



PROJECT MUSE®

My Mother's Table: At Home in the Maronite Diaspora, A Study of Emigration from Hadchit, North Lebanon to Australia and America by Nelia Hyndman-Rizk (review)

Amy E. Rowe

Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies, Volume 3, Number 1, 2015, (Review)

Published by Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/779804/summary>

NELIA HYNDMAN-RIZK, *My Mother's Table: At Home in the Maronite Diaspora, A Study of Emigration from Hadchit, North Lebanon to Australia and America* (New Castle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011). Pp. 315. \$59.34 cloth. ISBN 9781443829489.

REVIEWED BY AMY E. ROWE, Independent Scholar, London, UK; email: amy_rowe@post.harvard.edu



This anthropological study of Maronite Christian emigrants from the village of Hadchit in North Lebanon is primarily concerned with the nuanced ways in which the migrants and their descendants in Australia understand “home.” Hyndman-Rizk argues that through women’s practices of care, acutely symbolized when gathered around the mother’s table, emigrants establish a sense of homeliness that was previously fixated on a specific place: the land and infrastructure of Hadchit. This is a familiar process from many studies of migration. In order to understand how the migrants have established this new homeliness the author investigated: (i) how these people understand their (or their ancestors’) decisions to migrate with the aim of achieving *najāḥ* (success) by acquiring material wealth; (ii) the religious ramifications of such decisions, i.e. becoming “spiritually poor” by focusing on wealth; (iii) discourse about Hadchit as both a “holy land” and as a site of return; (iv) identity politics in Australia and the US and how Hadchitis operate within these broader multicultural settings.

The centrality of Hadchiti identity is perhaps the most striking aspect of this ethnography as compared with other studies of Lebanese diasporas. The author’s fieldwork was conducted exclusively with people in Australia and the US who have origins in the village of Hadchit. Hadchit emerges as the primary identification point with Lebanese, Maronite, Christian, Australian, Lebanese-Australian, or Lebanese-American as facets of their status as Hadchiti. On the one hand this provides a tight focus and reflects the importance of a very specific orientation to place and to lineage; this is often lost in ethnographic literature that tends to use Lebanese-Australian,

Christian Lebanese, etc. as the analytic framework. On the other, sometimes the village focus gives perhaps too narrow a focus to the ethnography. It would be useful to have more ethnographic material provided to see how they navigate the different scales of identification but seem to keep their Hadchit-ness as central (or at least as a vital aspect of identity). Also, given intermarriage with Lebanese from other villages and indeed with non-Lebanese, it would be useful to understand how the primacy of Hadchiti identity – as opposed to other potential configurations – is maintained. At the end of Chapter 6 the author explains that most Hadchitis today identify as Lebanese-Australian (in the Hadchit Household Survey) and why this hyphenated identity “best captures their dual positioning as being both Australian and Lebanese and, yet, distinctively different from both” (230). This is revealed only toward the end of the ethnography and the text would benefit overall from clarification, as much of the rest of the book appears to hinge on the centrality of Hadchiti identity for her interviewees.

The chapter “Return to Hadchit” stands out as one of the richest and most nuanced. The text is at its best when examining points of contact between villagers in Hadchit today and those from the diaspora returning to visit. The ethnographic material and accompanying analysis bring to light competing expectations of behavior from both sides. The study is primarily one about the migrants but also demonstrates how the migration process (or indeed capitalist modernity generally) has transformed the village of Hadchit and the social lives of those who remained in Lebanon. Sydney Hadchitis often have a vision of what Hadchit was forty years ago and expect it to be more or less unchanged; they are often startled by social changes like less frequent church attendance and young women having more freedom than those living in Sydney. Also challenging is the pressure to display their “success” in Australia through boasting about and demonstrating achievements of material wealth. There is some concern that migration may not have made some families better off in the long run. There is a great deal of discussion that people really “know how to live” in Lebanon – that life in the diaspora is all about work and associated stresses, that they have moved away from the place where one can actually live life to the fullest. The author brings these vital queries and dilemmas to the fore adeptly.

From a religious standpoint, return visits to Hadchit can be intensely spiritual experiences of pilgrimage and renewal (visiting saints’ shrines, etc.). Lebanon functions as a “spiritual motherland” for

Hadchitis in Australia. Vitally, it is the space where problems encountered with life in the diaspora can be rectified through spiritual purification. Yet visits can also be religiously unsettling. As Hyndman-Rizk writes: "Through the Maronite construction of Lebanon as a lost Holy Land, the Christian version of Lebanon is reproduced. . . [yet] the fragility of Christian Lebanon is revealed when reality intrudes upon the fantasy construction and can even unravel it. The pilgrim must arrive at the airport, travel through 'non-Christian' parts of Lebanon, deal with the realities of war and conflict and the precariousness of daily life" (209). There is a strong sense of Christian sects and Maronites in particular having "lost" the Civil War and this leads to a discourse of decline for the group within the diaspora (252). With more Maronites today living outside Lebanon in the diaspora, the Maronite Church establishment sees its future as a global religious organization. Hyndman-Rizk demonstrates how the Church encourages return visits as a form of pilgrimage. Further, the church has worked to redefine Maronitism as a spiritual identity and detach it from Lebanese ethnicity. One key reason for this is because "the dominant culture of the Australian host-nation, with its emphasis on female mobility and consent, is perceived to be a profound threat to the reproduction of the central feature of Maronite society, the patrilineage" (158). Hyndman-Rizk tracks these shifts adeptly.

Hyndman-Rizk analyzes how capitalist social relations and associated values of choice, agency, and individualism have upended gender roles amongst the migrants, with the most significant being a change from relations of descent (arranged marriage, kinship, obligation) to relations of consent. The author suggests that the Australian context is particularly challenging for men who are displaced from social roles as established through patrilineal descent. Passages that demonstrate how masculinity is challenged and how second-generation women are reformatting marriage, education, and work options are persuasive. However, there are moments when some of the descriptions of the roles of (primarily first-generation) women read as too tidy and are perhaps not ethnographically interrogated as much as necessary. These women are described as "ascetics of the home" who epitomize "suffering motherhood" endurance, and possess saint-like qualities linked to Mariology. These come across as powerful tropes but read as remarkably consistent when contrasted with the dynamism of the generation eschewing relations of consent and the tensions arising from that especially on the topic of marriage partners.

In diaspora and in the context of multicultural crisis, the feeling of homeliness and cultural identity is attached to the mother and exaggerated inside domestic space, because of the crisis of national belonging for Lebanese in the Australian public domain...[c]onsequently, the family experiences a dependence upon the mother for the feeling of 'being at home' and metonymically through her, to their cultural heritage, traditions and ultimately the homeland itself" (119).

In this passage one can see why the "mother's table" becomes so important for Hadchitis. Hyndman-Rizk does a good job pointing out the limits of belonging in Australia – especially in the context of major events such as the global War on Terror and the Cronulla Riots. She tracks the ways in which Hadchitis have used their Christianity and material signifiers of success to access whiteness and acceptance; yet they are facing what she calls a glass ceiling and, in some respects, losing accumulated cultural capital (221–22). This is producing new forms of identification and allegiance; one interesting example given involved Hadchiti Christian Lebanese and Muslim Lebanese youth bonding together as Lebanese and rallying to defend a mosque during the Cronulla Riots.

This study contains the most depth from the extended fieldwork and the author's long-standing familiarity with the Australian context; the material on the US in the book is brief, but serves as a useful contrast to the situation for Hadchitis in Australia. The fact that Hadchitis are in the third and fourth generation descendants in the US and that there was no continuous flow of Hadchitis coming to the US after the early twentieth century mark this community as quite different from Australian case. Yet recent anti-Arab sentiments have unsettled Christian Arabs in both contexts from their positions of accumulated whiteness. Hyndman-Rizk details how as feeling "honkey Lebanese" her American informants show how an older diaspora community can become unsettled from so-called assimilated status.

There is an extensive autoethnographic account embedded in the introduction, however it is not linked as successfully as it could be to the rest of the text; it would have been helpful to be given more description of how the author's self-described insider/outsider position shaped interactions during fieldwork. The author also raises many theoretical lines of inquiry from political economy to

transnationalism to gender construction to religious symbolism to ethnic and racial formation. Assuredly each area is relevant, yet concentrating on fewer theoretical influences and carrying them throughout the text in a more comprehensive way would strengthen the analysis. Hyndman-Rizk has done very thorough and interesting work. Her ethnography will appeal especially to those interested in Middle Eastern transnational communities and the Maronite Christian diaspora.