

Palestine and the figure of the Palestinian in Lebanese diaspora literature

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ABSTRACT

Research into the field of diaspora literature has become circumscribed by a focus on several recurring elements, namely ideas about home, the homeland, the nation and identity formation. This article, however, suggests that diaspora scholarship looks beyond these elements to gain a broader appreciation of what also is of intrinsic significance to diaspora writing. To illustrate this, it takes the example of the Lebanese diaspora novel and employs Caroline Levine's concept of 'form' to highlight that Palestine, often treated as significant to this fiction in terms of historical context, is intrinsic to Lebanese migrant literature. Palestine orders and shapes Lebanese diaspora writing in pivotal ways, shedding light on how transformations of character, political issues and the impact of authors' diasporic experiences on the narratives they craft are best understood through a considered investigation of Palestine's fundamental forming role in this literature. In doing so, this paper addresses this issue's broader concern with violent aftermaths, in this case the Palestinian Nakba and the Nakba's continued impact on Palestinians in Lebanon. It aims to challenge the demonisation of Palestinian exiles by examining the ways Lebanese diaspora writers deploy fiction to both revise the Lebanese perception of Palestinian refugees and acknowledge the violence that Palestinians have endured in Lebanon.

Keywords

Diaspora literature, form/formalism, Caroline Levine, Lebanon, Nakba, Palestine

According to Hyungji Park, "diaspora literature is not easy to define or identify" because its "boundaries" are "contestable, subjective and downright fuzzy" (2015, 155). As a result, studies of this fiction have relied on a core set of elements to define this fictional field, principally the home or homeland, and the impact of migration and displacement on the formation of characters' identities. Other closely related elements include mobility, the development of a diasporic "state of mind" to fashion homes that are portable (Mishra 2006, 5-17), and the nostalgia for a past home (Park 2015, 157). Diaspora writing is therefore circumscribed by a limited number of elements, which is further complicated by its close relationship with postcolonial fiction. Taking these observations of difficulty as a point of departure, the following article shifts the focus from attempting to define diaspora fiction to examining it as a form of writing that shapes and determines our engagement with it. It uses Caroline Levine's work on form as a theoretical framework to examine the implications of this formalism on definitions of diaspora literature. Importantly, its attentive reading of Lebanese diaspora writing finds that

Palestine is indispensable to understanding this fictional world, not solely because it reflects the social or political aspects of Lebanese-Palestinian history but also because it influences the very form of this diaspora literature.¹ By using a mode of reading influenced by Levine, the paper addresses the special issue's broader concern with violent aftermaths, which here involves the displacement of Palestinians in the 1948 Nakba, and the Nakba's continued tragic impact in a significant location of Palestinian exile, that of Lebanon. It also aims to challenge the toxic erasure and demonisation of Palestinian exiles by examining the ways Lebanese diaspora writers deploy fiction as an avenue to radically revise the historical treatment of Palestinians and how the Lebanese view their Palestinian refugee population.

The influence of Palestine on Lebanese migrant writing can be traced to its significance for Lebanese authors in Lebanon, especially those writing during and after the country's protracted civil war (1975-1990). In his study of the literary style of Lebanese civil war fiction, Norman Saadi Nikro writes it was "resistance movements associated with Palestinian and socialist parties" that shaped the identity and "self-understanding" of Lebanese writers like Elias Khoury, Mai Ghossoub and Rashid al-Daif (2012, 5). These authors were not only formally affiliated with pro-Palestinian political movements in Lebanon, but in many cases, they crafted narratives that centralised the plight of Palestinians and showcased their commitment to and sometimes "disillusion with the ideological imperatives of [...] such [political] attachments" (Nikro 2012, 5). The leftist politics of these writers was tied closely to the Palestinian cause and contrasted sharply with the treatment of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee population in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon number about 450000 and had resided there since the first Palestinian exodus in 1948, with more refugees arriving after the 1967 Six-Day War when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Lebanon's political groups, defined along sectarian lines, rarely agree on much, but on the issue of granting Palestinian citizenship, what is known as *tawtin*, the strong consensus is that Palestinians should not be naturalised. *Tawtin* is one example that reflects the degree of discrimination that Palestinians endure in Lebanon, who, despite having lived there for several decades, are constantly reminded they are not welcome by being refused naturalisation (Kassir 2003, 97).² The most significant and tragic highpoint of this discrimination is the September 1982 Sabra, and Shatila massacre where Maronite Christian Lebanese militiamen, aided by the Israeli Defence Forces, brutally killed approximately two thousand Palestinian civilians.³ The Lebanese have consistently failed to address this massacre, either as a single event or within the context of the broader prejudice Palestinians face in Lebanon (Worth 2010; Lamb 2008).

Like Al-Daif and Ghossoub, the artists and writers who express their commitment to the Palestinian cause or use their works to convey their alternative politics, certainly hold a minority opinion within Lebanon. However, despite their alignment with Palestinians, these Lebanese

writers have not necessarily prioritised the Palestinian issue in their texts in the same way or to the degree that Lebanon's migrant or diaspora authors have. Part of the reason for this emphasis from the latter body of writers is that the migration and displacement they have endured in some ways approximate the experiences of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This is not to imply that the experiences are identical; after all, as Nora Stel notes in a similar context, one group is a refugee population with substantially less economic, political and social leverage, while the other is a diasporic community that is not necessarily defined by forced migration or refugee status (2013, 2). However, both groups nonetheless share a sense of loss, a key element of displacement. This shared sense of loss is reflected in the persistent engagement with Palestine found in Lebanese diaspora fiction, as well as the repeated inclusion of Palestinian characters who play a vital role in the development of the narratives.

Beyond this frequency, as Ghassan Hage's research reveals, there appears to be a further distinct significance of Palestine for the Lebanese diaspora. As Hage explains:

I asked between twenty and thirty Lebanese-born Muslims in France, England, Australia and the USA one [...] question [...] You are often complaining that your government [in the host state] doesn't do enough to counter anti-Muslim stereotypes and discrimination, and that your government is too pro-Israeli. If [...] the government says to you: "[...] either I stop anti-Muslim racism or I stop being pro-Israeli, which one would you choose?" From the 100 or so people I asked, only [...] eight [...] said that stopping local anti-Muslim racism is more important. (2015, 92)

In other words, Hage's question poses a choice between stemming the discrimination that impacts Lebanese migrants or addressing the loss of Palestine and the forced migration of its people. While the latter is devoid of direct hardships for Lebanese migrants, it is emotionally wounding. That Hage's respondents overwhelmingly elect the latter illustrates Palestine's affective power for Lebanese migrants.

This significance of Palestine to the Lebanese diaspora is imprinted onto the Lebanese diasporic literary field, evident in the way it explores questions of displacement and dispersal through and alongside the issue of Palestine. Lebanese migrant writers craft their diaspora narratives often by mobilising the loss of Palestine or the plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and elsewhere, even when the novel is primarily concerned with, for instance, the Lebanese civil war or Lebanese migrant characters. Existing studies of Lebanese diaspora writing have not necessarily overlooked the presence of Palestine and Palestinian characters, but none have carefully examined how Palestine has shaped this literary mode of writing. What these studies have focused on, instead, when they have paid at most passing attention to the Palestinian presence, is Palestine's contextual relevance. In other words, literary critics have understood fictional engagement with Palestine primarily as an index of the social world or a representation of the political history and context that surrounds Lebanese and Palestinian relations.⁴ For instance, in Tony Hanania's *Unreal City* (1999), the inclusion of the Palestinian

refugee character Layla is noted by literary critics in terms of her complicated romantic relationship with the unnamed male Lebanese protagonist, who, like Lebanon, betrays this Palestinian refugee by refusing to fulfil his promise, year after year, to remove Layla from the Shatila camp and take her to the UK where he resides. She in turn betrays both the protagonist and, importantly, her Palestinian community by becoming the lover of a Maronite militia leader, the same militia that committed the violence in the camp. Layla thus reflects how Lebanon and the Lebanese failed the Palestinians to both protect and accommodate them, especially in reference to the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

While not inaccurate, what is marginalised in this sort of assessment is how the relationship between Layla, a discarded and uncared for Palestinian refugee, and the protagonist shapes the transformation of his character. Nor does it reveal the influence of the Palestinian issue on the guilt the protagonist exhibits for abandoning Layla and escaping the war and the testimonial form of the novel. Literary analysis of this novel and the general examination of Lebanese diaspora writing have been driven by those elements outlined earlier that are seen to underpin diaspora fiction. The motif of the home is one of those elements, which in the case of Hanania's novel is transposed onto Beirut, the protagonist's once cosmopolitan and chic home city that is dramatically altered in the novel's present into a war riddled hell-scape. Identity is another element that is probed in relation to *Unreal City*, especially as the protagonist transforms from an urbane, western-educated artist who is highly mobile to a jihadi and a killer. The result of such an analysis is that this novel, like much Lebanese diaspora literature, has been critically assessed in a rather formulaic manner or approached as a particular *form* of writing that can only be read in terms of a set of pre-determined elements or characteristics. Such a limiting practice has been identified by Caroline Levine in her work on form in literature, which explains "form" as "*an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping*" (emphasis in the original text). The "work of form" is "to make order" or to make sense of narrative structures through the elements or issues that recur within literary texts (Levine 2015, 3-4).

As I have suggested, making sense of narrative structures has not, in the case of Lebanese diaspora literature, included a considered investigation of the place of Palestine. However, by recognising that the incorporation of Palestine does not simply reference 'real world' political or historical events, such as the role of the Lebanese state in perpetuating Palestinian suffering, the vexed relationship between Lebanese and Palestinian refugees and the horror of Sabra and Shatila, should trouble existing, formulaic approaches. In this mode of reading, Palestine is not simply of extra-textual significance but is also intrinsic to the literary text. While it may seem contradictory, given the definition of form quoted above from Levine, her notion of formalism remains helpful because it proposes a more capacious framework for apprehending the (formal) influence of Palestine in this literature. This can be seen in form's

varied uses and applications. For instance, form not only reflects how narratives are shaped and ordered but also exposes the limits of each form. As Levine suggests, “a specific form [like a sonnet or a novel] can be put to uses in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form’s” capacities (2015, 6).

Taking this approach, focusing on the unobserved significance of Palestine in Lebanese diaspora fiction will shift analysis of this literature’s engagement with Palestine as driven by external political or historical contexts to one where Palestine is considered as intrinsic to a text in terms of its narrative shape and the structure of its language. Doing so will shed light on the unobserved potential contributions of this fiction that operate at two levels. The first relates to the transformation of certain characters and the capacity of this literature to mediate or challenge aspects of Lebanese political culture, which has failed to address its violence against Palestinian refugees. The second involves a recognition of the displacement that shapes the fiction of these writers, highlighting the particular “forming” capacities of these authors as diasporic subjects.

The literary relationship between Palestine and Lebanon

As noted, Palestine and Lebanon share a particular history complicated by the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, to which the Lebanese state refuses to extend citizenship. For Palestinians, their experience in Lebanon has been a particularly tragic one, exemplified by the violence of Sabra and Shatila. This history, the nature of the relationship between the Lebanese and Palestinians, and the violence of the 1982 massacres are amply narrated in novels set during Lebanon’s civil war by many of its diaspora writers, notably the award-winning *De Niro’s Game* (2006) by Rawi Hage. What is distinctive about this text is that it engages explicitly with the treatment of Palestine by Lebanese Maronite Christians. In doing so, the novel highlights that Palestine is not an extrinsic element drawn in by the author narrating a series of events that must contend with Palestine, but that Palestine is a key element in the novel in terms of character development and in relation to how the presence of Palestine exposes the weak foundations on which the Maronite imagined identity is built.

De Niro’s Game, set during Lebanon’s civil war in the Christian enclave of East Beirut in the early 1980s, has been critically lauded for its portrayal of the way war seeps into people’s daily lives, impacting every aspect of it from the dangerous exercise of dodging the bombs that explode across the city to maintaining intimate relationships. The novel’s particular focus on its two male protagonists – the childhood friends Bassam Al-Abyad and George Al-Faransawi – and how they negotiate their friendship in the distorting and pressurised war environment that surrounds them is a key way that this is explored. Their relationship is initially defined by shared youthful lawlessness – “War is for thugs ... like us, with guns under our bellies, and stolen gas in our tanks” – but the straining effects of the war and the Maronite Christian political

culture that surrounds them soon damage their strong friendship (Hage 2006, 13). This is reflected as Bassam begins to register a strong desire to escape Lebanon and the conformist Christian milieu of East Beirut, while George argues that, like himself, Bassam should stay to fight in the local Christian militia. Bassam openly rejects the Christian culture of the city typified in his declaration to a shocked neighbour that “God is dead” (98). Conversely, George is eager to remain precisely to defend the Maronite enclave. He even attempts to recruit Bassam into the militia, arguing, “we are alone in this war, and our people [the Maronite Christians] are being massacred every day. We will unite with the devil to save our land. How are we to make the ... Palestinians leave?” Despite George’s pleas, Bassam remains resolute in his mission – “I am fleeing and leaving this land to its devils” (78).

George reflects on the need to defend Maronite culture and identity at various points in the novel, not only because his community is under attack but also because Maronite culture is unique to the Middle East region. When he tells Bassam the “whole *ummah* [Muslim community] is against us” he casts the Maronites as completely ‘other’ to or outside the Muslims that surround them (Hage 2006, 123). While it is true that Maronite Christians are not Muslims, there is an added dimension to George’s comment that hints at the exclusive identity that Maronites believe they espouse. Numerous scholars who both uphold this idea of a distinct Maronite identity and culture, like Matti Moosa (1986) and Walid Phares (1995), as well as those who question it, such as Ghassan Hage (1996), Sami Ofeish and Sabah Ghandour (2002), argue that Lebanon’s Maronite Christians have long defined themselves, unlike their Muslim counterparts, by rejecting an Arab identity. The case for the Maronite’s non-Arab status has been used mainly to safeguard Maronite existence as a distinct community against what is perceived to be Arab-Muslim aggression.⁵ This is why Maronite political elites fiercely agitated the French imperial powers for a separate Lebanese state. When the state was created in 1923, it contained a sizable Muslim population that the Maronites could not ignore. In negotiating with Muslim leaders in the 1940s about what would constitute Lebanon’s post-independence national character, the Christian political elites insisted that the country would be neither Eastern nor Western in orientation and would only retain an ‘Arab face’. It was in this environment of Maronite anxiety regarding their own survival that the Palestinians entered Lebanon. They became the focal point of the threat from the Maronite perspective not just in 1948 when they arrived in Lebanon as refugees, but also later with their militaristic presence in the 1970s in their war against Israel. George registers this anxiety when he insists to Bassam that the Palestinians have set up a state-within-a-state in Lebanon, claiming “There are fucking black Somalis fighting with those Palestinians” (Hage 2006, 123).

As suggested earlier, Bassam does not share George’s views on the matter of protecting the Maronites or endorse that they are under siege from the Palestinians and an array of other Muslims. There are various scenes where Bassam’s inner thoughts reflect his own implicit

questioning of Maronite culture. This is made clear in the novel's opening sequence as Bassam observes a particularly dangerous burst of violence from his bedroom. Rather than describe the falling bombs, Bassam fixes his gaze on the stray "Christian cats walk[ing] the narrow streets nonchalantly, never crossing themselves or kneeling for black-dressed priests" (Hage 2006, 12). By noting the Christian cats' refusal to maintain the very Christian-like attributes of kneeling and crossing, Bassam ridicules the city's Maronite residents for their religiously supplicant behaviour. This strong criticism of Lebanon's Christian culture is further reinforced when Bassam recalls how his communist uncle, Naeem, had schooled him during his childhood that Palestinians were not enemies to be pushed out of Lebanon by the Christians, and ultimately that "there was no God [as] God is man's invention" (45).

Where this criticism is most strongly pronounced and reaches its fullest expression of undermining Maronite culture is through the novel's engagement with Palestine, and in particular in the scene where George recounts to Bassam in horrific detail the brutal murder of many refugee Palestinians. His account, one of the darkest in Lebanese civil war literature, is highly troubling as it depicts the tortured satisfaction George experienced while in the camp. He narrates this experience to Bassam with a combination of clipped sentences – "People were shot at random. Entire families killed at dinner tables. Cadavers in their night-clothes, throats slit; axes used, hands separated from bodies, women cut in half" (Hage 2006, 174-5) – and drawn-out prose –

We rounded up more men against a wall, women and children against another wall. We shot all the men first. The women and children wailed, and we changed magazines and them as well. It was their cries that made me shoot them. I hate kids' cries. I never cry; have you ever seen me cry? The rest who came after, when they saw the corpses on the floor, they panicked. Some pissed their pants. I saw three fleeing from the back; we chased them in the narrow alleys. I became separated from the others, and I lost everyone. (177)

It is notable throughout George's account that the only people he describes as being killed, the women, children and men, are civilians. If the aim of this Christian militia is to protect the Maronite community from annihilation, the details of George's account beg the question of how the militia is fulfilling this by targeting so many unarmed refugees. In light of this, the massacres must be seen as, at best, an act of projected protection against a perceived and overestimated threat. The accelerated syntax and lengthy prose that capture George's tormented excitement highlight the notable lack of evidence that the camp residents posed a threat to the Maronites, their existence in Lebanon or their culture. This illustrates that the carnage George describes is no longer just a fictional rendering of a particular historical event but is subsumed into the fraught question of Maronite identity politics through the narrative process crafted by Hage.

Significantly, Hage's novel illustrates, most clearly, its undermining of Maronite culture through the Maronite militia's encounter with the Palestinians. If we were to understand the

presence of Palestine in these texts as mere “reflections or expressions of prior social [or political] ... forms” (Levine 2015, 122) we would overlook the degree to which Palestine shapes our perception of these novels. Recognising the ‘intrinsic’ presence and forming significance of Palestine in these texts is important because it enhances the expected or formulaic ways that Lebanese diaspora fiction is appraised. For Hage, this means the troubled and tragic place of Palestine in relation to Lebanon is not simply represented by the novels but integrally shapes the formation of characters and determines how a narrative can explore the flawed foundations on which Lebanese Maronite culture is built.

The diasporic lives of authors: Lebanese migrant writers and Palestine

The intrinsic significance of Palestine to Lebanese diaspora narratives has further implications alongside those discussed above. It helps us to understand how this mode of writing is shaped by the diasporic sensibility of the authors. Levine’s understanding of social and literary form is again helpful as it invites a reframing of the influence of Palestine for displaced authors in their writing process. As Levine states, “Literary forms and social formations are equally real in their capacity to organise materials, and equally *unreal* in being artificial, contingent constraints” (Levine 2015, 14). In light of the equal weight Levine gives to literary and social forms, the question “how does Palestine shape characters or critique fundamental ideas about Maronite culture?” addressed above, can be extended to “how does Palestine illuminate the writerly sensibility of authors whose lives have been altered or even determined by migration and border transgression?”

Part of the important work done by several diaspora researchers has been to identify particular themes or issues that diaspora fiction engages and renders into narrative form. According to Ato Quayson, “genealogical accounting,” that is “stories of [...] ‘how-we-got-here’” which narrate a family or community’s migration through the lens of one or a few key characters, is distinctive of diaspora literature (Quayson 2013, 151). Genealogical accounting is a narrative or storytelling device and, as Quayson intimates, informs the diasporic writerly disposition. In other words, the migrant writer’s work is shaped or formed by their experiences of displacement, so that, to continue with Quayson’s example, a diasporic novel is structured by narratives of journeys that account for “how-we-got-to-here” (151). In this part, I will extend Quayson’s contribution and apply it to Lebanese diaspora fiction, shedding light on how writers’ engagement with Palestine is determined by their experiences of displacement and how Palestine, in turn, shapes their narratives of dispersal or dislocation. *Ports of Call* (1999) by Amin Maalouf highlights the interplay between the social world of the author and the literary text to expose alternate models of coexistence within national borders.

The establishment of geographical borders and the creation of states underpin the tragic separation of the central characters in *Ports of Call*, the married couple Ossyane Ketabdar and

Clara Emden, in 1948. As the text is narrated from Ossyane's perspective, in 1976, looking back on the events that led to the partition of Palestine and his separation from Clara, readers are most privy to his experience of exile from his wife, daughter and their family home in Haifa, Palestine. Significantly, his narrative of exile is immediately bound up with the changes taking place in the region in the decade of the 1940s that lead to Clara and Ossyane's separation, as well as the regional transformations of previous decades beginning with the decline of the Ottoman Empire in 1919 and the interwar period in Europe up to World War II. These historical events form the backdrop to the novel's sustained investigation of concepts like the homeland and the nation. Through his narrative, Ossyane conveys that he possesses rather unorthodox understandings of these concepts, informed by the author's views.

Maalouf is mainly known for his fiction, but he has also written a memoir, *Origins* (2008), and an extended essay, *On Identity* (2000), where he outlines elements of his particular diasporic sensibility. Two key interrelated elements are his rejection of roots and his scepticism of the link between national identity and territory. Regarding roots, Maalouf expresses his apparent dislike of them because of their imprisoning nature: "Roots burrow into the ground [...] they hold their trees in captivity [...] Trees need their roots for nourishment [...] Men do not" (Maalouf 2008). For "men," it is roads that matter: "roads hold our promises, bear our weight," and afford mobility. He attributes his preference for routes to his "nomadic clan," specifically his paternal family, whose home is "as wide as the world" (2008). Maalouf's preference for routes challenges one of the key pillars of orthodox diaspora thinking, which posits "roots" or places of origin as central and a return to them as the organising principle of all dispersed communities.⁶ His dismissal of roots and his embrace of a "nomadic" and figurative deterritorialised existence underly his challenge to the assumption of a supposed fundamental relationship that ties national identity to the territory. This is best demonstrated by Maalouf in his forceful response of "Both!" each time he is asked, after having migrated to France in 1976, whether he feels more French or more Lebanese (Maalouf 2000, 3). Having always felt "poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions" (3), Maalouf's response is a more succinct version of what Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin refer to as the "lesson" of diaspora, "namely that peoples and lands are not naturally and organically connected" (1993, 723).

Where these sentiments are most effectively displayed in *Ports of Call* is in Maalouf's indirect, though no less powerful, way of exposing the fallacy of the separation of Palestinians and Jews and instead modelling the possibility, or the sole remaining viability, of a single bi-national state. In other words, the novel's approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict is informed, or ordered and structured, by the author's diasporic acceptance of routes and his disaggregation of nationalism and land. This diasporic outlook allows Maalouf to critique, in fiction and through narrative, the assumption that national identity can only be singular, and

must be fixed or tied to territory. Maalouf's protagonist makes clear that he rejects narrow or highly orthodox ideas regarding national identity, a rejection that is derived primarily from his peculiar familial circumstances:

What I loathe [...] is racial hatred and discrimination. My father was Turkish, my mother Armenian, and if they were able to hold hands in the midst of the massacres [the Armenian genocide in WWI], it was because they were united by their rejection of that hatred. That is my inheritance. That is the place I come from. (60)

While this passage is an unequivocal statement against racism, it also stresses that Ossyane's origins, the place he comes from, are not bound by some physical place or a commitment to a national homeland. Place here is unanchored; it is a vantage point that encourages a kind of critical detachment from the potential conformism that being at home, or belonging to one's home nation, might provide. The dangers of taking "home [...]" for granted" are raised by Edward Said, where he urges us to "stand away from 'home' in order to look at it with an exile's detachment" lest its "underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy" (Said 2002, 185).

The novel's attempts to model bi-national coexistence between Jews and Arabs is driven by its espousal of this kind of critical detachment. In terms of political activism, Ossyane's disavowal of partition sees him, a Muslim Armenian-Turk born and raised in Lebanon, and his wife Clara, an Austrian-Jew who relocated to Palestine after surviving the Holocaust, establish the Palestine Arab and Jewish United Workers Committee in the 1940s, an organisation dedicated to demonstrating that Arabs and Jews "should be on the same side, fighting" for a single state in Palestine (Maalouf 1999, 106). At a personal and intimate level, Ossyane and Clara's union models the possibility of cohabitation for these two communities. Together, they enact this possibility by developing a dialogic mode of communication that transcends self-representation and self-interest.⁷ Rather than argue from their respective positions of Muslim and Jew, Arab and European, Ossyane and Clara's debates are framed by a kind of "moral elegance" where "Clara tried to understand even the Arabs' worst shortcomings, and to show no unjustified indulgence to the Jews, and I, with no prejudice for the Arabs, kept always in mind the persecutions that the Jews had endured" (130). The duality of conflict, of Palestinian versus Israeli, Arab versus European or Muslim versus Jew, is seen as vulgar and uncivilised by Ossyane:

A few days ago, in Paris, I had occasion to hear a discussion on the radio between an Arab and a Jew, and I confess that I was shocked. The idea of staging a confrontation between two men, each speaking in the name of his own tribe, vying in the displays of bad faith and gratuitous cunning I find shocking and revolting. I find such duels vulgar, uncivilized, in bad taste [...] and inelegant. (130)

These “inelegant” debates, where each side speaks in the name of their “own tribe” enforces a model of segregation that stands in stark contrast to Clara and Ossyane’s dialogic model.⁸

The resistance to partition displayed in this work of fiction, through the relationship and love affair of its central characters, illustrates how a Lebanese diaspora novel’s engagement with Palestine participates in a highly political debate and suggests ways through and around the political impasse and complexity that have perpetuated the Israel-Palestine conflict. Gregory Jusdanis, a critic of the role of culture and literature in political debates, argues that scholars like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha exaggerate culture’s “importance ... as an agent of oppression (national culture) or of resistance (cultural difference)” if they fail to take “into account the actual institutions [that run and govern] the state” (Jusdanis 1996, 151). Jusdanis is right but only insofar as his perception of literature, as fiction that can only ever reflect the “real world” experiences of migration, of postcolonial and diasporic movement, does not change. However, if we acknowledge the formal aspects of literature, which structures, shapes or patterns itself within, against, alongside – not after or before – social or supposed ‘real world’ formations (such as Jusdanis’ “actual institutions”), then we can better see how literature not only participates but offers alternate models to think through and about political issues and conflicts.

In relation to the diaspora, Jusdanis is just as sceptical. He wants to know if “diasporic identity promises to free people from the confines of the nation-state” how can “diaspora do this? [...] what would be the political basis for such a world?” (155). Jusdanis’ appreciation of the political is just as narrow as his understanding of literature. He fails to consider that the political basis of a world freed from the confines of the nation-state may not be predicated or modelled on existing nation-based political or state institutions but could approximate the dialogical “moral elegance” of Ossyane and Clara, drawn and derived from the diasporic literary form Maalouf develops. As Pheng Cheah argues, literature is “not merely a product of human imagination or something that is derived from, represents, or duplicates material reality”; instead, it is an “opening through which one receives a world and through which another world” or other possibilities become apparent (2008, 35). Indeed, for a conflict that is entering its eighth decade, one that policymakers, politicians and politics have been unable to solve, perhaps it is time to take seriously what cultural formations can “open” to us. Through its engagement with Palestine, Maalouf’s *Ports of Call* illustrates how a Lebanese diaspora novel both recuperates the toxic erasure of Palestinians and offers, or to borrow from Levine, affords insights into alternate pathways to address the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Diaspora literature and form

The challenge that a Lebanese diaspora novel poses to Jusdanis’ dismissal of culture and diasporic form provides a fitting conclusion to a paper concerned with recovering the erasure

of Palestinians since their violent displacement and challenging their demonisation in Lebanon. It does so by exploring and expanding the limitations of diaspora writing from several Lebanese authors. Diaspora literature is ordered, or – to use Levine’s term – formed by elements like identity, displacement, home and nostalgia. However, there are other elements that also shape or have a formal impact on diaspora writing that we risk overlooking in our quest to define this fictional field. As the case of Lebanese diaspora fiction illustrates, the specific feature of Palestine shapes, determines or moulds this literature. Palestine is not just important to Lebanese migrant writing because of the history it shares with the Lebanese, an extrinsic or extra-textual historical context that is merely reflected in a narrative. Instead, it has an intrinsic textual significance that impacts narratives and shapes them in terms of character development or tracking how authors’ diasporic experiences influence their writing. What this mode of analysis highlights is how diaspora literature can become a site to reckon with past violence, so that the aftermath of that violence is acknowledgement, acceptance of responsibility and, perhaps in the future, healing and reparation.

Notes

¹ The novels in this article are defined as diaspora fiction because their authors are members of the Lebanese diaspora. Like Syrine Hout (2012), I understand Lebanese diaspora fiction as works by writers who have migrated from Lebanon or are descendants of Lebanese migrants and continue to engage with issues of displacement, alienation, longing for home and negotiating life between the home and host state.

² According to the late journalists Samir Kassir, the issue of Palestinian *tawtin* is an obsession not just of Christian Lebanese who have had the most difficult relationship with the Palestinians, but also of the Palestinians’ supposedly staunchest ally, the Shi’a Muslims and Hezbollah (2003, 97).

³ Estimates on the number of Palestinians who perished vary. The Lebanese government records a number of 2000, the International Committee of the Red Cross, 2750, and the Lebanese Red Cross, 3000 (Al-Hout 2004, 296).

⁴ For examples that demonstrate Palestine as contextually relevant to Lebanese fiction or of marginal importance and hardly examined, see Hout (2012); Lang (2016), especially pp. 148-152; Mostafa (2011).

⁵ Ghassan Hage argues that “regardless of what else the conflicts between Maronites and Muslims in the last four or five centuries have been about, there is no doubt that a large majority of Maronites have experienced those conflicts as a struggle for their very survival” (1996, 128).

⁶ William Safran (1991) is the strongest advocate of roots and return, and others like Robin Cohen (1997) do not argue for return but also do not overtly challenge it.

⁷ My use of dialogic is a register of the various associations that, according to Linda Hutcheon, have been derived since Bakhtin’s initial use. Dialogic refers to “flexibility, a willingness to engage conflicts [...] a resistance to closure, [...] and a keen sense of ‘otherness’” (2002, 30).

⁸ The author has worked on this topic in a previous essay. See Bayeh (2010, 173).

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