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## Sites of Identity Among Middle Eastern Diasporas in North America

Jennifer Dueck, Tami Amanda Jacoby

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*Jennifer Dueck & Tami Amanda Jacoby*

SITES OF IDENTITY AMONG MIDDLE EASTERN  
DIASPORAS IN NORTH AMERICA



Diaspora has, over the last twenty years, found firm footing as a respectable area of academic study. Once confined to communities formed by forced expulsion from an ancestral homeland, diaspora studies has broadened to include communities that have left their homelands for a wide range of economic, political, and cultural reasons. While definitions of diaspora are still contentious, diaspora studies generally seeks to understand the intricacies of migrant experiences that occur when communities leave one geographic space, contend with issues of home, space, and belonging, to coalesce around different markers of identity in a new geographic space.

Studies on such topics have by now become mainstream for many regional and trans-regional communities. However, prominent Middle Eastern scholars have deplored the relative absence of the Middle East from the wider field of diaspora studies.<sup>1</sup> Not only are Middle Eastern migrants a vital force in Middle Eastern history, society and politics, they also comprise influential transnational networks throughout Europe, Africa, and the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Add to this scholarly lacuna the present-day depiction in the North American media of a homogenized and simplified Middle East, frequently defined by conflict, and dominated by orientalized images of a Muslim Arab population.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to such homogenized depictions of the Middle East and its peoples, the lived experiences of Middle Eastern diaspora communities around the world are marked by tremendous complexity and diversity. Counted among them are many disparate linguistic, ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, Druze, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, and a wide spectrum of Christians.

*Jennifer Dueck is Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Manitoba. Email: [jennifer.dueck@umanitoba.ca](mailto:jennifer.dueck@umanitoba.ca)*

*Tami Amanda Jacoby is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Studies, University of Manitoba. Email: [tami.jacoby@umanitoba.ca](mailto:tami.jacoby@umanitoba.ca)*

The three articles published here as a special section emerged from a scholarly workshop held at the University of Manitoba in December 2015 to help address limitations in existing diaspora scholarship about Middle Eastern communities in North America. Two threads emerged during the workshop that are worth outlining here. The first is the way in which diaspora groups define new spaces in which to articulate and enact their identities. Such spaces include festivals, oral history projects, businesses, films, and other analogous sites. The three papers in this section each focus on a different kind of space, or site, in which diasporic communities formulate and articulate their identities.

A second thread that emerged in the workshop discussions was the difficulty of defining a methodology of diaspora studies. The dramatic changes involved in migrating, and the very different circumstances in which diaspora communities take shape, create all sorts of challenges in developing shared analytical questions that can shape scholarly inquiry. How can we understand diaspora as an analytically useful concept, when the diaspora experience is so varied? Since the publication of the first issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in May 1991, a milestone in the articulation of diaspora studies, diaspora scholars from around the world have debated what exactly we mean when we study diaspora. Is diaspora mainly a geographic process of migration, in which scholars should seek meaning in global patterns of movement? Is it a process of social formation or a kind of political consciousness, in which individuals participate, and which scholars can study? Is it a mode of cultural production that creates artefacts and media with their own internal systems of meaning that scholars can examine and catalogue? Is diaspora distinct from area studies or from studies of other transnational, expatriate, migrant, immigrant, refugee, displaced person and extra-national groups?<sup>4</sup> And if so, how?

The evolving nature of diaspora studies is no simpler for its interdisciplinary character, shaped by trends in fields as wide-ranging as cultural and literary studies, political science, history, anthropology, sociology, and religion. Since the 1960s, scholarship about diaspora communities has evolved, intersecting with critical debates about multiculturalism, identity politics, the state, and more recently, transnationalism and globalization.<sup>5</sup> It is worth remembering how far the field has progressed beyond earlier scholarship that favored essentialized typologies, such as collective trauma or a shared sense of exile from a homeland, to define the characteristics of diaspora

groups.<sup>6</sup> Once the scholarship moved beyond definitions of diaspora communities as exiled victims, it could then encompass migrant communities formed for reasons related to labor, trade, or imperialism. This development usefully led to new studies of Indian, Chinese, Lebanese, Palestinian, Sikh, and Caribbean communities. However, much of this scholarship still limited itself to analyzing diaspora via the causes of a community's initial dispersion and the primary activity undertaken when communities regrouped in their new socio-economic contexts.<sup>7</sup>

A subsequent phase of diaspora studies drew on criticisms of the nation-state model, calling new attention to the transnationality of migrant communities whose membership spanned formal political borders.<sup>8</sup> Freed from analysis focused solely on nation-states, scholars of diaspora were uniquely positioned to forge new insight into relations between identity, nation, and borders. The persistence of ethnic identities in countries transitioning out of communism in the 1990s helped focus attention to divisions based on race, class, and gender, all of which could be usefully examined through the lens of diaspora.<sup>9</sup> It was at this time that the word "intersectionality" entered the social science lexicon. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe discrimination faced by black women that could not be explained by a single axis framework, intersectionality helped lead scholars toward a more general understanding of identity as a hybrid construction.<sup>10</sup> The leap toward identity theories of hybridity helped enable diaspora scholars to examine identity as a fluid and transitory concept that derives from lived experiences. Concrete historical changes, such as increased ease of travel and communications, trade liberalization, deregulation of international financial markets, new technologies, and new immigration policies have all influenced how these lived experiences translate into identity. Furthermore, the internet and social media have facilitated ongoing contacts throughout transnational networks. Writing on the Eritrean diaspora, Bernal attributes "new collective subjectivities and public spheres in which struggles over meaning and power are staged" to growing negotiations of identity in cyberspace.<sup>11</sup> By this logic, diaspora communities can pursue a variety of trajectories, from ethnic mobilization and exclusion to complete integration, at different times and in different places, depending on their particular needs. New forms of diaspora identity can serve as "catalyst for self-discovery and community-building"<sup>12</sup>

while at the same time negotiating alliances of common interest, bringing more people into the fold.<sup>13</sup>

Coming from three different disciplines, the papers collected here each focuses on a particular site in which a Middle Eastern diaspora community engages in a process of collective identity formation resulting from the experience of relocating to North America.<sup>14</sup> Laura Robson, addressing the Armenian diaspora community in the United States, examines the history of public memorials of the Armenian genocide as they developed in the second half of the twentieth century. Such memorials have not only provided spaces where Armenian communities could commemorate the genocide as an expression of collective memory and loss, they also represent a site where those communities have sought to project a particular image of Armenians in America. As a result, debates about these memorials reflect not only the Armenians' own self-perception as a distinct community, but also aspirations for their reception in American society. Peter Bush's paper focuses on Arabic-speaking Protestant communities in Canada, examining sites of Arab-Protestant worship in the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba. Unlike public memorials, which serve a broader public, these congregations primarily serve the Arab Protestant communities who attend them. Yet they are not spaces of homogenous identity. Bush demonstrates how these Protestant Arab communities work out questions of identity and belonging within this space of Arabic-language Protestant worship. Finally, Baka Arda examines what she calls "selfie-art" by artists living in North America who self-identify as Middle Eastern. These artists do not necessarily know each other, nor do they form a coherent community around the site of their art in the ways that Armenians might gather around public memorials or Arab Protestants at churches. Yet their art represents a site where they engage intensely with their own identity and project an intentional image for the consumption of mainstream North American society.

The communities and spaces discussed by these three papers are quite distinctive. Yet all three examples clearly express the need that each community felt to create new, North American, sites for articulating their sense of belonging and difference. Each of these spaces serves members of the diasporic communities, whether Armenian, Arab Protestant, or Muslim Middle Eastern, in working through what it means to bring an identity label from life in a former homeland to life within a new host-land. These case studies illustrate well the complexity and variety of "new diaspora identities," and the

ways in which communities change their strategies when re-negotiating their identities in new places.<sup>15</sup> The sites that each paper identifies exemplify how the communities themselves define and articulate their North American sense of self in ways that are entirely different from analogous sites in their respective homelands.

In Robson's paper, for instance, a particular challenge facing the Armenian communities in the United States was how to ensure that Armenians could articulate and promote themselves as white Americans. This question resulted in new frames for thinking about public memorials of genocide, frames that were specific to the Armenian communities in the United States. The example of Jewish assimilation provided an instructive example, which led different groups of Armenians to promote public memorials of the Armenian genocide modeled on Jewish Holocaust memorials. The shared Jewish and Armenian history of violent exile, which puts both groups in the classic "victim exiles" definitions of "diaspora,"<sup>16</sup> pointed the Armenian community toward memorials that could commemorate community cohesion while at the same time emphasizing membership in mainstream, white, American society. The space that Robson explores is a physical representation of collective memory, a rich concept at the heart of understanding diaspora groups, who continually seek to sustain their identities over time, using symbols and discourses from the past to construct common futures, solidify ethnic consciousness, and promote intergenerational continuity.<sup>17</sup> Robson's argument clearly demonstrates the dynamic workings of collective memory, very much at odds with the static, nostalgic way such diasporic memorials are sometimes perceived. Remembering is an active, conscious and calculated process that mobilizes political struggles while reinventing the significance of cultural artifacts.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Peter Bush's paper examines a site, the Arabic-language congregations, in which the Arab-Protestant communities of Canada articulate their sense of identity and belonging in direct response to the experience of living in Canada. The Arab Protestants that Bush identifies have made the journey from being part of a linguistic majority (Arab) and religious minority (Protestant) in one of several different Arab nations, to being part of a linguistic minority that is nonetheless part of a religious majority in Canada. The creation of Arabic-language Protestant congregations enables Protestant Arabs to interface with mainstream Canadian religious institutions, all the while providing a shared space for worshipping in the Arabic language of the

homeland. Yet even in evoking this seemingly shared language of home, these Protestants face complexities in that they themselves come from different nations and classes, and that their memories of homeland differ generationally. First-generation Protestants had their own ways of practicing their minority religious beliefs in Arab nations; second-generation Protestants grew up in Canada, so may know these homelands only second-hand through their elders' stories or through occasional visits. Churches thus become sites for articulating and processing generational differences, which demonstrates the fluidity of the concept of "home" in a diaspora context. The original homeland for these Arab Protestants is replaced by a newly-created space that evokes the homeland and yet incorporates a diverse range of cultural markers from different Arab nations and from the Canadian cultural context.<sup>19</sup> As James Clifford has noted, the transnational links among diaspora groups need not necessarily be directed through a real or symbolic homeland: "decentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return."<sup>20</sup> Unlike the Armenian experience with public memorials, the institutional church experience of Arabic-speaking congregations serves more to interpret internal conflict and tension over community identity than to promote a curated image of Arab Protestants within Canadian society.

Arda's emphasis on "selfie-art" showcases a space where artists are very literally creating artifacts intended to express their own individual identities. The examples she selects all make specific reference to the stigmas of terrorism and otherness that typically attach to Muslims and Middle Easterners in North America, especially in the years following 9/11. The particular historical circumstance that informs these artworks is the growth of surveillance targeting Muslims in North America. The global "War on Terror" has created a new set of threats for Middle Eastern and Muslim diaspora communities in North America, in which individuals are labelled as "suspicious" and perceived as "susceptible to a variety of forms of radicalization."<sup>21</sup> The singling out of Muslims for scrutiny and sanction is exemplified by recent partisan initiatives, as with the controversial "niqab debate" commandeered by the Conservative Party of Canada during the Canadian national elections in 2015, as well as the controversial Executive Order on immigration by the newly elected President Trump in 2017.<sup>22</sup> That these discourses would find widespread appeal calls attention to the precarious position of Middle Eastern communities in North America. Artistic production by Muslim Middle Eastern subjects, using their bodies as the centerpiece, is a way for Muslims and

Middle Eastern artists to make themselves active agents in such surveillance so as to assert ownership of their own identities within a social and political context in which they are particular objects of suspicion.

The three papers demonstrate the rich possibilities of Middle Eastern diaspora studies as a vehicle for understanding the lives of people who, for all sorts of reasons, choose to move themselves and their families to a new geographic location. The process of discovering how their old identity translates into a new context often takes place within a particular space, including not only such things as public memorials, churches, and artworks, but also businesses, community centers, clubs, festivals, and charitable associations. While these spaces clearly have corollaries back in the countries of origin, the ways that Middle Eastern diasporic communities use such sites to articulate their identity in North America play out in different, and sometimes surprising, ways, demonstrating just how dynamic, creative, and strategic migrants must be in order to re-define themselves in a new context.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, "On Forgotten Shores: Migration in Middle East Studies and the Middle East in Migration Studies," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–8; and Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Habiba Shohat, eds. *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Andrew Arsan, *Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa* (London: Hurst & Co, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The 1993 essay by Samuel Huntington, though old, still exemplifies much of this line of writing: Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22z–49. For an excellent discussion of the politics of Edward Said's Orientalism and Middle Eastern studies in the United States, see Chapter 7 in Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



<sup>4</sup> Steven Vertovec quoted in Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press, 1997); William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 83–99; Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm; New York, NY: St. Martin's, 1986); Khachig Tölölyan, *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research* (London: Routledge, 2004); Khachig Tölölyan, "Restoring the Logic of the Sedentary to Diaspora Studies," in Lisa Anteby-Yemini, William Berthomiere, and Gabriel Sheffer, eds., *Les Diasporas: 2000 Ans d'Histoire* (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), 137–48.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 1–22; Robin Cohen, "Notions of Diaspora: Classical, Modern and Global," paper presented to International Seminar organized by UNESCO-CRER on Emerging Trends and Major Issues in Migration and Ethnic Relations in Western and Eastern Europe, University of Warwick (2008), 15; Butler, "Defining Diaspora," 192.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, x.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, "Defining Diaspora," 196.

<sup>9</sup> Davis Yuval, *Gender and Nation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Floya Anthias, "Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?" *Sociology* 32, no. 3 (August 1998): 557–80; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139–67.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Bernal, "Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: The Eritrean Diaspora Online," *Global Networks* 6, no. 2 (April 2006): 161.

<sup>12</sup> Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> Aisha Khan, "Material and Immaterial Bodies: Diaspora Studies and the Problem of Culture, Identity, and Race," *Small Axe* 19, no. 3 (November 2015): 48.

<sup>14</sup> This collection of approaches is consistent with Kim Butler's notion of studying collective identity formation throughout place and time. See Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 193–94.

<sup>15</sup> Slama and Heiss, "Comparing Arab Diasporas," 246.

<sup>16</sup> Original references to "diaspora" maintained the classical meaning of the term, denoting a victimized group engendered by catastrophic violence, dispersed from an original homeland and reconstituted in more than two geographical locations. Khachig Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of

Diaspora Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 648.

<sup>17</sup> The concept of collective memory has permeated the social sciences through the pioneering scholarship of Maurice Halbwachs along with Michel Foucault's earlier work on the politicization of memory. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1977). See also: Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity*, 8; Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies," 91.

<sup>18</sup> Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity*, 8–9.

<sup>19</sup> Arnold J. Band, "The New Diasporism and the Old Diaspora," *Israel Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 323; for fluid concepts of home and homeland, see Martin Slama and Johann Heiss, "Comparing Arab Diasporas: Post-9/11 and Historical Perspectives on Hadhrami and Syro-Lebanese Communities in Southeast Asia and the Americas," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 245.

<sup>20</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 249–50.

<sup>21</sup> Doron Zimmerman and William Rosenau, eds., *The Radicalization of Diasporas and Terrorism* (Zurich: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Center for Security Studies, 2009), 9.

<sup>22</sup> This rhetoric well preceded his election and was a regular feature of the campaign. "Donald Trump: Ban All Muslims Entering US," *The Guardian*, 8 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/07/donald-trump-ban-all-muslims-entering-us-san-bernardino-shooting>.