



# Introduction: Home and Homeland in Contemporary Arab American Literatures

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## ► To cite this version:

Karim Daanoune. Introduction: Home and Homeland in Contemporary Arab American Literatures. *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 2022, N° 170 (1), pp.3-10. 10.3917/rfea.170.0003 . hal-04524734

**HAL Id: hal-04524734**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04524734>**

Submitted on 28 Mar 2024

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“Home and Homeland in Contemporary Arab American Literatures,” *Revue Française d’études américaines* 2022/1 (N°170), p. 3-10. Éditions Belin.

ISSN 0397-7870

ISBN 9782410025699

DOI 10.3917/rfea.170.0003

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## Introduction

### Home and Homeland in Contemporary Arab American Literatures

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But a place is inside you—like a part of your body, don’t you think?  
Like a liver or kidney? So how could you leave it? It sounds a big trouble to me.  
—Naomi Shihab Nye, *Habibi*

Even love is a place? O son  
Love no country and hate none  
—Fady Joudah, *Alight*

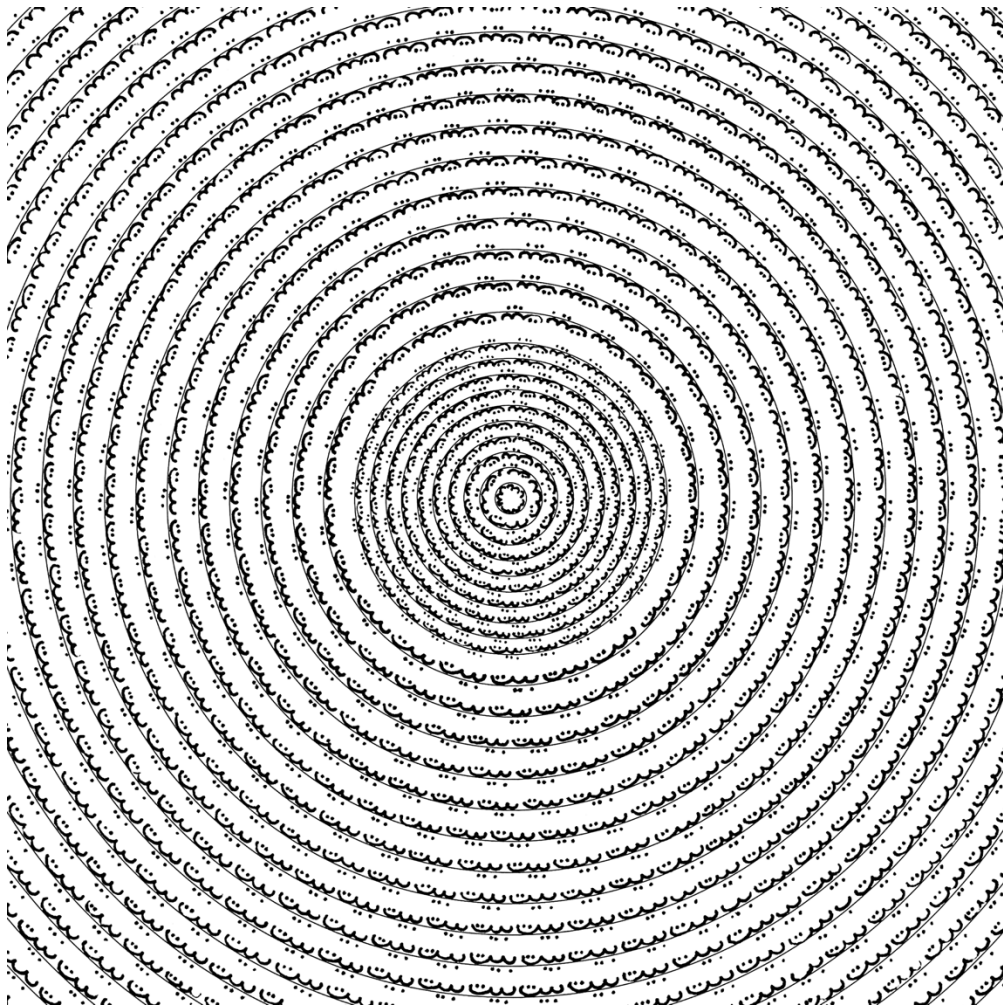
This dossier of the *RFEA* devoted to Arab American literatures includes six essays encompassing works pertaining to fiction, poetry and drama by Arab American writers and an anglophone Arab writer, Rayyan al-Shawaf, who has lived in the United States. It also features four poems by Arab American poet **Philip Metres** and an autobiographical text by American poet **Ammiel Alcalay**, who reflects on his life and literary experiences at the crossroads of America and the Arab world, or what was formerly called the Levant. Last but not least, it comprises the reproduction of a painting, “Circle Home/Beit” [بيت in Arabic], by Lebanese American artist Helen Zughaib, which will constitute the guiding thread of this introduction.

While the hypnotic quality of Zughaib’s painting may appositely render the obsessional attributes of *home* and *homeland* for Arab American writers and artists, its circumvoluted, quasi labyrinthine arrangement underscores this question’s complexity. Exploring these notions within Arab American literatures intimates that one must work at the crossroads of ethnic, diasporic and transnational discourses. It also implies navigating a heterogenous nexus of singular Arab American experiences with different outlooks on the ancestral homeland “over there,” on what constitutes a home “over here,” but also on the interstitial “spatial imaginary” (Blunt & Dowling 2) envisaged between host land and

homeland. Moreover, these Arab American experiences originate in idiosyncratic stories which are themselves heir to different times and historical developments. As Ramazani has suggested with regard to transnational poets whose work is “labeled ‘Made in USA’, [s]ome poets are born to Americanness, some achieve Americanness, some have Americanness thrust upon them” (Ramazani 37). Following this, it is crucial to remember that, in a hyphenated identity, both the term “Arab” and “American” fail to *house* homogenous entities and identities (Fadda-Conrey 10-11), and that “the hyphen marks a dialogic and nonhierarchic conjuncture” (Radhakrishnan 204). If we have decided in this dossier, in accordance with much current usage, to omit the hyphen from the label “Arab American,” it is also to insist on the fluid, nonhierarchical and dynamic nature of this conjuncture.

Reflecting on Arab Americans and the concepts of home and homelands demands that the enduring specter of 9/11 be acknowledged. Indeed, the 9/11 attacks shook the concept of the “Other” at its core by exacerbating and distorting the concept of the “same,” notably through the creation of the US Department of Homeland Security and the vote of the USA Patriot Act. The implementation of new laws meant to ensure the integrity of the homeland radically altered the definition of those whom the USA considered to be rightfully at home on its national territory. It also led to a heightened surveillance of Arabs and Muslims, conflating them “as if America [couldn’t] handle two Others at one time” (Joudah 2017). Although American, Arab Americans were deemed unfit to live on American soil and embody American values, as they all became terrorists *in potentia*. While they came to “signify Otherness more than ever before” (Naber 38) and were perceived as “lack[ing] true and single allegiance to the US” (Fadda-Conrey 5), they were, and continue to be, regarded as what Laila Lalami calls “conditional citizens,” that is to say: “Americans who cannot enjoy the full rights, liberties, and protections of citizenship because of arbitrary markers of identity. [...] [P]eople who know what it is like for a country to embrace you with one arm, and push you away with the other.” (Lalami 27) Notwithstanding the absurdity, unlawfulness, and perniciousness of these policies, Arab Americans maintain, through the voices of their artists, a pride in being American while simultaneously contesting from within what it is to be American through their political awareness of the disastrous implication of the US in the Arab world. The younger generation of writers that composes most of this dossier’s corpora does in fact invest the original homeland with “a stark political knowledge of neoimperialist and settler-colonialist agendas and the ensuing traumas of war and dispossession they incur” (Fadda-Conrey 20). In modalities akin to diasporic and transnational conceptions of space,

both real and imagined, they also destabilize the concept of home, and of what it means to feel at home.



*Detail of “Circle Home/Beit” by Helen Zughaib, 2010. Archival ink pen on etching paper, 32 × 32 in. Used with permission from the artist.*

One possible way of looking at Zughaib’s painting is to grasp its layout as that of a map, or a mapping gesture. The circumscribing circle—as the image of a well-defined territory, whether land or house—may point to a sense of rootedness that seems counterpoised not only by the animated effect that the handwriting produces, but also by the effect of depth that the concentric circles induce. Thus understood, home is always a subtle negotiation between roots and routes. The first three essays emphasize this sense of conciliation—whether it be understood, following Alison Blunt’s terminology, at the “household scale,” the “national scale” or the “diasporic scale” (Blunt 4-5)—by reinforcing the mobile aspect of the conceptual pairing fixity/mobility. In her article on *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by the Syrian American author Mohja Kahf, **Jumana Bayeh** considers the question of home by

reflecting on that of identity. She studies the novel within a diasporic framework that emphasizes a resolutely dynamic conception of identity, therefore distancing itself from earlier diasporic views that posited rootedness, return, and the fixity of home as their theoretical foundation. Bayeh also draws her approach from the work of Lebanese Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage, for whom people of hyphenated identities apprehend the world in a “vacillatory” mode that Bayeh describes as “a multi-sited reality, one of intersecting spatialities.” This must be seen in contrast to an “oscillatory” mode (Hage) in which the subject, according to Bayeh, “move[s] back and forth from one identity marker to another.” Indebted to the work of Rapport and Dawson, Bayeh examines how identity is fundamentally conditioned to the narrative of each singular diasporic subject and—as narratives are inherently determined by movement—how identity inherits, so to speak, the attributes of narratives defined by mobility and multi-sitedness. She further argues that the protagonist, Khadra Shamy, is also shaped by the cultural dialogue taking place between the two coextensive sides of her identity, thanks to her relationship with history, intertextuality, and her journey through diverse places, among which are Indiana, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Shamy proves that there are no fixed sites of identity but only places of self-discovery that accumulate and never coalesce into what Bayeh calls a “singular totality.”

Also centered on Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and on *The Night Counter* by Palestinian American author Alia Yunis, **Sara Arami**’s essay investigates the role of photography and photographs as they partake in formulating definitions of identity and homeliness through a strategy of “remapping.” Looking very closely at the incipit of Kahf’s novel, which showcases Khadra Shamy’s return to Indiana, Arami explains that the protagonist reclaims her Americanness thanks to the empowering agency of her camera. Khadra thwarts the “visual ideology” imbued with phallogentric, racist and nationalistic views imposed by the “*States of the Heartland*” map. Khadra therefore uses her camera as an instrument enabling her to regain a position that puts “her, and consequently Arab American women, back on the maps of the United States.” In Yunis’ magic realist novel, the mythical figure of Scheherazade comes every night on her flying carpet to visit the protagonist Fatima Abdullah—an old Lebanese matriarch with eight children and a multitude of grandchildren scattered across the US—to listen to her story. Featured in the narrative is an old black and white wedding photograph of Fatima that Arami analyzes as a token for the primary mobile aspect of home. The photograph, which was shot in her original homeland and which is on display in the houses and places that are dear to each and every one of her children, literally constitutes a portable piece of the ancestral homeland. Its disseminated and replicated

presence across the country is tantamount to a comprehensive mapping network of the US territory, thus underlining not only the indisputable Americanness of the Arab American family but, more significantly, the dynamic embedding of the ancestral homeland within the host land.

**Françoise Král** pursues the question of home by shedding light on the polysemous meaning of the vocable *home* in her own analysis of Yunis' *The Night Counter*. She notably observes that the novel emphasizes a precarious dimension of the home-as-structure that is nevertheless countered, or at least lessened, by an irrepressible desire for a home or a sense of homeness. If the precariousness that she locates stems from the inherited violence of history both in the eastern homeland and the western host land, she expounds that a sense of home is nevertheless achieved when, for instance, the text alludes to the contribution of Fatima's family to "the national master narrative" (as her first husband was a former General Motors worker). Král provides further illustration of the ways in which Fatima's nostalgic obsession with "Deir Zeitoun"—her former house in Lebanon that she wants to bequeath to one of her children—subsides as she learns that the house has been destroyed. The burden thus lifted, a certain version of home is retrieved; but in the presence of Scheherazade, the literary tradition she represents, and the underlying western literary canons that Yunis employs, this version is of the hybridized sort.

What is also noticeable in Zughaib's painting is that she does not merely imply an architectural design or neat geometrical mapping that would simultaneously enact a form of mobility and rootedness; she also weaves into it an intricate repetitive pattern out of the Arabic language. This linguistic arabesque testifies to the consubstantial rapport between the idea of home and language, the decisive quality of which is already signaled in the bilingual title "Circle Home/Beit." The repetition of the word *Beit* may equally be perceived as the demanding spelling exercise performed by a child reminiscing about the homeland or as the liberating urge to perform the homeland at all costs, as though by writing it down it could be conjured up. In her article, **Syrine Hout** concentrates on the point where language, home and identity intersect. Focusing on Rayyan al-Shawaf's novel *When All Else Fails* and its Baghdad-born transnational protagonist Hunayn, who evolves in "*the America 9/11 had made*" (al-Shawaf 68), she explores the ways in which the sense of identity and belonging is governed by the characters' relationship with language. Hunayn's command of both English and Arab idioms allows him to create a linguistic space wherein a sense of identity is secured. In fact, his use of language reveals its strategic dimension as it provides a means by which he attempts to survive in a racist environment depending on who his interlocutors are and how

much enmity they exhibit. She contends that the different uses of code-switching and code-mixing are functional tools to negotiate post 9/11 America and find a form of homeness through and within language, in order to locate what Hout aptly calls a “home/comfort zone.”

The word-saturated grooves of concentric circles of Zughaib’s painting uncannily resemble a disk on the surface of which the music of nostalgia plays over and over the missing homeland’s same Arabic tune. The compulsive repetition of *Beit* may equally betray the melancholic temporality of a subject trapped in the past, or the relentless efforts to overcome and work through the traumatizing loss. In any case, the work calls for the presence of the homeland as much as it enacts a “farewell to presence” (Jankélévitch 372; my translation). The center of the circle, although it seems to have initiated the movement of the handwriting, remains unfilled, as if it could not be reached or could never absolutely coincide with writing. In other words, something unavailable has nevertheless been capable of triggering a possibly liberating narrative. The blankness of that center recalls the analogy that Cassin draws between nostalgia and the quest for origins: “nostalgia is not simply homesickness and the return home. This feeling, at once overwhelming and gentle, is, like every origin, a chosen fiction that constantly gives clues so as to be taken for what it is, an adorable, human fiction, a cultural fact.” (Cassin 2-3) Nostalgia is thus caught between “the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (Said 173) and the real and imagined stories that are narrated in order to come to terms with that sorrow, “fictions that we employ to feel at home” (George 170). In his contribution, **Rédouane Abouddahab** discusses the treatment of nostalgia and loss by Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem “Brushing Lives.” The poem juxtaposes seemingly disconnected scenes where the poet initially describes a beautiful woman waiting on her customers, then progresses to the moving encounter of the poet’s father with a fellow Palestinian exile. Because the story of the father’s grief over the loss of his original homeland has been told, and more crucially listened to by his daughter’s attentive ear, the father is able to utter what his interlocutor, burdened by melancholy, can only consider as unutterability itself: “Palestine.” Abouddahab reveals, through a close listening to the sensuousness of the poem, how the latter is traversed by the “voices of desire” and the musicality of the feminine that assuage the nostalgic affliction characterized by loss and forced dispossession. He finally elucidates how Shihab Nye, in the very characteristic way of her poetry, broadens the singularity of a narrative, in an ampler ethical gesture, so that it encompasses a universal dimension of “human suffering.”

If one were to transfer Zughaib's own personal exilic condition—a departure from Lebanon—to the case of Palestine, the blank space of her painting would evince the paragon of the missing home and homeland that Palestine stands for, and perhaps, the aporetic aspect that it grafts to the very concept of home, which prompts Hammer to wonder: “Has being without a home and homeland become the home of the Palestinian diaspora?” (Hammer 200). Dispossession and “domicide”—“the deliberate killing of home” (Porteous & Smith 11)—are what account for the theatrical works at stake in **Mickael Malek Najjar**'s contribution. Focusing on contemporary Arab American drama and, more specifically, on Palestinian American playwright Ismail Khalidi and Lebanese American Mona Mansour, Najjar tackles a specific home that defies common categories, namely: the refugee camp. In the play *Urge for Going*, Mansour immediately signals the quintessential precariousness of habitability in a Lebanese refugee camp as her opening stage direction partly reads: “*A small structure: a shelter more than house*” (Mansour n.p.). Considered as a living body, the home in Khalidi's play *Sabra Falling* is in need of an intravenous connection with the generator of the neighboring clinic. The refugee camp thus features a sick house, itself predicated upon a conception of home which is un-viable as, according to Najjar, it “shelters” people who are deemed unworthy of possessing a life. Intent on unveiling how the playwrights reimagine the ancestral homes they have left behind or never inhabited, as well as the traumatic experience which they have nevertheless inherited by vicarious traumatization, Najjar maintains that such playwrights have chosen to resist by granting visibility to people whose lives have been devalued. To accommodate room for them on stage, and the lively home it performs, not only revalues their lives but works against their oblivion, helping them to acquire a visibility to their primary desire to find a sense of home.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Ammiel Alcalay and Philip Metres for adding a personal and creative touch to the dossier, and to Naomi Shihab Nye and Helen Zughaib for permission to reproduce their work.s



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