inequalities that set the tourist in contrast to the migrant and demonstrate that, as Ginette Verstraete reminds us (2003), “rather than simply having disappeared – as the European Union rhetoric goes – borders have multiplied: permeable ones for some and durable ones for others” (229).

### **3. Europe as Free Market and as Fortress**

In *Leaving Tangier*, Ben Jelloun elaborates the issue of the porosity vs. impenetrability of borders and raises uncomfortable questions regarding the construction of the European

Union as a free market for goods and a fortress for human beings.<sup>87</sup> In this regard, Verstraete writes, “in a space of unlimited mobility for a very limited group of people – European’s propertied nationals – borders are abundant, the production and consumption of others immense” (227). In *Leaving Tangier*, Ben Jelloun addresses this contentious issue through the story of Malika, a Moroccan teen-age girl who dreams of leaving Morocco and travelling to Spain. In fact, Malika can only move in her dreams and is confined in Tangier where she works in a Dutch factory “in the free zone of the port” (77), shelling shrimps to be sold in the European market. This is how the narrator describes the antithetical conditions under which goods and people move across and inside the European Union:

Like her girlfriend Achoucha, the neighbour lady Hafsa, her cousin Fatima, and hundreds of girls in her neighbourhood, Malika went off to shell shrimps in the Dutch factory down in the free zone of the port. Every day refrigerated trucks brought in tonnes of cooked shrimps, caught in Thailand and shipped through the Netherlands, where they were treated with preservatives. In the factory, small hands with slender fingers shelled them day and night, after which the shrimps travelled to yet another destination to be canned before debuting at last on the European markets. In Tangier, the girls were paid a pittance. (77)

The narrator denounces and condemns the dislocation of European enterprises in foreign countries and the subsequent exploitation of local people by European companies. By mapping the itinerary of the shrimps from Thailand to the Netherlands and from there to Tangier and then back to Europe, Ben Jelloun highlights the permeability of borders and the extreme mobility of the shrimps. The verb “debut” referred to the first public appearance of the shrimps on the European market sarcastically alludes to the careful preparation they have been

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<sup>87</sup> I use the term fortress to highlight how Europe has been conceptualized as a well-protected place and as a barrier intended to be difficult for enemies to enter. The Schengen agreement signed in June 1990 is considered to be the starting point of this conceptualization. See Henriques and Khachani 8.

subjected to in order to be suitable for the demanding European customers. As this passage demonstrates, in *Leaving Tangier*, Ben Jelloun denounces and condemns the economic perspective that guides the European Union's political and legal agenda and is in accordance with Verstraete who observes: "in an economy based on the removal of differences through objectification, 'aliens' get to travel like packages in trailers: without frontiers as long as they are paid for at the start" (244). Ben Jelloun addresses the theme of the objectification and subsequent exploitation of the illegal migrant, by inserting in his narrative the story of Abbas, a North African immigrant who reaches Spain by "hiding in a truck full of merchandises" (133). In the course of the story, Abbas and the various illegal migrants populating the novel gradually metamorphose into invisible beings, "bare bodies,"<sup>88</sup> and alienated individuals who conduct underground and marginalized lives. This is how Abbas himself describes his miserable life:

"Frankly, I talk big, but, well, you know sometimes I just cry all alone in my little room, yes, I sometimes sob over my life, the situation I'm in; I miss my mother terribly, I talk to her on the phone, but I can't go see her, I haven't a single document anymore, no Moroccan passport, no national identification card, no residence permit, so if I leave here, it'll be in handcuffs with someone's foot halfway up my ass. You think that's a life? I'm the all-around champ of illegal alienation: I make myself as black as night to be invisible, as grey as dawn and fog to pass unnoticed, I avoid deserted places, I'm ready to run away any second, and I've memorized all the entrances to the local churches so I can hop in a flash into the arms of

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<sup>88</sup> I borrow the expression "bare body" from Willem Schinkel who employs it to define the conditions of irregular migrants deprived as they are of any legal protection. In his words: "Irregular immigrants are these 'bare bodies' imprisoned, of whom bone scans are taken to determine their age if doubts exist. They are what Agamben understands by the Roman concept of *homo sacer*: they cannot be sacrificed or killed (since they are never really 'inside' - 'integrated'), but can be treated as existing outside the law in 'zones of exemption' (since they are always 'external' - excluded)" (787).

the priest – that way they can't get at me, and it's already happened once, one Christmas when they gave up the hunt and I spent the holidays with the priests.” (128)

Abbas laments here his vulnerability and constant shift between two non-existences: repatriation and systematic annulment.<sup>89</sup> He also admits living in total solitude and being periodically overcome by despair. The accumulation of documents preceded by the negation “no” stresses his social and legal invisibility; moreover, through the metaphor of the hunt, the author constructs Abbas as both a criminal and a harmless prey chased by a group of predators.

The theme of the deportation and invisibility of the illegal migrant is further elaborated by Hage in *De Niro's Game*. In this case, the writer draws a parallelism between Bassam's fear of being arrested and detained for an indefinite period of time and the deportation that Jewish people experienced during the Second World War. In the following passage, Bassam is represented while wandering like a trapped animal in Paris and in his delirium, he imagines running into a Gestapo search:

I walked like a spy in disguise, with a hat on my head, a baguette under my arm, and when I saw the Gestapo and the Vichy men rounding up thousands of people who looked like me, with the same nose and the same skin, I turned and entered the sewers. I feared being captured, I feared being cramped in trains, I feared cold nights without food, I feared being stripped of my hat, stripped of my watch, my baguette and my violin, my loved ones... and I also feared for the price I would pay in one way or another, in the present or in the future. (216)

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<sup>89</sup> The removal of the illegal alien from the public sphere and his reduction to the object of an administrative process has been denounced and condemned by Schinkel in his article. As he poignantly asserts: “The very location of the 'illegal alien' is the procedure. Outside the procedure, indeed, there 'is' no 'illegal alien'; he or she is either repatriated (back in that other heterotopia called 'the' 'Third World') or invisible (in the fields, picking asparagus, or in the kitchen, washing dishes).” See Willem Schinkel 797-798.

Here, Hage establishes a connection between the persecution and deportation that the Jewish were subjected to during nazism and the indefinite detention that illegal migrants currently undergo in Europe. The parallelism is perhaps risky but pregnant with consequences as it relates contemporary procedures that are taken against illegal migrants to those that were implemented and carried out by the Nazis and the fascists against the Jewish and other target groups during World War II.<sup>90</sup> According to Hage, as the racial laws legitimized the discrimination and violence against the Jewish, today's legal procedures endorse the deportation of thousands of illegal aliens and other 'undesired' ethnic groups in detention centres and their gradual degradation and dehumanization.<sup>91</sup>

In their works, both Hage and Ben Jelloun demonstrate that the production of illegal migrants is tightly related to the construction of rigid and impenetrable borders. Ben Jelloun, in particular, openly contests the erection of a Fortress Europe and envisions the Mediterranean as a crossroad open to multiple passages and a connecting space that heals ancient divisions. Accordingly, in the delirium that anticipates Malika's premature death, the girl imagines reaching Spain by train and being warmly welcomed by the local people:

Dream number three is a train that crosses the Strait of Gibraltar. Tarifa and Tangier are linked by a bridge as lovely as the one Malika saw in a tourism magazine. The trip takes twenty minutes. Malika is sitting in the first car, avidly observing everything about the crossing. When the train arrives on the Spanish coast, a welcoming committee greets the travellers, offering them flowers, dates, and milk. Malika loves dates. She takes three of them and eats as fast as she can. The Spanish who greeted them propose that Malika attend the lycée there, to continue the studies she interrupted upon

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<sup>90</sup> In his thought-provoking article, Schinkel compares the detention centre to a "camp" or "an *exceptional space*, a spatial culmination and contraction of the exceptional power of the state" (796).

<sup>91</sup> In this regard, Schinkel equates the detention centre with "a non-place" where people "are devoid of identity" (794) and whose main objective is to create "the illusory image of a purified, orderly national territory and society" (795).

leaving Tangier. When she turns around, the train is gone, and the bridge as well. (96)

By imagining Malika's safe and comfortable trip to Europe and by envisioning Spanish cordial hospitality, Ben Jelloun dismantles the construction of Europe as a citadel sheltered by strong fortifications and reconfigures the Mediterranean as a *borderland* (Anzaldúa 1987), an area marked by permanent and forbidden crossings and perpetual movement, but also as a site where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa 19).

#### 4. Margins of Migration

In their autobiographical accounts, Methnani and Bouchane narrate their personal experience of living as illegal migrants in Italy at the end of the 1980s. Their works are written in a direct and bare style and represent a painful and essential chronicle on the phenomenon of illegal migration. As Alessandra Di Maio notes, the fact that these texts appeared in the 1990s is not a case: the so-called *Martelli Law* granting illegal migrants living in Italy an Italian citizenship was introduced in 1990; this law, also called *sanatoria*, viewed the regulation of illegal migrants as an immunization against the plague of migration.<sup>92</sup>

The works of Methnani and Bouchane have been written with the collaboration of Italian journalists and editors;<sup>93</sup> despite the possible alterations and deformations that this intervention may have produced, these works represent an impressive testimony of the phenomenon of illegal migration and a lucid albeit painful report of a failed hospitality. I wish

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<sup>92</sup> According to Alessandro Dal Lago (1999), Italians' initial indifference towards migration was substituted in the 1990s by an open hostility. This interpretation is shared by Anika Kotic and Anna Triandafyllidou (2007), who point out that migration in Italy has been constructed and understood as a triple problem: a "security threat," a "threat to jobs," and a menace to the Italian "cultural and religious identity." See Kotic and Triandafyllidou 194.

<sup>93</sup> Methnani's autobiography has been written in association with the Italian journalist Mario Fortunato, while Bouchane's work has been edited by Carla De Giordano and Daniele Miccione. For an extensive analysis on the problems embedded in these collaborations, see Alessandra Di Maio (2001).



to include their writings in my work, for they allow me to give space to an unusual point of view, that of the illegal migrant himself, a perspective that necessarily complicates mainstream narratives that reduce illegal migrants to non-persons.<sup>94</sup> In particular, by taking into exam these two autobiographical accounts, I wish to raise questions regarding the subtle boundary that separates injustice from hospitality and to reflect on how, quoting Derrida, “injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality” (*Of Hospitality* 55).

In *Chiamatemi Alì* [*Call me Ali*] and in *Immigrato* [*Immigrant*], the protagonists are two graduate students who move to Italy from Morocco and Tunisia in search for a job and a better life. As soon as they reach Italy, however, both are gradually sucked into the underground world of illegal migration and their dreams and expectations, their visions of wealth and happiness break in thousand pieces. In *Chiamatemi Alì*, Bouchane refers to his condition of illegality as “an endless and daily suffering” [un’infinita e quotidiana sofferenza] (39); in *Immigrato*, Methnani redefines his nomadic and troublesome transit from Sicily to the North of Italy as a “descent” (40) into the abyss of illegality and into the unknown sides of his personality. This is how the first-person narrator expresses this contradictory experience: “Alla fine, con lucidità, ho pensato che risalire l’Italia corrispondeva, nella mia personale geografia, a una discesa nel Sud di me stesso” (40) [In the end, I thought in a clear-headed way that travelling up through Italy corresponded, in my personal geography, to a descent into the South of myself].

Methnani’s journal is carefully organized: the structure of his diary is neat and systematic as if to counterbalance the extreme confusion and disorientation provoked by his migratory project. In particular, the brief chapters reflect his restless and aimless journey from the South to the North of Italy and chronicle the discriminations, exploitations, and

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<sup>94</sup> For a thorough examination of the systematic removal and misrepresentations that migrants undergo in the Italian media, see Dal Lago (1999).

disillusions that he endures in Mazara del Vallo, Palermo, Naples, Rome, Florence, Turin, and Milan. Scenes of distrust and hatred, episodes of discrimination and segregation abound in the novel and call into question the supposed hospitality of Italians: in one scene, for instance, the protagonist is forced to move to the back of the bus because he is told that the seats in front are “reserved” to Italians (14); in another case, he is told that the bar he wants to go in is “prohibited” to migrants (21). This atmosphere of open racism and segregation leads the narrator to compare Naples to Pretoria (43), thus implying that the condition of North-African migrants in Italy is comparable to the one experienced by black people in South Africa during apartheid. In Methnani’s work, however, racism takes a variety of forms and is portrayed as a complex phenomenon. For example, when the protagonist decides to go into an African restaurant, the distrustful looks of its Nigerian and Senegalese guests make him feel immediately uncomfortable, self-conscious, and unwelcome. This is how he expresses his unease and disappointment: “Sempre alla ricerca di un posto per dormire, mi fermo in un ristorante che ha solo specialità africane. Dentro ci sono nigeriani e senegalesi. Tutti mi guardano perché, penso, per loro io non sono nero. Mi sento oggetto di una inedita forma di razzismo” (38) [Being constantly in search for a place to sleep, I stop in a restaurant that offers only African speciality. Inside there are Nigerians and Senegalese. Everyone is staring at me because, I think, I’m not black for them. I feel the object of an unusual form of racism]. In this case, scornful looks and racist attitudes are paradoxically engendered by Methnani’s light black skin that is perceived as being not enough black and therefore despised. In the African restaurant, the protagonist’s body stands out for his difference and is immediately marked as a body out of place.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> According to Ahmed, strangers are those who are clearly recognized as not belonging. In her words: “Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place*” (*Strange Encounters* 21, her emphasis).

Rather than mingling with the local people, the protagonists of these stories are gradually deprived of their human qualities, pushed to the margins of the society, forced to conduct a parallel and underground life and to surrender to the degrading and misleading representations that are cast on them by local people. In *Chiamatemi Alì*, Bouchane unveils the racist remarks circulating in the Italian society and reluctantly reports the following categorizations: “Lei intanto dice che i marocchini sono cattivi perchè, per un niente, tirano fuori il coltello, ma gli indiani no: sono bravi” (32) [In the meantime, she says that Moroccans are bad because they take out the knife for nothing, but Indians no: they are good]. Here, the narrator distances himself from the circulating prejudices and stereotypes that construct ethnic groups as separated and impermeable entities and reduce the stranger to a monolithic, homogeneous, and predictable being. Also the label “marocchino” [Moroccan], used to indicate all migrants in total disregard of their origins and ethnic or national belonging, is sarcastically questioned and reported with consternation and incredulity: “Gli ho detto che se per davvero esistono marocchini del Pakistan e marocchini dell’Algeria, io allora cosa sono? Un marocchino del Marocco? Anzi, un marocchino bianco del Marocco?” (98) [I told him that if there are Moroccans from Pakistan and Moroccans from Algeria, then what am I supposed to be? A Moroccan from Morocco? Rather, a white Moroccan from Morocco?]. The label “marocchino” acts as a dangerous mechanism that is meant to annul the real existence, specificity, and uniqueness of the migrant and to manipulate his/her representation. The deleterious effects of these processes of degradation and homogenization are revealed and questioned also by Methnani. In the following passage, for instance, the narrator confesses to have surrendered to the stereotypes and misconceptions circulating in the Italian society, and avows having started to adapt to and interiorize the stereotypical representation of the “vu’ cumprà”:

Da quando ho capito che la mia discreta conoscenza dell'italiano, invece di facilitare le cose, le complica, ho preso a parlare come ci si aspetta parli un "vu' cumprà". Negli ostelli e nelle mense, dico: «Amigo incontrato stazione dire venire qua. Rubare me passaporto e soldi.» Pare che questo linguaggio elementare tranquillizzi molto gli impiegati delle strutture per l'accoglienza degli immigrati. (56)

[Since I have understood that my passable knowledge of Italian rather than facilitating things, complicates them, I have started talking as they expect a "vu' cumprà" to express himself. In hostels and canteens, I say: «Amigo met somebody station say come here. Stole passport and money.» It seems that this elementary language reassures the employees of the reception centres for immigrants.]

Here, Methnani admits performing the denigrating role that locals cast upon him and confesses having started to respond to their expectations. In order to match the stereotype of an uncultivated and empty-headed stranger, the protagonist has finally agreed to talk like a "vu cumprà," a supposedly ignorant peddler who is presumed to express himself by using a ridiculous and degenerated language.

By portraying illegal migrants as the victims of the society they inhabit, Methnani and Bouchane reveal and call into question the practices of marginalization and exclusion that affect migrants and the inhospitality that Italians show towards the foreigners among them. Hospitality, however, is never totally abolished or excluded, and the episodes of friendship and solidarity, that are sporadically scattered in the narration, attest to the survival of welcoming behaviours even in the bleak and desolate context in which the protagonists of these two works find themselves confined to. By unveiling the inhospitality of the Italian society, Methnani denounces and condemns the discrimination and segregation he has been

victim to; by manifesting the chasm that separates him from the people who surround him, Bouchane expresses a sharp critique against a hypocrite society that pretends to be hospitable but is in fact marginalizing and excluding. Both authors develop a realistic style and use a simple and bare prose. The events follow a chronological order and the book takes the form of a diary in which the protagonist carefully records the linear and sequential succession of his days and sticks to the facts, struggling to maintain a certain degree of objectivity. The choice of the first person narrator, however, alters Methani and Bouchane's attempts to produce a strictly factual report. Although the literary value of these texts may be questionable, I have nonetheless decided to include them in my study because they represent a watershed for the development of the so-called migrant literature in Italy, and because they shift the position of the illegal migrant from being a mere object of sociological scrutiny to a subject with a voice, yearning to give his own version of the story. As Alessandra Di Maio (2001) notes:

Claiming for themselves their right to speak with their own voices, to tell their stories from their own standpoints, and to write the history to which they were contributing participants, these writers re-manipulated and revolted against the narratives created on and about them. With the force of their own creative imagination, they portrayed their own experience as immigrants, therefore appropriating the reins of the nation's discourse on immigration. From narrative objects, they made themselves narrative subjects. (150)

### **5. The Migrant as Present Absentee**

In *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, Sayyad equates the inexistence of the (illegal) migrant with "the paradoxical situation of the living dead or the already dead-living" (143), thus foregrounding his/her continual oscillation between actual life and legal inexistence,

visibility and invisibility. In *Immigrato*, Methnani describes the existence of the illegal migrant as “an authentic second-level topography” [un’autentica topografia di second livello], “a kind of underground circuit in broad daylight with its rules and well-defined boundaries” [una sorta di circuito sotterraneo alla luce del sole, con le sue regole e i suoi confini ben definiti] (56). In one of the most impressive passages, Methnani compares his aimlessness to the hopeless and monotonous wait of a group of North African migrants who lie on the ground at the Central station in Milan and look like “a caravan of nomads who are gathered around a palm” (111) [una carovana di nomadi raccolti intorno a un palmizio]. More specifically, the author equates his own degradation, disorientation, and estrangement with their in-existence. The issue of the migrant’s estrangement from the society in which he/she lives is further developed in the following passage, in which Methnani compares his erratic and purposeless condition to the floating of a balloon:

Mi abito praticamente a vagare per la città senza meta. A cercare lavoro, ho rinunciato del tutto. Non mi faccio più domande, e non ne faccio agli altri. Tutto è diventato normale e indifferente. Scivolo lungo la strada che non conduce da nessuna parte, ma non importa. Importa solo andare avanti, aprire gli occhi la mattina e chiuderli a notte inoltrata. Ho superato la soglia della disperazione dello stupore. Mi sento un palloncino che vola qua e là.  
(72)

[I am getting used to wander aimlessly across the city. I have completely given up the hope to find a job. I don’t ask myself any question anymore, and I don’t ask any question to other people. Everything has become ordinary and indifferent. I slide on the street that leads nowhere, but I don’t care. It matters only to move on, open my eyes in the morning and close

them late at night. I have gone pass the threshold of despair and amazement. I feel like a balloon that flies here and there.]

Here, the narrator expresses his resignation and total disinterest for what surrounds him. His initial enthusiasm and amazement have gradually turned into despair and apathy; his boredom and distress are so intense that his life recalls him that of a balloon that drifts away from the world and floats carelessly in the atmosphere.

On an autobiographical level, Methnani bears witness to the alienation that he has experienced as an illegal migrant in Italy; on a fictional level, Hage raises questions regarding the contradictory condition of excessive visibility and total invisibility that Bassam experiences in France. In Marseille, Bassam falls victim to a xenophobic attack: he is first carefully monitored by a group of skinheads, then verbally vilified, and finally attacked because his body has been perceived as a visible threat for the “purified” space of home (191). Later in the novel, when Bassam is in Paris, he gradually metamorphoses into a spectral body that passes completely unnoticed. This is how the narrator describes his invisibility and compares his condition to a kind of death:

I took the steps down to the river’s edge and sat on a bench and waited for the fog to descend and touch the water.

Now, I thought, all is invisible; all is hidden from laws, eyes, perception. This must be death, where nothing is seen.

I wore the fog as a garment and walked with it into the night. (228)

Bassam is outlined as an invisible and furtive body who hides himself from the rest of the society. The narrator alludes to his decline and gradual degradation by describing his downward movement towards the river and the fog’s “descent.” By comparing the fog to a clothing that Bassam wears as a disguise and by repeating “all is invisible; all is hidden,” the writer emphasizes the protagonist’s invisibility. This idea of the in-existence of the illegal

migrant is brought to the extreme in the episode of the booth that is paradigmatic of Bassam's isolation and alienation:

I decided to call the number, like I had promised. I found a telephone booth and I dialed. The phone rang, but no one answered. Still I stood in the booth, looking with an empty gaze through the glass. I felt as if I could live inside of the booth, feeling its borders, claiming it for myself. I pretended that I was talking on the phone, but all I wanted was to be in the booth. I wanted to stand there and watch every passerby, I wanted to justify my existence, and legitimize my foreign feet, and watch the people who passed and never bothered to look or wave. So I waited and glued the receiver to my ear and listened to the long monotonous tone. (193-194)

Here, the booth functions as a refuge for Bassam that protects him from the inhospitable environment that surrounds him; yet, it also epitomizes his confinement and estrangement from the people around him. By outlining the illegal migrant as a ghostly presence and an unnoticed being, who unstably fluctuates between visibility and invisibility, Hage and Methnani raise uncomfortable questions regarding the dehumanization and *derealization*<sup>96</sup> that illegal migrants endure in the society they inhabit.<sup>97</sup> They also demonstrate that the existence of the illegal migrant is alternately reduced to a cumbersome and inconvenient apparition or to an irrelevant and unquestioned presence. By and large, these writers reframe illegal migrants as the *present absentees*<sup>98</sup> of our contemporary societies, raise interesting questions regarding

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<sup>96</sup> As Butler rightly notes: "The derealization of the "Other" means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (33-34).

<sup>97</sup> The image of the living dead is further elaborated by Hage who identifies Bassam as a "standing corpse" (222) and a "dead man" (202).

<sup>98</sup> The term *present absentees* has been used by the Jewish State to indicate the Palestinian refugees who were forced to abandon their homes and belongings after the proclamation of the Israeli State in 1948. Their right to reclaim their possessions and to go back to their homes has been abolished by the Israeli Present Absentees' Law. I draw a connection between their condition of marginalization, non-recognition, and the one that 'illegal' migrants endure in contemporary societies. Both groups lack legal protection, recognition, and are the victims of the delineation and erection of impermeable borders based on exclusivist claims. On the Palestinian present absentees, see Masalha (2007).



the status of (illegal) migrants in our communities, and incite us to critically reflect on how and under what circumstances a human being ceases to be recognized as such.

## 6. Migration as Break and Potential

Drawing from the Arab word “el ghorba,” Sayyad explains that term migration condenses two divergent meanings: its literary version evokes feelings of disorientation, exclusion, and helplessness, while the idealized version gives rise to images of success and emancipation. He further outlines migration as a “*break*, a break with a territory and by that very fact a population, a social order, an economic order, a political order, and a cultural and moral order” (*Suffering* 88, his emphasis); according to Sayyad, this break gives rise to feelings of guilt and culpability, as the migrant is accused to have “betrayed” his/her origins. Feelings of culpability and self-accusation abound in the works of Methnani and Bouchane who represent the illegal migrant as a subject who unevenly shifts between hope and despair, expectations and disillusion. In *Immigrato*, Methnani initially imagines Italy as “an enchanted, happy country” [un paese incantato, felice] (8) and later reconsiders it as a hateful and disturbing place in which he feels trapped as an animal in a “cage” [gabbia] (42). This is how the narrator explains how his self-esteem has dropped in an irreparable and harmful way and how his dreams have turned out to be mere illusions:

Sono costretto a non vedermi più, in così poco tempo, come un giovane laureato all'estero. Non sono già più un ragazzo che vuole viaggiare e conoscere. No: di colpo, mi scopro essere in tutto e per tutto un immigrato nordafricano, senza lavoro, senza casa, clandestino. Un individuo di 27 anni venuto qui alla ricerca di qualcosa di confuso: il mito dell'Occidente, del benessere, di una specie di libertà. Tutte parole che già stanno cominciando a sfaldarsi nella mia testa. (24)

[After so little, I find myself forced not to recognize myself anymore as a young foreign graduate student. I am not anymore a young man who wants to travel and know. No: suddenly, I discover myself to be every inch a North-African migrant, without a job, a home, an illegal alien. A young man of age 27 who has come in search for something confused: the myth of the West, well-being, and a kind of freedom. All words that already start breaking up in my head.]

The protagonist realizes that his migratory project has been nourished by vain promises and that his quest for economic well-being and freedom appears more and more uncertain and confused. His identity and status as a graduate student have been negatively affected and annihilated by his condition of illegality that has swept away all his qualities. Feelings of culpability, embarrassment, and shame abound in the novel and lead the subject to experience an unbearable sense of loss and distress. Similarly, in *Chiamatemi Alì*, Bouchane reframes migration as a downward curve that is marked by harmful humiliations and as a catastrophe from which there is little salvation (16-17). Religion is therefore redefined as the only sheet anchor to which the protagonist can still hang on to: “Fra tanta gente che parla la mia lingua e professa la mia stessa religione sono a casa. Mi sembra di essere un naufrago che rischiava di annegare e all’improvviso ha trovato un pezzo di legno al quale aggrapparsi” (15) [Among many people that speak the same language as me and follow the same religion, I feel at home. I feel like a shipwrecked person who was risking death and suddenly found a piece of wood on which to cling on]. Bouchane represents the mosque as a piece of home and through the simile of the shipwreck suggests that his life has been destroyed by migration and rescued by religion.

The idea of an impending disaster and constant suffering pervades also Ben Jelloun’s novel. In *Leaving Tangier*, migration is represented as a risky and downward path that leads

the subjects to experience loss, humiliation, and despair; the author further delineates migration as a form of betrayal towards oneself and one's moral beliefs. Rather than celebrating migration as a progressive movement towards economic well-being and social recognition, Ben Jelloun represents it as a risky and perilous journey that dives the subject into the dark sides of himself and as a swing away from his moral integrity, values, and beliefs. Accordingly, as soon as Azel reaches Spain and is confronted with the harsh and dramatic reality of sexual exploitation, his dreams turn out to be vain promises and illusions; his lightheartedness is gradually substituted by a feeling of shame and his hope is replaced by an unbearable sense of discomfort. When he finally realizes that Spain does not correspond to the idealized image that had inspired his migration, he is overpowered by a feeling of despair and helplessness. This is how he expresses his disappointment and disorientation:

You know, from Morocco you can see Spain, but it doesn't work like that in the opposite direction. The Spanish don't see us, they don't give a damn, they've no use for our country. I'm in my little room, it smells musty here; there's only one window and I don't dare open it. I admit that I'm disappointed – it's just that I'm impatient, exhausted, wiped out by the change of climate, and by fear, too, the fear of what's new, of not being able to cope... (58)

Azel is haunted by the remorse of having left his homecountry and is assailed by a sense of discouragement because his life in Spain does not correspond to his expectations. By narrating the innocent aspirations, ingenuous dreams, and fervent desires that animate Azel's migratory project to Spain and by confronting us with the everyday humiliations and harmful violations he suffers, Ben Jelloun reconfigures migration as a gradual moral dissolution and as a hopeless descent into the abyss of criminality, prostitution, and illegality. His representation, however, is highly controversial and should be critically questioned as it fails to acknowledge the many

successful and positive stories that attest to the capacity of migrants to pursue their ambitions and fulfil their dreams. Only in the final part of the book, the author reconsiders migration in positive terms, first as a universal and historical fact, then as a potential remedy that could re-equilibrate the world's social and economic imbalance:

'He calls himself Moha, but with him you're never sure of anything. He's the immigrant without a name! This man is who I was, who your father was, who your son will be, and also, very long ago, the man who was the Prophet Mohammed, for we are all called upon to leave our homes, we all hear the siren call of the open sea, the appeal of the deep, the voices from afar that live within us, and we all feel the need to leave our native land, because our country is often not rich enough, or loving enough or generous enough to keep us at home. So let us leave, let's sail the seas as long as even the tiniest light still flickers in the soul of a single human being anywhere at all, be it a good soul or some lost souls possessed by evil: we will follow this ultimate flame, however wavering, however faint, for from it will perhaps spring the beauty of this world, the beauty that will bring the world's pain and sorrow to an end' (219-220)

In this passage, migration is represented as a universal human condition and an effective countermeasure that can make up for the economic and social inequalities that affect the contemporary reality. By mentioning the anonymity of the migrant, the *hijra* (migration) of the Prophet Mohammad, and the different generations of migrants who have succeeded one another, Ben Jelloun turns the migrant into the representative of the entire humanity and migration into a historical and universal fact. Moreover, by referring to the “siren call of the open sea” but also to the “need to leave our native land,” the author reframes migration as a mixture of attraction and danger, irrational enchantment and necessity. The final invitation

expressed through the sentence “so let us leave, let’s sail the seas” contributes to construct an atmosphere of hope and release. By reconsidering migration as a remedy aimed at redressing the inequalities of the world, Ben Jelloun resists and overthrows dominant discourses that construct migration as an emergency demanding fast and strict countermeasures, and dismantles mainstream narratives that equate migration with a sickness that weakens the health and strength of the nation. The writer also refuses to represent the migrant as an intruder or an unwanted guest and rather delineates him/her as a traveller who is animated by an irrational desire to leave and is attracted by foreign lands as a sailor by the song of the sirens. Far from reconfirming negative and alarming representations of migration, the author refashions migration as a tiny light and a faint flame that emanates grace, is beneficial, and contributes to counterbalance the world’s *unevenness* (Radhakrishnan, 2003).

### **7. Crossing as Stigma and Hospitality as Third Space**

In *Leaving Tangier*, the crossing of the Mediterranean is reframed as a crucial passage that marks the life of the migrant forever, leaving a visible and everlasting stigma on his/her body:

If you saw how they treat *las espaldas mojadas*, 'wetbacks,' that’s what they call us, we who’ve managed to wriggle through the net, and they’re right, our shoulders are clearly soaking wet, we’ve just hauled ourselves out of the water and that saltwater doesn’t go away, doesn’t dry, it clings to our skin and clothes: *las espaldas mojadas*, that’s what we are, and before us – long before us – the Italians were called wops, the Spaniards dagos, the Jews yids or whatever, and us, that hasn’t changed, we’re *los moros*, the wetback Arabs, we lumber out of the sea like ghosts or monsters! (122)

In this passage, the narrator refers to the different names that are used to identify (illegal) migrants. In particular, North-African migrants who have traversed the Mediterranean are called “*las espaldas mojadas*” and represented as individuals who have wrestled their bodies across the border and are still carrying the visible and palpable sign of their passage. The water of the sea has penetrated their bodies and left distinct marks that adhere to their figure reminding them of the 'sin' they have committed.<sup>99</sup>

The representation of the migrant as a transgressor who violates a well-defined normative system is further developed by Bouraoui in *Tomboy*, where Yasmina equates her sense of guilt, shame, and fear with that of an illegal migrant. According to Yasmina, children of mixed origins and illegal migrants are presumed having transgressed some rigid demarcations and broken an invisible law that establishes the 'purity' of cultures and nations. This emerges clearly in the following passage in which the narrator compares her unstable and troublesome condition to that of a criminal who is searched because she is suspected to hide a double life:

I have always felt like an illegal alien going through immigration, like an outlaw always expecting to be picked out from the group of passengers, held by two police officers, surrounded, then dragged to a small room. Who are you? Where do you come from? Where are you going? I have always felt like I am keeping a secret, living a double life, sheltering another self underneath the visible surface. I have always felt like I wear different masks depending on the country, the police officer, and the people I meet. (94)

Yasmina compares her sense of guilt and exposure to that of an illegal migrant. She admits being terrified by the idea of being encircled, captured, and interrogated; she also fears being

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<sup>99</sup> This representation of (North-)African immigrants as “*las espaldas mojadas*” echoes Anzaldúa’s definition of the Mexican illegal migrants as the “*mojados*.” As she poignantly asserts: “Without benefit of bridges, the “*mojados*” (wetbacks) float on inflatable rafts across *el río Grande*, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads.” See Gloria Anzaldúa 33.

hit with a barrage of questions and having to explain, justify, and legitimize her existence. The comparison with the “illegal alien” and the “outlaw” clearly highlights Yasmina’s banishment and sense of exclusion from the French and the Algerian society. The anaphora “I have always felt like” conveys feelings of guilt and persecution, while the terms “underneath,” “double life,” “masks” have negative connotations and suggest an idea of betrayal, dishonesty, and deception. Sayyad’s interpretation (2004) of the members belonging to the second generation as “ambiguous agents” (291) is particularly useful to interpret this passage. According to Sayyad, members belonging to the second generation are viewed as suspicious actors of the social life, as they contest through their very presence the hierarchical system and social order established and safeguarded through the imposition of rigid categories. In other words, because they fit into more than one category, children of mixed origins are suspected to attack the social order and the existing power relations. This is why in *Tomboy*, Yasmina’s body becomes the object of a careful and alarming monitoring:

Tomorrow, I will go to the doctor to check my Algerian life, just in case.  
Blood, hearing, bones, reflexes. To inspect the body, search, detect any signs of nutritional deficiency. Yes, sir, we eat enough vegetables, meat, and dairy. Blood tests, x-rays, and a stethoscope to check that all is well after living in that country, that land, North Africa. The French health system takes over, appropriating and searching our bodies, it penetrates from head to toe. Nina has webbed toes, the middle ones. Does she suffer from it? No, she walks normally. But yes, I do suffer from it. I am ashamed of it and often bandage them. Where does it come from? Her French side. She has bad posture, doctor. Isn’t it scoliosis? No. What about her fevers? Is that malaria? No. Isn’t she too small for her age? No.

Tomorrow they will examine me although I am completely healthy. (66-67)

Yasmina explains here that her Algerian life has been turned into the object of an accurate inspection aimed at detecting possible abnormalities. By using verbs such as “inspect,” “detect,” “search,” the writer constructs the doctor as an inspector looking carefully to find irregularities and anomalies. In particular, the doctor is compared to an official conducting an inspection in order to find the deviations that Yasmina’s body is supposed to hide; he is represented as a functionary who meticulously examines Yasmina in order to see if she fulfils all expected criteria. Because her physical appearance does not completely adhere and conform to fixed national categories, Yasmina’s whole existence is regarded with suspect and put in question. The verbs “take over”, “appropriate” and “search” indicate the doctor’s attempt to gain control over her body, while the verb “penetrate” conveys feelings of violation and intrusion.<sup>100</sup> The unbalanced relation between Yasmina and the doctor is reinforced by the expression “yes, sir” that suggests the girl’s blind acceptance and submission and the doctor’s superior rank. This idea of inequality is also expressed in the final line by the plural pronoun “they” as opposed to “I” and by the doctor’s scrutinizing gaze that reveals his hegemonic position.<sup>101</sup> As this passage demonstrates, Bouraoui’s care for the language finds expression at the formal level: the choice of words is accurate and the apparently transparent prose hides in fact a profound aesthetic research.

The sense of exclusion, hostility, and inhospitality that Yasmina endures both in France and in Algeria is set in contrast to the inclusion, hospitality, and comfort that she experiences during her stay in Rome. Tivoli is celebrated as the place where Yasmina can

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<sup>100</sup> The theme of the invasive medical gaze as a sign of unequal power relations is developed by Palestinian visual artist Mona Hatoum. In her video installation *Corps étranger*, she projects images taken from her endoscopic and colonscopic exam. The title plays with the double meaning of *corps étranger* signifying both a foreign body but also an abnormal element that does not belong to the body. The installation creates an atmosphere of total estrangement and provokes in the viewer feelings of discomfort as the medical exam is perceived as a terrible violation. For more on Hatoum’s art and on other Palestinian contemporary artists using the human body as an artifact, see Gannit Ankory 59-90.

<sup>101</sup> On gazing as the sign of an existing hierarchy, see Teixidor 61.



finally feel complete and an integral part of the community. This sensation of comfort and self-recognition is clearly expressed in the following passage where Yasmina interprets the re-appropriation of her body as a kind of self-rebirth:

I became happy in Rome. I tied my hair back. We discovered a thin nape. Sensitive ties. A pretty face. Eyes that turned green in the sun. Female hands and gestures. A deeper and controlled voice. I became happy in Rome. My body revealed something new, an evidence, a different personality, a gift, perhaps. I came from myself and myself alone. I was finding myself, born solely from my eyes, my voice, and my desires. I shed my old self and reclaimed my identity. My body was breaking free. It no longer had French traits. It no longer had Algerian traits. (112)

Bouraoui represents Yasmina's self-recognition as a gradual process that provokes feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. The adjectives "happy" and "pretty" highlight the attractiveness of her body and the pleasant sensations deriving from the sense of inclusion and recognition she experiences in Tivoli. The pronoun "we" and the reference to the "ties" evoke an idea of integration and harmony, of delicate attachment and affinity. Noteworthy is also the use of the verbs "reveal" and "discover" that convey an idea of disclosure, exposure, and liberation that is reinforced by the verbs "break free," "shed" and "reclaim". In *Tomboy*, Rome is presented as the place where Yasmina rediscovers her body and reappropriates it; her body surprisingly discloses in front of her and is offered to her as a present. This process of self-discovery goes hand in hand with a feeling of inclusion and is encouraged by the convivial atmosphere that distinguishes the city and its inhabitants. Bouraoui refashions here hospitality as the Bhabhaean Third Space where binary oppositions are abolished, crimpling representations are invalidated, and exclusivist forms of belonging are uprooted. However, the celebration of Tivoli as a fully-hospitable and pleasant location should be put in perspective and compared

to the inhospitality that Methnani and Bouchane endure in Italy and reluctantly retrace in their works. This juxtaposition may also help us recognize that experiences of displacement are always specific, concrete, and modulated by gender, social, racial, and, not last, legal differences.

### **8. Hospitality at Issue**

Arab diasporic women writers elaborate non conventional representations and interpretations of hospitality that echo Derrida's theorization of hospitality as a paradoxical concept that unevenly shifts between absolute and conditional. In particular, Derrida elaborates absolute hospitality as an unconditional reception granted to an unknown guest and makes a distinction between a traditional understanding of hospitality, as a pact based on reciprocity, and absolute hospitality that is handed over to an anonymous guest as a gift. In his words:

To put in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (25, his emphasis)

On a theoretical level, Derrida reframes absolute hospitality as a paradoxical form of reception that transgresses and at the same time guides the regulations and norms that govern ordinary and conditional hospitality, understood as a welcoming behaviour based on a pact and on mutual convenience. On a literary level, in "Red Brocade" (2008), Nye calls for an unconditional hospitality in which the host esteems his/her guest and honours her/his presence by welcoming him/her in an unquestioning way. In particular, the guest is invited

into the intimate space of home and provided with food. He/she is given public praise and receives the most special and desirable cushion, the “red brocade pillow” whose designs in relief have been woven with golden and silver threads:

The Arabs used to say,  
When a stranger appears at your door,  
feed him for three days  
before asking who he is,  
where he’s come from,  
where he’s headed.  
That way, he’ll have strength  
enough to answer.  
Or, by then you’ll be  
such good friends  
you don’t care.  
Let’s go back to that.  
Rice? Pine nuts?  
Here, take the red brocade pillow.  
My child will serve water  
to your horse. (110)

In this poem, Nye represents hospitality as a traditional and habitual practice that Arabs used to perform in the past but is disappearing today because of the spreading wariness and hatred towards foreigners. In contrast with the current narratives that fuel mutual fear, distrust, and hate, Nye demands that the guest and the foreigner be honoured again as it traditionally occurred in the Arab world; besides, in opposition to the contemporary regulations and limitations that restrict hospitality, the poet calls for an unconditional and absolute openness to

the stranger. By so doing, she retrieves the positive meanings that Arab culture traditionally attributed to hospitality, as a “blessing for all the parties concerned” and “a behaviour that almost achieves the level of sacredness” (Reynolds 113). In this poem, by underlining the fact that the guest is offered the most beautiful and treasured support, Nye highlights the importance and special care that were traditionally granted and should again be accorded to the guest. Furthermore, by highlighting the total foreignness of the stranger and the absolute respect and confidence that the host shows towards him/her, the poet reframes hospitality as a warm reception that should be accorded, as Derrida reminds us, even to “the absolute, unknown, anonymous other” (*Of Hospitality* 25).

Nevertheless, in Arab diasporic literature, hospitality is not uniformly depicted in positive terms and is not always encouraged as Nye does. In *Arabian Jazz*, Abu-Jaber represents the negative consequences of an overindulgent form of hospitality and reframes the guest as an exigent client and a spoiled adult who keeps his host under siege. In the course of the novel, uncle Fouad gradually metamorphoses into an unwelcomed guest, who overstays and invades the privacy of the Ramouuds, and as a parasite who lives at the expenses of his hosts and shows no gratitude for their hospitality. The following passage, representing Fouad complaining about the American food he has been served and criticizing the low quality of the reception that his family has accorded him, exemplifies my statement:

“THIS FOOD TERRIBLE,” Uncle Fouad said, gnawing on a chicken bone. “Miserable, I say. Nothing like home.”

“Oh, I know, I know,” Fatima said, shielding her eyes from the sun under a screen of polished nails. “Is all what I have to work with, the quality, the materials –”

“I would feed this maybe to my cat,” he said, reaching for a drumstick.  
“To kill him with. And I want my coffee; why aren’t you bringing me my  
ahweh? You are wanting to shrivel me up like a black fig?”

They were sitting on blankets in the backyard. Fatima had begun  
unloading baskets of food the moment she’d arrived while Fouad moaned  
over how they wanted to “starve him alive” by making him wait to eat until  
ten-thirty. (124-125)

Here, uncle Fouad is depicted as a disdainful and unbearable guest who makes life impossible for his hosts. In particular, Fatima appears to be the primary actor and the principal victim of hospitality: being a woman, she is designated as the perfect host of Fouad and obliged to take care of him, look after him, and grant all his wishes; she is also the person whom Fouad presents his personal grievances and on whom he vents his anger and displeasure. Indeed, by being conventionally designed as the perfect caretakers, women appear to vouch for hospitality but also to easily fall prey to it. It is not surprising then to find Fatima performing the role of the careful and dedicated host but also falling victim to the power of her guest and of her own hospitality.

By presenting hospitality as a complex and contradictory experience, Nye and Abu-Jaber bear evidence to the positive aspects but also to the downsides attached to this practice. Far from idealizing hospitality as a perfect and idyllic situation of fraternity, peacefulness, and generosity, Abu-Jaber problematizes hospitality and disrupts its a-critical and superficial celebrations, showing that hospitality can also entail exploitation, ingratitude, and discomfort. Conversely, by invoking an unconditional, warm, and unilateral reception of the foreigner as such, Nye re-situates absolute hospitality as a priority that should guide political and legal agendas, individual and communitarian actions.

## 9. Hospitality as Transgression

In *Le Fou d'Omar* (2005), Farhoud narrates the story of the Lkhoulouds, a Lebanese family living in Montreal. The novel takes the form of a polyphonic work in which the voices of Lucien Laflamme, Omar Khaled Lkhouloud, Radwan and Rawi Lkhouloud succeed one another, providing the reader with divergent but complementary points of view. Laflamme is the Québécois neighbour of the Lkhoulouds, while Omar Khaled is the father of Radwan and Rawi. In particular, Radwan is the oldest son and a mentally ill person; his brother Rawi is a famous writer who has repudiated his Arab name and family to pursue a successful career.

The story opens with the description of Omar Khaled's death and draws upon Radwan's mental turmoil and sense of impotence, as he suddenly realizes that he is on his own now and must carry out the funeral honours for his father in total solitude. Indeed, Radwan is alone and segregated in his house, blaming himself for not being capable of following all the instructions that his father had carefully and patiently handed down to him and asked him to carry out when he dies. This is how he expresses his disorientation: "Mon père est mort et moi, je sais pas quoi faire. Il faut vider la chambre, mon fils, chez les musulmans, il faut tout enlever ce qui rapelle la vie. Oui, père. Oui. Il faut. Oui, père, oui" (23) [My father is dead and I, I don't know what to do. You must empty the room, my son, among Muslims, all the things that call back life must be removed. Yes, father. Yes. I must. Yes, father, yes]. Radwan appears confused and powerless; the voice of his father, who constantly reminded him of the precepts that regulate the Muslim funeral honours, echoes in his mind but does not have any effect on him and simply increases his anxiety and confusion. In particular, Radwan's chaotic and disturbed language is a fruitful device through which the author communicates his mental frailty.

Since the beginning, the reader is confronted with a paradoxical situation in which Radwan, who is emotionally confused and mentally ill, is in charge of the death watch and

burial of his father. This situation is paradigmatic of the absurd and troublesome existence that the members of the Lkhouloud family have gone through since their arrival in Montreal. Indeed, Radwan's mental illness is just one of the various forms of alienation that are outlined in the novel: his psychological disorder tally his siblings' sense of estrangement and his father's discomfort and withdrawal into himself. This is how Rawi explains that all the members of his family share different degrees of estrangement:

Exilés, nous le sommes tous, à des degrés divers. Certains, avec la conscience d'être exilé, d'autres vivant l'exil sans conscience de le vivre. Radwan, constamment arraché à lui-même, vit un exil de la pire espèce; mes soeurs essaient tant bien que mal de se refaire des racines avec l'aide de leur enfants; mon frère Hafez défait toutes attaches à mesure qu'elles se font. (...)

J'ai fui, moi aussi. Je me suis construit une identité, un passé et des désirs, comme j'avais commencé à le faire pour mes personnages. Je me suis inventé un père et une mère. Un lieu de naissance. Une enfance et des amis, un caractère, des aspiration et du talent. Je me suis fait fils unique et adoré par ses parents. (98-99)

[Exiled, we are all, on different levels. Some with the consciousness of being exiled, others living the exile without being aware of it: Radwan, who is constantly torn by himself, experiences one of the worst kinds of exile; my sisters try, some times more successfully than other times, to grow new roots with the help of their children; my brother Hafez unbinds all ties as soon as they come into being. (...)

Me too, I have run away. I have fabricated my own identity, my past and some desires, as I had started to do with my characters. I have invented a

father and a mother. A place of birth. A childhood and some friends, a personality, some aspirations and some talent. I have made myself reborn again as a unique child and adored by his parents.]

As Rawi explains, the members of his family suffer from different forms of alienation that are the result of their displacement and of the hostility and inhospitality that the society shows towards them. The distrust that the Lkhoulouds are victim to is exemplified by Laflamme's tendency to carefully monitor and scrutinize his neighbours and by his inclination to meticulously record any of Radwan's movements (17).<sup>102</sup> Laflamme's habit to keep an eye on him and register his activities confirms his curiosity but also his wariness. Indeed, Laflamme endlessly questions the withdrawn life of the Lkhoulouds, but his questioning actually boomerangs against him and fills him with apprehension.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the novel, Laflamme expresses his irritation towards his neighbours, blames them for their taciturnity, and complains about their oddity and reticence. Yet, during one of his monologues, Laflamme starts questioning his preconceptions and reflects on the increasing hatred that Arabs have been victim to since 9/11. In particular, he draws a connection between the distrust that Québécois have been victim to in the 1960s and 1970s and the spreading suspicion and wariness that affects Arabs nowadays. By comparing the hatred that Arabs are currently going through to the one that Québécois were subjected to during their fight for independence, Laflamme plants the seeds for reconciliation and succeeds in creating a

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<sup>102</sup> Sandrine F. Teixidor (2010) explains that the act of gazing implies an asymmetric relation between the person who observes and the one who is observed. As she puts it: "although gazing may appear as a mere look, it implies a hierarchy among those looking and those who are being observed" (61).

<sup>103</sup> The representation of Laflamme's curiosity and his inclination to raise doubts regarding the integrity of the Lkhoulouds echoes Derrida's consideration of the foreigner as the one who is constantly questioned and whose presence is put in question. According to Derrida, however, the stranger is also the person who expresses doubts on the role and position of his/her questioner and on the validity of his/her questions. In his words: "But before being a question to be dealt with, before designating a concept, a theme, a problem, a program, the question of the foreigner is a question *of* the foreigner, addressed *to* the foreigner. As though the foreigner were first of all *the one who* puts the first question or *the one to whom* you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being in question of the question. But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question" (*Of Hospitality* 3, his emphasis).



connection between these two otherwise distant and different ethnic groups. This is how he eventually expresses his solidarity for his neighbours:

Les Arabes sont connus pour être des gens hospitaliers, généreux, ouverts. Depuis le 11 septembre, leur image a pris une sérieuse débarque, faut dire. On les sent plus craintifs, sur leur gardes. On le serait à moins. Être un jeune Arabe en ce moment, ce n'est pas une sinécure. À en croire Bush et ses semblables, chaque jeune Arabe est un terroriste potentiel, tout comme dans les années 1960-1970, chaque jeune Québécois était un poseur de bombe potentiel... (142)

[Arabs are known to be hospitable people, generous, open. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, however, their image has floated off, I must admit. They appear more timid, on guard. We too would be the same, I guess. To be a young Arab right now, it's not a mere trifle. To believe Bush and his similar, each young Arab is a potential terrorist, as in the 1960s and 1970s each young Québécois was a potential bomb-hanger.]

By pointing out precise historical, social, and political references, Farhoud succeeds in illuminating the concrete repercussions of political and cultural discriminations on the everyday life of individuals and at anchoring the experience of the Lhkoulouds in a precise historical and cultural context. As Laflamme observes, Arabs, who were known as being kind, generous, and pleasant people, have now become more fearful and wary. By showing how political and cultural events influence and negatively affect human beings and the nature of their social contacts, Farhoud invites us to consider the gravity of the circulating prejudices and categorizations that end up deteriorating the relations between human beings. However, by representing Laflamme's final understanding and empathy towards his neighbours, the author also reaffirms the possibility for subjectivities to locally renegotiate human and

responsible contacts and to actively resist and oppose the wounds and divisions brought into being by hateful and distrustful narratives. It is not surprising then, that at the end of the novel, Laflamme is the one who comes to Radwan's aid and helps him carry out all the required procedures to grant his father a religious and dignified burial. By personally addressing Radwan and by taking his condition to heart, Laflamme succeeds in reaching his neighbour, pulling down the wall that kept one separated from the other, and in overcoming the reciprocal prejudices that had restrained them from striking up a friendship. As the following passage suggests, through his compassionate address and responsible call, Laflamme succeeds in disarming Radwan's defensiveness and in winning his confidence:

J'entends: Radwan... Radwan... Il prononce bien mon nom. Comment sait-il mon nom? Radwan... Radwan... En allongeant la deuxième syllabe. Sans nasale. Radwaann. Exactement comme le faisaient mon père et ma mère, mon frère et mes soeurs. C'est la première fois qu'un étranger. Peut-être qu'il n'est pas québécois francophone mais québécois arabophones. Mon père a sauté peut-être trop vite à la conclusion pas de voisinages avec les étrangers. J'entends: Radwan, je suis votre voisin. Je m'appelle Lucien Laflamme. J'aimerais vous parler. De quoi veut-il me parler? J'entends: Radwan, je ne vous veux pas aucun mal. Vous pouvez me faire confiance. On est voisin depuis si longtemps. Laissez-moi entrer. Laissez-moi entrer, Radwan. J'ai une chose très importante à vous dire. Silence. Long silence. J'entends: J'ai quelque chose à te dire, mon garçon... Je voudrais te parler, mon garçon... Je fonds. Je deviens liquide. Je suis un chien galeux qui reçoit une caresse. Mon premier chien, Bamako-à-la-langue-pendante. Et Ego-à-la-patte-cassée, et Bacha-sans-poil, Abel-le-galeux et Solo-l'affamé. Je suis un coeur qui bat à la tendresse. Juste entendre cet étranger m'appeler mon

garçon avec cette douceur... L'acide de mon plexus se répand. Mon coeur ne tient plus. Il me reste encore la force de marcher. Traverser le salon. Ouvrir la porte du vestibule ma main déverrouille la porte.

Il me tend la main. Je vois ma main aller vers sa main. Il me serre dans ses bras. J'entends: Toutes mes condoléances, Radwan. Je sais que vous aimez beaucoup votre père. Toutes mes sympathies. (181)

[I hear: Radwan... Radwan... He knows how to pronounce my name. How does he know my name? Radwan... Radwan... Prolonging the second syllable. Without any nasal sound. Radwaann. Exactly as my father and mother, my brother and sisters used to do. It's the first time that a stranger. Maybe he is not a francophone Québécois but an Arab-Québécois. Maybe my father has jumped too easily to the conclusion no neighbourhoods with strangers. I hear: Radwan, I'm your neighbour. My name is Lucien Laflamme. I'd like to talk to you. What does he want to talk about? I hear: Radwan, I don't want to hurt you. You can trust me. We have been neighbours for so long. Let me come in. Let me come in, Radwan. I have a very important thing to tell you. Silence. Long silence. I hear: I have something to tell you, my boy... I'd like to talk to you, my boy... I melt. I become liquid. I am an itchy dog that receives a caress. My first dog, Bamako-with-the-hanging-tongue. And Ego-with-the-broken-foot, and Bach-without-hair, Abel-the-itchy and Solo-the-hungry. I am a heart that beats to tenderness. Only to hear this stranger calling me my boy with this sweetness... The acid of my stomach extends. My heart is overlapping. I just have the strength to walk. Cross the living room. Open the door of the entrance-hall. My hand unbolts the door.

He offers me his hand. I see my hand go towards his hand. He embraces me. I hear: All my condolences, Radwan. I know that you loved your father very much. All my sympathies.]

Through the technique of the interior monologue, Farhoud allows us to gain access to Radwan's most intimate thoughts and feelings. Questions, doubts, and memories succeed one another and condense disorderly in his mind. The point of view abruptly shifts from Radwan's psyche to the external world where Laflamme is trying to convince his neighbour to open the door. Radwan's careful observation of Laflamme's behaviour is interrupted by an incontrollable flux of memories and suppositions that assail him all of a sudden forcing him to look away. The rhythm of the narration is urgent and hastens to the unexpected denouement of the story. In fact, Farhoud outlines here a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, Lucien Laflamme, who is Québécois and therefore embodies the native, is here represented as a foreigner who threatens Radwan's secure and protected domestic space; he is further portrayed as a guest who materializes on and challenges the threshold of his host. In addition, the exact pronunciation of Radwan's name muddles his identification to the point that Radwan suspects him to be an "Arab-Québécois." On the other hand, Radwan, who is Lebanese and therefore supposedly a stranger, is here outlined as the master of the house who withdraws in the protective and comfortable space of home and puts his guest in question.

In *Le Fou d'Omar*, the guest and the host appear to alternately exchange positions: Radwan is the host of Laflamme and welcomes him in his house, even if it is actually Laflamme who looks after Radwan, feeds him, and carries out a series of activities that we normally would expect the host to perform. The following scene exemplifies my statement:

J'entends: Il faudra manger un peu. Je rêve. J'ouvre les yeux. Je rêve. Un homme aux yeux bleus est penché au-dessus de mon lit et me sourit.  
J'entends: Vous avez bien dormi? Je vous ai faite une soupe aux lentilles.

Vous aimez les lentilles? Je suis mort. Au paradis. Est-ce qu'on mange des lentilles au paradis? (182)

[I hear: You should eat a little. I'm dreaming. I open my eyes. I'm dreaming. A man with blue eyes is bend over my bed and smiles. I hear: did you sleep well? I have prepared you a lentil soup. Do you like lentils? I am dead. In heaven. Do they serve lentils in heaven?]

Here, Lucien Laflamme is depicted as a very careful and compassionate host who honours his guest and treats him with special care. Radwan and Laflamme's positions appear blurred and interchangeable: Laflamme's activities clearly identify him as the host and master of the house even if his blue eyes designate him as a stranger in Radwan's house and therefore as a guest; conversely, Radwan's passivity and heavenly condition designate him as the guest of Laflamme's hospitality.

In *Le Fou d'Omar*, Farhoud represents a contradictory situation that complicates and muddles the rigid dualism that separates the foreigner from the native, the host from the guest, and demonstrates that these positions actually shift, blur, and overlap. By so doing, the writer bears evidence to the instability and interchangeability of these two terms and confirms Derrida's conviction that boundaries, separations, and lines are marked by "an irreducible double inclusion" to the point that "the including and the included regularly exchange places" (*Aporias* 80). In her novel, Farhoud reframes the guest as a transgressor, a lawbreaker who disobeys the rule of the father and infringes the law of the master by entering his house. Laflamme's crossing of Radwan's threshold is represented as a "transgressive step" (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 75), a movement that oversteps the existing boundaries and contests the established order. By so doing, Farhoud corrupts the existent power relations and revolutionizes the figure of the guest who is no longer and not only a person in need of assistance but is reconfigured as the rescuer and redeemer of the host: no wonder then, that as

soon as Laflamme crosses the door, Radwan is released from his voluntary segregation and from the obligations that had been imposed on him by his father. This re-evaluation of the guest as the person who eventually liberates his/her host, echoes Derrida's redefinition of the guest as a saviour. In his words: "the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it's *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage)" (*Of Hospitality* 123, his emphasis). On the whole, Farhoud draws our attention on the doubleness of borders that look impermeable but are in fact consistently broken through by resistant and audacious crossings. By reconfiguring hospitality as a transgression, the writer calls for radical rethinking and demands that we reconsider the circulating divisions, categorizations, and oppositions as culturally induced and therefore disputable constructions. Moreover, by muddling the binary opposition that sets the foreigner in contrast with the local and the guest in opposition to the host, Farhoud demonstrates that boundaries can actually be contested and their order be resisted. Finally, by presenting the guest as honourable and respect-worthy and by indicating him/her as the liberator of his/her host, Farhoud urges us to rethink the question of the foreigner, to free ourselves from the presumptions that held us hostage, and eventually rediscover him/her as a human being.

## 10. Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter, I have explored and critically interrogated the representations of home that Ben Jelloun and Hage carry out in their works and argued that these authors actually resist and disrupt traditional and homogeneous depictions of home as a comfortable and impermeable site by revealing instead its hybridity. I have then moved on to analyse the collision and complicity that characterize the relation between sovereignty and hospitality, and have raised questions regarding the political, social, and economic

inequalities that are embedded in both crossing and trafficking. By stressing the discrepancy that exists between the tourist and the illegal migrant, economic goods and “economic refugees” (Anzaldúa, 1987), and by showing how borders are continually transgressed and sovereignty proved limited, I have meant to stimulate a reflection on hospitality “in the name of the unconditional, even if this pure unconditionality appears inaccessible” (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 149).

By comparing fictional and autobiographical works, I have intended to reveal and critically interrogate the representations of illegal migration that Arab diasporic authors disseminate in their works. On the one hand, Ben Jelloun represents migration as a gradual descent into hell and as a harmful condition that leads the subject to experience mortification, daily humiliations, and despair; on the other, Lalami reframes migration as a desperate striving that implies distress and hope, resilience and resignation, determination and disillusion. In *De Niro's Game*, Hage refashions the figure of the illegal migrant as a slippery shadow, an easy target for xenophobic violence, and an alienated body who is overpowered by a sense of estrangement, loneliness, and invisibility; in their autobiographical accounts, Methnani and Bouchane represent the illegal migrant as a living dead and a *bare body*. By and large, these works develop a lucid and sometimes painful denunciation of the inhospitable and selfish characteristics of the contemporary society and demand us to dissent with and oppose the systematic removal or disturbing proliferation that illegal migrants are subjected to in the public discourse.<sup>104</sup> This generates a collective anxiety that Arab diasporic women writers seem more capable of opposing by shifting their attention from migration to hospitality: Bouraoui, for instance, redefines hospitality as a Third Space (Bhabha, 1989) where rigid demarcations, clear-cut identifications, and one dimensional representations are transgressed and dismantled; Abu-Jaber and Nye reflect on the limits and potential of

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<sup>104</sup> Italian journals, for instance, have bombarded Italians with fears about the “invasion” of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean and with the alarming “emergency” following the coming into being of a new political scenario in North Africa. See, among others, *Corriere della Sera* 20 Feb. 2011.

welcoming practices, while Farhoud refashions hospitality as a transgression, a practice that blurs rigid binary oppositions and requires nonconformist and resistant actions.

On the whole, this last chapter is intended to be a celebration of literature as a site where invisible subjectivities finally gain visibility, an art that speculates about controversial topics, and a powerful catalyst for change. In this regard, the following reflection by Derrida on the potential of literature is particularly enlightening:

the possibility of literature, the legitimations that society gives it, the allaying of suspicion or terror with regard to it, all that goes together – politically – with the unlimited right to ask any question, to suspect all dogmatism, to analyse every presupposition, even those of the ethics or the politics of responsibility. (*On the Name* 28)

To conclude then, by laying the reality bare and by relating literature to the world, Arab diasporic authors amalgamate creativity with realism, aesthetic with everyday life and refashion literature as critique. By developing lucid or hallucinated visions of war, illegal migration, and social exclusion, they testify to the malaise that affects our global society and provide us with disconcerting counter-narratives that shake our conscience and sense of responsibility. By dwelling in representations of the social, this chapter intends to celebrate literature for its capacity to investigate and illuminate domains of the collective that have been overlooked and to shed light on ethical and political questions that other disciplines have so far assumed the right to explore.



## CONCLUSIONS: CREOLIZING DIASPORA

This study has been conducted by employing an integrated methodology that combines theoretical tools drawn from deconstruction, post-colonial studies, feminist theory and creolization poetics. Throughout my work, I have consistently struggled to combine a close reading of the texts with the social, historical, and cultural dimensions that they represent and evoke. Drawing from the theoretical elaborations of Brah, Ahmed, and Salih, who deprive home of its mythical, stable, and beneficial traits, this study refashions the domestic space as a hybrid site of dwelling where opposing social, cultural, political, and gendered forces exert their pressures on the self. If home is reframed as a porous and instable space subjected to a constant transformation and in relation with other locations, roots, intended as a univocal form of belonging, are supplanted by a network of multiple attachments and affiliations. Rather than presenting the diasporic subject as a person in exile, yearning for a univocal home and lingering on nostalgic recreations of the world left behind, this study celebrates her/his capacity to actively negotiate alternative modalities of belonging that surpass the idea of a mythical place of origin to which one should return or that of a single nation to which one should swear an oath of loyalty.

In accordance with the works of Anzaldúa and Hall, I have argued that forms of identification are shifting, temporary, and based on human agency; at the same time, I have also tried to demonstrate that, “*community* can be a site of support and oppression” as Clifford underlines (“Diasporas” 314, his emphasis). This has led me to investigate how power intervenes in the politics of identification and how subjectivities constantly wrestle with, revolt against or conform to the existing (mis)representations. Identity formation is outlined as a process through which, some times more successfully than others, diasporic subjectivities transgress racial, gendered, cultural, and national categorizations, but is at the same time tightly bound to and feels the effect of those socially constructed categories. Drawing from

Spivak's conviction that "the importance of deconstruction is its interest in (...) strategic exclusions" (*Post-colonial Critic* 43), I have raised questions regarding the dissimulation, eclipse, and submersion that Arabness has been subjected to in recent times, and analyzed the process through which Arab diasporic writers denounce and oppose this systematic and deliberate removal. Both deconstruction and feminist theory have proved to be important theoretical tools to manifest the ways through which Arab diasporic women writers contest and subvert imprisoning images of the Arab Woman inherited by Orientalism and diffused by the media and the film industry, by supplanting them with self-images that ooze with confidence and power. In accord to Salih, however, I have also argued that diaspora does not loosen gender, racial and cultural oppression and that Arab diasporic women, more than other subjects, are potential victims of the circulating stereotypes and must revolt against various forms of oppression.

As Trinh Minh-ha aptly observes, language, in particular, is one of the most ambiguous instruments of oppression that patriarchy employs to reinforce its power. She adds: "power (...) has always inscribed itself in language. Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion" (52). In this study, language has been interpreted both as an instrument of domination through which the power of patriarchy and racism is reinforced, but also as a means for the emancipation of the subject. In particular, language mirrors the power relations that traverse the social, but is also a fruitful medium through which Arab diasporic authors queer hegemonic languages and corrupt their supposed 'purity.' In accord to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, I have considered the insertion of foreign words into English and French as a "metaphoric entry" (50) of the Arab world in the context of the US, Canada, and Europe, and the beginning of a fruitful cultural contamination. By and large, this study provides a critique of monolingualism as a cautious and sterile operation that writers carry out in order to be recognized and included in

the privileged category of national literature and praises multilingualism as a useful means for the transgression of the language purism that still underpins national literatures. Because I believe that we should not only traverse the boundaries that separate the various disciplines but also put in dialogue different languages, I have decided to analyze texts written in English, German, Italian, and French. From a linguistic perspective, diaspora is refashioned as a battleground where opposing languages face one another, but also as a fertile terrain for the contamination between languages and for the performance of original linguistic experimentations.

Drawing from Glissant's creolization theory and poetics of relation, this research reads and interprets the Arab diaspora as an extraordinary site for the cross-fertilization of cultures and for the negotiation of intercultural and interracial relations; this, however, without ignoring the tensions and conflicts engendered by cultural antagonism and the gendered, social, economic, legal and racial inequalities that traverse the diaspora space. Glissant's interpretation of the Caribbean tale, interpreted as a fruitful means to interrupt, divert, and subvert mainstream narratives and absolute views on History, has been a useful theoretical tool to explore and critically interrogate the revival of story-telling by contemporary Arab diasporic writers and to illuminate the ambiguity and "undecidability" of the oral tale. In particular, this study interprets story-telling as a crucial medium to reconstruct a sense of the collective, oppose power, and heal the existing divisions. Story-telling is celebrated for its capacity to disrupt mainstream narratives and bring in a different perspective on History. Nevertheless, starting from Derrida's conviction that language is the origin of a radical and paradoxical alienation, this research moves on to explore how this ambiguity distinguishes not only language but also writing, story-telling and the text. In particular, drawing from Butler's theorization of accountability as an empowering practice but also as an impossible enterprise, this research argues that narratives are always and necessarily opaque and imperfect accounts.

This is especially true in the case of works that address issues such as illegal migration and hospitality, and pretend to offer an objective and realistic representation of the migratory phenomenon. This research interrogates the potential of literature in examining these contentious and urgent topics. In particular, it raises questions regarding the fabrication, exploitation, and *derealization* that (illegal) migrants suffer in contemporary societies, the production of othering and its tight relation to the erection and reinforcement of borders. Said's idea that the humanities must interfere, cross boundaries, and take into consideration the everyday world (*Reflections* 145) has profoundly influenced my research. I share with Said the conviction that "our age (...) is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (*Reflections* 174) and that the intellectual should "venture(...) further outside the academy" (*Reflections* 502). In particular, this study intends to offer an alternative point of view on hospitality, one that complicates the rigid dualism guest/host on which most of the current narratives on immigration are based, and to rethink the Mediterranean sea as a crossroad open to multiple passages, a connecting space, and a *borderland*. Far from reinforcing current discourses that construct the migrant as an undesired traveler and an unwanted guest, this work embraces the interpretation provided by Ben Jelloun and presents migration as a historical and universal fact. Rather than confirming a-critical celebrations of hospitality, this study takes into consideration and critically interrogates the tensions that govern the relation between conditional and absolute hospitality, and invokes hospitality as a necessity and a priority. Moreover, drawing from Farhoud's representation of the guest as a savior, this study aims at contesting and subverting mainstream depictions of the migrant as a threat to our security and of migration as a plight for the nation. By embracing the transgressive and non-conventional representations of migration that Arab diasporic writers disseminate in their texts, this research criticizes multiculturalism as a theoretical model of coexistence imposed by a nation state with the intention of preserving and "domesticating" its

'strangers,' and supplants it with interculturality. If, as Ahmed reminds us, multiculturalism is a practice that values difference “insofar as it can be incorporated” by the nation state (*Strange Encounters* 117), interculturality, on the contrary, is the result of concrete practices of exchange and interaction carried out in the everyday life by individuals belonging to different ethnic groups. My idea of interculturality owes debt to Gana’s theorization of a “poethics of the everyday” (“Everyday Arabness” 29), intended as a “poetic practice – a poesis - whose politics/ethics is persistently concerned with the articulation of the experiential present and the contingencies of lived experience” (29), and to Covi’s theorization of “making/doing interculturality,” as an “ongoing effort to communicate across and between cultures and diversities by new words and images and through positions that result from alliances and negotiations previously not engaged or pursued” (Anim-Addo, Covi and Karavanta, “Introduction” 12). Both the world we inhabit and the humanities are complex and subjected to a constant metamorphosis. In order to express this idea of evolution and plurality, Covi supplants the abstract construct of *the human* with a new figuration called *la dividua*, “a feminine (embodied) noun which is offered to refer to that which can be divided, and is relational, multiple, fractioned” (“La Dividua” 285). Starting from the idea that the self is plural and necessarily related to others, Covi invokes the construction of a more responsible and diverse community that consciously engages with “the difficult but necessary task of a future shared with different beings” (284).

In accordance with Covi, who puts the accent on the interrelated and plural character of the contemporary world, this study demonstrates that Europe, North-America, and the Arab world are not geographical, political, and socio-cultural areas delimited by impenetrable and rigid boundaries, but are subjected to a constant relation and change under the effect of their mutual connection. It also contests the myth that relies on the existence of 'pure' languages, cultures, and nations, and considers rigid national categories to be inadequate to read and

interpret contemporary literary works. If global migration, as this research intends to demonstrate, contributes to bring the world home, then the opposition between Weltliteratur or migrant literature vs. national literature appears incapable of accounting for and shedding light on the complexity and creolized character of the contemporary world and of the new literature(s) emerging out of diaspora. Another inference that can be drawn from this study is that literature can and must dialogue with other disciplines, especially those belonging to the social sciences, like sociology, and to the humanities, like philosophy, and that literary criticism is a powerful means for the exploration of new dimensions of the social, so far assumed to pertain exclusively to other disciplines.

Although I am aware of the fact that the quality of literary criticism is not proportional to the number of works and authors addressed, with this study I have intended to provide a wide-ranging overview on the field of Arab diasporic literature by analyzing works written in English, French, German, and Italian, and by combining literature with sociology and philosophy. On the whole, this study can be seen as a tentative response to Said's call for a humanism that is "cosmopolitan and text-and-language bound" (*Humanism* 11) and an experimental attempt to put in practice his vision of humanism as "an unsettling adventure in difference, in alternative traditions, in texts that need a new deciphering within a much wider context than has hitherto been given them" (Said, *Humanism* 55). Some avenues of investigation, however, are just hinted at in this work and require further exploration: among these, the contaminations between arts and languages in Arab diasporic literature, the relation between displacement and mental alienation, the interplay between story-telling and literature, oral traditions and writing.

As I hope to have demonstrated, *diaspora* proves to be a fruitful term of reference to explore and investigate the evolving and plural reality of the Arab diaspora and the hybrid and multi-layered texts written by Arab diasporic authors. In addition, because *diaspora* is both a

concept and a concrete historical fact, it is a useful concept for those studies that intend to relate theory to the lived experience, literary criticism to the world in which we live. Throughout this work, I have employed *diaspora* as a lens to detect and interrogate the existing hierarchies and power relations that traverse the diaspora space, but also to manifest the forms of solidarity and intercultural affiliations that the different individuals and groups negotiate. As Brah rightly notes, diaspora evokes upsetting experiences of uprooting and displacement but is at the same time a fertile terrain for the elaboration of a new knowledge. This study takes into consideration both these contradictory and complementary aspects and employs *diaspora* as a key term for the exploration of Arab multilingual literature and for the investigation of the relations and creolization that characterize the contemporary world. If the Caribbean is an archipelago that connects North and South America with Europe and Africa, and is characterized by “sociocultural fluidity,” “historical turbulence,” and “ethnological and linguistic clamor” (Benítez-Rojo 3), the Arab diaspora bridges and transcends abstract categories such as the 'East' and the 'West', the 'First World' and 'Third World' and is a plural and evolving site of inhabitation that destabilizes the idea of homogeneous nations and communities, and complicates standard interpretations of migration as a one-way process. To conclude then, as I hope to have demonstrated, *diaspora* proves to be a fundamental term of reference for the exploration of the contemporary reality, for the investigation of Arab diasporic literature, and for the elaboration of what Said calls an “antinomian and oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again [...]” (*Humanism* 83).

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