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Home, Memory, Identity, and History in Contemporary Lebanese-Australian Diaspora Writing: A Study of Jad El Hage's *The Last Migration* (2002)

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Abstract

Not much has been said about Arab Australian diaspora literature compared to Arab American or British diaspora literature(s) (Bayeh 66). Jad El Hage's The Last Migration falls within the framework of Arab -Australian writing. As the title of the novel suggests, movement, geographical displacement, and their experiences thereof reside at the heart of this narrative. Characters in El Hage's novel, a contemporary example of diaspora writing, are displaced, and they are always in search of a portable home. The present paper studies Jad El Hage's The Last Migration, a post-war Anglophone Lebanese novel. It seeks to look at how Lebanese diaspora constructs imaginary and mobile spaces of home to compensate for the lost physical homeland elsewhere. This paper also unpacks the role of memory in making home away from home. In short, it aims to answer the central question: how does the use of memory in diaspora literature (re)write history, and thus combat collective amnesia aimed at mainly by the state after the Lebanese Civil war?

Keywords: **home; migration, diaspora; identity, memory; history**.

Introduction

Lebanese-Australian literature is often discussed as part of a general debate of Arab Diaspora literary writing. The latter has, in turn, been subject to much controversy. Part of this controversy lies in the categorization of this literature. Labels incorporate "emigrant," "ethnic," and "postcolonial" (Al Maleh x). In this vein, Salhi also qualifies this literature as 'hybrid' in the sense that it "bears the marks of both the writers' country of origin and their host country. It is also a ground where both home and host cultures converge, intersect, and even clash, resulting in a third culture, which situates itself in a third space which is that of the diaspora" (Salhi 3-4). It thus creates a space where different cultures, spaces, and identities meet and interact in a "third space". One more definition is put forward by Peter Clark who looks at this literature as "marginal Literatures of the Middle East," and he defines it as "the literature of exile, of ghurba, of ightirab" (Clark 187). Albeit with different labels, Al Maleh avers that these writings can be inscribed under the umbrella of Anglophone Arab literature, following the label of "francophone" literature. This way, Arab diaspora writing in English can be defined as the literature of English expression written by Arabs. Most of what characterizes this literature is its recentness. According to Al Maleh (2009), Arabs have started writing in English since the last century, yet mass writing in this language has been witnessed only in the last few decades; heretofore the debate around this literary writing is quite recent. This paper tries to contribute to this debate by studying Jad El Hage's *The Last Migration*, published by Panache Publications, Melbourne, Australia in 2002. As an Anglophone writer, Jad El Hage's work is inscribed within the framework of post-war Anglophone Lebanese diasporic fiction. *The Last Migration* is a narrative about the protagonist Ashraf Saad, a forty- something Lebanese journalist. Ashraf, around whom the main events revolve, departed from Lebanon with his family, namely his daughter and wife, when the civil war broke in 1975. He has resided in different places 'elsewhere' in the west for around 20 years. In the novel, Ashraf tells us about these journeys, his feelings, and sentiments towards the hostland(s), the homeland, as well as his bid to make sense of place through attachments to people. Such attachments intrigue El Hage's characters interminable quest for identity.

1 The Trope of Home in Diaspora Literature

The reverberation of the trope of home cannot go unnoticed in diasporic narratives. It is one of the cardinal preoccupations of diasporic authors who represent and problematize "home" differently. With this, this section aims to examine the notion of home as a space in mind, that is, as an imaginative home. It thus offers a ground for debating and deconstructing home in *The Last Migration*. Home is as complex as the whole diasporic experience itself. Part of this intricacy resides in the fact that "home" does not refer to specific things. It is free-floating; one can take home to mean a physical place, an imaginary land, family, friends, or childhood memories, and experiences, etc. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah writes:

> Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day … all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations (192).

Imaginary home is accentuated here. Home is constructed in one's mind surpassing the physical reality. It is thus a shifting site, wherein many discourses are articulated. *The Last Migration* engages actively with the trope of home as "imaginary homeland". Suffice it to say that characters complicate the notion of home as portable by reconstructing an "imagined home" through different discursive strategies and cultural practices. They partake in making home away from home, and in so doing, they create many stories and realities which disrupt boundaries and fixed territorial identities. Therefore, these characters occupy multiple spaces, suggesting the complexity of shifting identities in the postmodern non- place. Because of their constant movement and fluid crossings of border, characters feel the constant need to create their images of the homeland in their minds. This mental activity is imbued with a desire for home that is continually deferred by dint of the civil strife in the home country, Lebanon. Feeling at home is thought to be catered for by the process of reconstructing imagined homes through a (re)production of cultural practices in the diasporic community.

The Last Migration is fraught with instances wherein the dislocation of characters triggers a genuine interest in the construction of home elsewhere. Right at the outset of the novel, namely in the prologue, Ashraf informs his readers about a meeting with his western friend, Claire, when he "made Arabic coffee and brought out the four albums of photos to show her" (4). Food plays a fundamental role in the cultural construction of home, and characters find solace in making recurrent allusions to food to feel home and also compensate for "the lost home". Cultural and home-making practices evoke a sense of place and belonging to an imaginary homeland. What is more, making home is shared with other people (Western friends) to make them, as mentioned earlier, "feel the experience".

Lebanese diaspora characters seek to restore their connections to Lebanon through practices "outside" it. Bronwen Walter propounds that "[D[iaspora involves 'feeling at home' in the area of settlement while retaining significant identification outside it" (qtd. in Blunt 689). The "outside"/ "inside" intermingle and proffer a space to negotiate identity and belonging across transnational boundaries. Building on this, the construction of the Lebanese cultural reality is a dynamic process in that many stories are made up in different contexts which activate a desire to belong to an imaginative home. Yet, home is made "mobile" and "portable" via the presence of culture. Home can be thus equated with culture. That is, the practice of culture is a way to define home in the diaspora. Such definitions can be read as a strategy to maintain the national heritage to transmit it to the coming generations striding across diasporas.

2. Home: Beyond Stasis and towards Mobility

Feeling at home is not grounded in physical spaces, but it is rather about emotional ties with an imaginative space of home. This entails that home is not only about bodily dwellings but it is also about mental and emotional dwellings. Emotional associations are fashioned by the presence of local food rituals and the performance of different traditions in diaspora. Preparing and consuming food in the host country is meant to establish connections with the homeland, and identification is premised on the construction of imagined spaces. The latter ceaselessly reshape the identities of the diasporic characters. This argument is corroborated by Brah who states that "the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from being fixed or pregiven. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life" (183). The material fragments of food and also "albums of photos" referred to earlier operate as strategic practices to negotiate images of home and to contest identities. On many occasions is Ashraf engaged in producing and consuming food with individuals who belong to different cultures: "Jenny and I made herbal tea and stood in the kitchen," (126) declares Ashraf in a meeting with Jenny. Wherever he goes, Ashraf highlights Lebanese food as a way to articulate his

affiliation with home. Indeed, food is very symbolic as a trope that reverberates in many Arab diasporic texts.

Food and other fragments invoke feelings of affiliation to a past homeland that needs to be retrieved and reproduced. This idea finds expression in Fadda-Conrey's argument that "[T]he reproduction of […] Arab homeland occurs primarily through material fragments, including food, Arabic text, photos, music, plants, and religious icons and scripture" (30). Interestingly, these fragments are brought to the fore as a means to overcome the sense of loss brought about by dispersion elsewhere. They are of cultural weight because they unite the diasporic community and also introduce the cultures of origin to the host communities. Moreover, these fragments are ways of negotiating identity and longing for belonging through the construction of fluid attachments in the imaginary. Being in space can take different forms: physical, emotional, and imaginative. The production and consumption of food is a way to be imaginatively in space for people of the diaspora.

The intricacies of food, as a cultural element, run through Arab diaspora literary writing. Readers of this literature must be familiar with Diana Abu Jaber, the Jordanian author, whose *Crescent* presents genuinely the trope of food and its load as a strategy to make home away from home through memory. Sirine, one of the focal characters in Abu-Jaber's text, prepares "the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (19.) The intersections of food and memory offer a ground to negotiate the Arab identity in host countries. Sirine activates her memory to restore attachments to the Arab culture. The kitchen becomes a form of reinstating memories and experiences. She lives under the shadows of the past, and she resorts to flashbacks as a way to re-member (i.e. be a member again) herself in the Arab cultural community. Further, such sites as "the kitchen" and "the café," where food is prepared and served, function as a meeting point between different cultures and communities. These sites, especially the café, are very symbolic in that they are of cultural importance. The excerpt from *Crescent* remains telling:

> At [the] Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soup operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned. . . .There are students who come religiously, appearing at the counter with their newspapers almost every day for years, until the day they graduate and disappear, never to be seen again. (20)

The café is emblematic of a meeting point of different cultures of the Arab world. It is a place where Arab immigrants of different ethnicities get together and develop a sense of community. The café incarnates a terrain for the interaction of different subjectivities to negotiate their belonging and identification away from the homeland. The café works to bridge the gap between host and home countries and also between the members of the diasporic community who share more or less similar experiences of displacement and dislocation. The café operates to bring back memories as well as images of home. The latter endorse the survival of the diasporic individuals through home practices and customs which are promoted through absent boundaries. Fadda-Conrey delineates this situation as "the presence of absence" in that diaspora members are active in the process of bringing fragments of the absent homeland to the present hostland. The absence of boundaries goes against the conventional idea of home (land) as a physical space which is fixed and stable.

Much like Abu-Jaber's *Crescent, The Last Migration* depicts scenes in which food becomes an articulation of the characters' endeavor to contest identity beyond borders and affiliations. Here, the strategies of "building" home abroad often involve people from the host community, a fact which may suggest the need to blur lines between different people. In so doing, diasporists manage to loosen the feelings of estrangement and loss. Sharing one's culture with interested ones can be therapeutic. In the process of making home, Ashraf feels thrilled to make other people participate. Upon one of Claire's visits to Ashraf, he states "I was beside myself with joy because she was coming to stay for four whole days. I bought her a red jellabia. I went to the Lebanese shop in Uxbridge Road and loaded my car with enough ingredients for twenty-five meza dishes" (74).

Two main remarks can be made about the above excerpt. First, constructing home serves as a connecting factor between different communities; he "invites his Western friends to take part in these delights" (Hout 151). Ashraf accordingly engages them in the process of creating a space that blends cultures and strives for the inclusion of the other. Second, Ashraf's cultural practices of buying and preparing food set out to retain a sense of place. He is reinventing the homeland as a way to alleviate the feeling of "uprootedness" that is evoked by "being away from loved ones," as he declares. Albeit far from the homeland, Ashraf manages to keep ties with "the tradition" by dint of the presence of fragments like home-like cafés and shopping centers in the diaspora.

The diasporists' constructions of home elsewhere grapple with a need to disrupt homogenizing tendencies. The making of home rituals that the reader is presented within El Hage's novel conjures up images of maintaining relationships with Arab culture. Talking mainly about the American context, Nadine Naber calls for what she labels "Arab cultural re-authenticity" which is "a localized, spoken, and unspoken figure of an imagined 'true' Arab culture that emerges as a reaction or an alternative to the universalizing tendencies of hegemonic U.S. nationalism, the pressures of assimilation, and the gendered racialization of Arab women and men" (88) .The reinvention of traditions and identities can be interpreted as a strategy to preserve minority culture and simultaneously promote cultural diversity. The presence of the homeland in diaspora does not only act as a way to remember home and to compensate for the tormenting sense of displacement, but it is primordial to endorse discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism.

Immigrants, like Ashraf, use different items and objects to create an "imagined community". In *The Last Migration*, characters tellingly illustrate the importance of this community in so far as it is collective. Individualism loses ground for collectivism. However, collectivism should not be taken to mean homogeneity and thus the reducibility of the diaspora to one single and private community. It is rather suggestive of a desire for belonging to and identification with other diasporic members. This is embodied in the characters' acts to maintain ties with one another through the quest for some sort of community. Arguably, they are keen on the public rather than the private place. Eric Hobsbawm makes an interesting distinction between Home and homeland; "Home, in the literal sense, Heim, chez moi, is essentially private. Home in the wider sense, Heimat is essentially public…Heim belongs to me and nobody else…Heimat is by definition collective. It cannot belong to us as individuals" (65). What is constructed by Ashraf as the imagined community is ostensibly Heimat. The latter is brought to existence through memory, flashbacks, and different cultural performances.

In this sense, characters aim at retrieving the "lost" homeland by dint of making and remaking a network of images that can cater for a homing desire and fulfill their dream of homecoming. Notwithstanding their bid to reconstruct home away from home, what these characters produce is only fictions and imaginative narratives, since the refurbishment of home is not easily attained. In the

absence of home, characters strive to have a place that can be named as "home". It in this respect that the diasporic imaginary is shaped by the idea of a "homing desire" (Brah 180).

Critical herein is the immigrants' need to construct home as a way to heal the sense of loss and alienation they endure. In doing so, what they produce is but images about the homeland. And the latter is thus a product of imagination. Here, the characters' production of imaginative spaces is saturated with multiple versions and experiences. Making meaning of home is loaded with the intricacies of time, for characters are overwhelmed by the shadows of the past and myths. The absence of home in the present hostland invokes and engenders different constructions of home and thus of identity. Diasporists have recourse to images, myths, and imaginative narratives to create the homeland. Narrating the homeland is a narration of identity, which has trespassed borders of time and space. In this same vein, Stuart Hall opines that cultural identity "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (395). These elements form the core of "imaginary homelands". They are further grounded in the past which defines the present. Thus, the construction of the present homeland elsewhere necessitates that diasporists go back and look back to the past, or more exactly the past homeland they left behind.

The notion of identity here is presented as breaking up with the prison house of time and space. That is, the diasporic identity is not confined by time and place, but it rather challenges these boundaries and moves beyond them. Time is not linear but it is subject to disruptions and distortions by flashbacks, memories, and the wounded past. "Broken" time is in congruence with the postmodern thesis about uncertainties and partial truths. The postmodern condition of displacement generates ideas about unfixity and rootedness. In this line, diasporists find their homeland in images and memories and not in physical dwellings. Definitions of home are always in the making, and fixed notions of identity lose the ground for mobility and transnationalism. It is probably worth making the difference here between exilic and diasporic constructions of home. Although exile and diaspora are fashioned by displacement and movements, "exilic approach to home is based on national boundaries, [but] in a diasporic approach, home is not linked to a certain physical space; it is rather transnational in character and is a constructed space in the present through contacts, memories and activities"(Hafezi 8). In *The Last Migration*, places are transitory and characters are, in the protagonist's words, "in transit". Diasporists, unlike exiles, challenge borderlines and aspire for transnational spaces that are produced and reproduced by memory, affiliations, and narrative stories. Identity is thus open to continuous contestation and construction in the diasporic space which disrupts essentializing conceptions of home as fixed and stable.

3 Memory and Identity Formation

Longing for an imaginary homeland through narrative constructions and cultural memories is what nurtures the identity of the diasporic subject. It is writing and recalling that inform readers about the characters' identities and histories. Interestingly enough, authors of Arab Anglophone diaspora literature are much enmeshed in the stories they present in their texts. To exemplify, a careful analysis reveals different affinities between the protagonist Ashraf and Jad El Hage in *The Last Migration*. The author's life finds reflections in his narrative. El Hage was born in Lebanon, and he has lived in different places, moving across continents, and he has spent a great portion of his life writing as a journalist. Likewise, Ashraf, El Hage's protagonist, was born in Lebanon and has departed abroad to work as a journalist and news reporter. It could be conjured that Ashraf is representative of the author himself in that both take their readers back to their experiences in their homeland as well as hostlands. They are secret sharers of the life stories and the narratives of their history and identity. Regarding

narrative stories, Paul John Eakin maintains, in Living *Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, that "narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of who we are" (ix). The writing practice and the narrative thereof are much connected to their producer and creator, that is, the narrating self.

In a way, the sense of self is shaped by the narrative which rests on retrospect, foreshadowing, and flashbacks. To put it in Ricoeur's terms, the [narrative] identity is informed by the fact that people reveal who they are through stories they tell about their life or that are told about them through historical writing or creative imagination. For Ricoeur, identity can be classified into idem (memete) which stands for sameness and fixity, and ipse (ipseite), or selfhood, which entails flexibility and change. It is ipse that is evocative of narrative identity for it delves into the self through recounting life stories made up through recourse to both facts as well as fictions (Crowley 2-3). Here, writing becomes a vehicle for authors to narrate their life and past experiences through their characters using the process of memorialization that takes the reader to past incidents that these writers have gone through and witnessed. Indeed, it is remembering and narrativising that ascribe history meaning and significance. Told in the first-person narration, *The Last Migration* blurs the lines of demarcations between autobiography and novel and renders them indistinct. The author and the protagonist, as two faces of the same narrative player, draw on writing, as an active process, to construct imaginative images of the past homeland. It is a process that brings the absence to the presence, the absent homeland to the present diaspora space.

The characters' construction of an imaginary homeland is the result of the absence of home. This process of construction is meant to develop a sense of belonging and affiliation with the "lost" home country which has become the battlefield of civil conflicts and clashes. The desire to come back to the homeland is always delayed. Hence, characters construct "mobile" homeland away. Referring to the whole Arab homeland, the latter seems to die because of the war and disintegration. Ashraf sorely expresses this idea stating that "We [Arabs] are finished…Five hundred years ago we started to fall apart, after Andalusia crumbled. We have been shrinking on the outside, disintegrating on the inside. Nations are like people, they grow old, they become sick, and they die" (62). Through the art of retrospect and flashbacks, *The Last Migration* lay bare the dreadful reality of the Arab world owing to wars and fights. This image is fully exposed through literary devices of similes and personification to account for the tragedy that wars have brought to people. Nations are presented as sick and dead because of clashes over power, ethnic conflicts and political agendas. Lebanon, around which the events revolve in El Hage's narrative, is portrayed in a sad tone. His village of Cana has been subject to tragic massacres that led to the killing of numerous civilians. In this line, it becomes conspicuous that the Lebanese diaspora abroad has emanated from the situation brought by the notorious effects of the Lebanese Civil War which broke in 1975. Warfare is what has mainly contributed to the formation of Lebanese diaspora across continents.

The Lebanese diaspora is essentially fashioned by the need to flee the Civil War. Lebanon is no longer a "good land" but it has become a source of sorrow and fear. Upon one of his visits to his country, Ashraf concludes that he is "here in transit. Few hours only" (64). He thus frequently moves back to Lebanon only as a homeland in mind at a stage when conflicts have made any physical return intricate. It must be pinpointed here that most of the Anglophone Lebanese literature is shaped by the Civil War and the conflicts in the region.

The Lebanese Civil War has contributed much to the emergence of the coming-of-age Lebanese Anglophone literature. The latter is therefore understood as an expression of a nation

scattered and shrunk by notorious incidents. Related topical issues have thus initiated a still-running discussion in an array of disciplines from a variety of critical and analytical perspectives. The argument is that the weight of the civil strife in the production of literary and creative writing cannot go unobserved. In fact, "like many cataclysmic events of similar scope and duration, it inspired a generation of writers to respond artistically to the destruction of lives, families, institutions, and infrastructure in a variety of genres" (Hout 1). Lebanese narrative works have played a considerable role as a responsive discourse to the nefarious consequences of the Civil War. There have certainly been many writings discussing this image of Lebanon during and after the war. The works under study in this thesis are cases in point wherein writing about the war has motivated numerous writers to record a poignant part of Lebanese history.

4. Diaspora, Trauma and History (Re)writing

The diasporic vantage serves to facilitate writing about "what was," that is, past incidents and history. Diasporic narratives present portrayals of history, hence the experience of the Civil War, through memory. *The Last Migration* narrates experiences of characters' yearning for a sense of belonging and their bids to construct the nation. Accordingly, nation/place is what shapes both memory and history. Basing his argument on Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de Mémoire* wherein he argues that "memory is life," and "history is the construction of what is no longer", Richard Roberts keenly maintains that "history and memory are intimately linked to places. People move and they stay put. In each case, people produce history about the places they inhabit or that they used to inhabit" (520). What is expressed here is the interrelationship between history, memory, and experience. In this vein, memory in El Hadge's text provides images, tropes, and metaphors of home for the writer and readers alike. The process of remembering remains a useful strategy in bringing out the past history and experiences with a view to construct "imaginary homeland".

The history that is created and reported is rife with tormenting images and ravages brought about by the war. On his way to visit the grave of Claire - Ashraf's friend who passed away in a mud slide during a research trip to Mexico - in Amsterdam, Ashraf writes: "Françoise [Claire's daughter] had told me the name of the graveyard. I'd written it down in my notebook with further ado. Perhaps, unconsciously, I thought it would be like the cemetery in Cana, where our families are buried together in collective graves and the whole village is no more than a dozen families" (28). Narrowed to a personal level, this passage exhibits how much Ashraf is haunted by the remembrance of death. Hazardous memories are imprinted in his unconscious mind, and they are brought out occasionally by the traumatic experiences that he has gone through. Trauma manifests itself well in the image of cemetery, a symbolic site, used by Ashraf in foreshadowing the agonizing memories of death. In fact, the death of Claire has brought about loss and turmoil to Ashraf's life, but his trauma does tacitly incarnate the collective trauma of Lebanon. His tragedy can be read as illustrative of the tragedy of Lebanon during the Civil War when everything fell apart leading to the disintegration of the nation. The latter is projected through narrative strategies showing the characters' attachment to a collective past.

The fluctuation between the narrating subjects "I" and "we" is very telling in the sense that it unpacks the narrator's formation of collective identities and collective "imaginary homelands" based on recollected memories through an emphasis on the presence of the past "there" in the present "here". Watching the news about the turmoil caused by the war, Ashraf reports part of it this way:

> The wailing mothers, the devastated fathers holding up parts of their children to the cameras. The mayhem of rescuers, paramedics, Blue Berets, shouting for more blankets to cover the dead. We heard a recording from an army wireless. Through the static came the last cry for help. "They have hit Fiji Batt. headquarters… The rounds are coming now… We have been fired upon. We're being fired upon… We have casualties… One of our main buildings in Fiji Batt. has been demolished… People are dying here… We hear the voice of death, do you understand? (179)

The tragedy of Lebanon finds its eloquent elaboration in the passage above. Ashraf's communal sensibility leads him to shift from "I" to "we" in narrating the effects engendered by the war. Lebanon, as a place of memory, is brought to the fore by the diasporic consciousness as a way to keep ties with the home country. The evocation of the memories of the horrific past tracks the extent to which the war experiences are insistent in returning, and thus are persistent in the lives of individuals and groups who have undergone excruciating incidents, such as the outrageous massacres the above passage testifies. The death of civilians in the war does not finish there but it continues as a haunting wound for the characters in the narrative. Indeed, it is through narration that this trauma comes to the fore belatedly. In her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth maintains that the "event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (4-5). Remembering provides the traumatic past with meanings through representation, which in turn creates imaginative spaces of mind far from the home-country. The wound of the war has yielded complex perceptions about home. Home is understood as a fleeting notion with different reformulations which derive from displacement in time through flashbacks and focus on the shadows of the past, and also by the tormenting sense of place shaped by the war. Interestingly enough, the diasporic characters' identity is shaped by the relationship between the past and the present and also between the hostland and their country of origin. Their floating mobility conflates with the postmodern understandings of identity as provisional and informed by disruptions in time and place. Herein reside the notions of identity and home as being built on difference and heterogeneity.

Lebanon as a site and source of trauma is what brings about displacement which is at the center of diaspora writings. Forced or chosen, displacement forges new identities that are continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Ashraf's attachment to his mother, a nurse in their ancestral village of Cana in Southern Lebanon, unremittingly haunts him like Cana itself. During a visit to his village, Ashraf sought to convince his mother to leave; she refused because she is the only medically-trained person in the village. She was preoccupied with treating the victims of the war. However, when the shelling had increased, Ashraf received a fax from his mother informing him that she was packing to leave.

Ashraf closes the narrative with this very telling passage; "[B]eside her [Anna] my mother wakes up with a jolt. 'Don't let me drop off again, son. This is my first and my last migration. I don't want to miss a moment of it.' The flight reaches the standstill speed and the shell of time is broken and past and future and present dissolve and in the end is our beginning" (184). Striking is the existential queries that are presented. First, the words trauma, wound and "jolt" are tacitly found in this excerpt denoting the characters' concern about "what is no longer," the past. This way, they inform readers about the history of their nation. This idea is excavated in Agnew's argument that such words "are frequently used in narratives of the past, when people who have confronted the traumas of history attempt to tell us about their genealogy, national history, and themselves" (111). That said, the characters' narrative is grounded in history which is in turn based on the lived experiences with much

potency to transmit them to other people. Second, the passage implicitly highlights the interactions between the three generations in El Hage's text: the mother, her son, and his daughters. All of them are, in a way or another, fashioned by the war, though the daughters didn't experience it. Their mobile identities are the by-product of the civil strife in their home country. Finally, migration, loaded with much awe, seems to be the only escape from the shelling brought out by the war. It has made characters rootless and pushed them - as the case of the mother testifies - to cross borders to join the diasporic communities abroad.

Border crossing remains an incentive for characters to form portable imaginary homelands as a way to heal their sense of loss and displacement. Further to this, the process of fashioning spaces of mind disrupts the linear conceptions of time which is "broken" as it is inscribed within a postmodern context. The word "our beginning" in the passage above is revelatory of the fact that identity is in a constant process of becoming; it is open to change, transformation, and renewal.

Memory is not only about "what was," the past, but it represents a way of writing history and producing historical knowledge about the past. Narrating operates through memory to shape the course of history. Here, diaspora writings can be said to engage in history writing. It is diasporic texts that give birth to history and endow the past with meaning by dint of the acts of memory. *The Last Migration* sets out to contribute to the production of history through narrative discourses saturated with memories of the past. In so doing, it highlights the identity of a nation at a certain period which is the Civil War. This being the case, Ashraf's memory is certainly evocative of the collective memory of the Lebanese people. His memory is always nurtured with other people's memories. In Ricoeur's words, "[P]eople do not remember alone, but with help from the memories of others; they take narratives given them by others for their own memories; and we compose our own memories with support from commemorations and other public celebrations of significant events" (15). Ricoeur favors the concept of "collective consciousness" to denote these interrelationships between individual and collective memories.

Ashraf's narrative can be understood as working towards what Benedict Anderson qualifies as "long-distance nationalism" (Anderson, 1998). This kind of nationalism is endemic to the diasporic condition, for migrants aim at revealing concern with and attachment to their country of origin. Transnational nationalism is informed by attempts at reconstructing the nation-state and arriving at the national reconciliation which values and does justice to everyone in the Lebanese community. Long-distance nationalism, it must be noted, is brought out by the globalizing processes which encourage migration and border crossing. It is striking thus how nationalism in the conventional sense has lost ground for modern nationalism which acknowledges the fall of frontiers because of transnational movements common to the postmodern world.

In his book *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities*, Zlatko Skrbis cautions against seeing globalization, transnationalism, and nationalism as contradictory. For him, they are rather complementary. In this vein, he proposes that "Long-distance nationalism is still a nationalism but one that is profoundly adapted to the conditions of a modern global system […] it is that type of nationalism which crosses neighboring states and/or continents" (6). To put it bluntly, this form of nationalism is prevalent in diasporic communities across borders; it is not therefore disrupted by transnationalism or globalization. In remembering, narrativising, and writing about the past homeland, Ashraf's long-distance nationalism does not, however, postulate that he aspires to single belongings, but it endorses the multiplicity of attachments whereby the sense of place is in continuous negotiation and making.

As mentioned, memory and history writing are jointly intertwined. This can be reflected in artistic works such as *The Last Migration*. The power of memory resides in the fact that it acts against the official ends to contain part the Lebanese history through the policy of "Don't mention the war" (Barak, 2007). In fact, in post-war Lebanon, there have been attempts in official public discourses to endorse the strategy of "collective amnesia" (Hout 2). Thus, the "official talk" is liable to make no mention of the atrocities of the past and the devastating war. The aim is to "unwrite" history, to wipe out memories, and hence to deny the young generation the possibility to dig deep into their shared past. Much criticism has been leveled at these official acts and discourses to suppress memory, and efforts have been made by the "civil society" who has been concerned with the debate on the war to make memories alive through presenting a full picture about the problematic of the past war and its nefarious consequences. In his article, "'Don't Mention the War?' The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon," Oren Barak dwells on the groups and subgroups which constitute the civil society that sets out to endorse "the right to remember". These groups encompass "Writers, photographs, playwrights, and filmmakers who addressed the conflict in their artistic work" (55). Inscribed in this realm, *The Last Migration* engages in preserving memory through narrative discourse. Characters aim at resisting the official bids to suppress the history of Lebanon, and in so doing, they do justice to the victims and their families whose stories are negated. The state's forced amnesia through what Ricoeur again labels as "the manipulated memory" is dissected in writings such as that of diaspora. These writings dismantle the different abuses of memory by giving voice to the representatives of the absent as the case of Ashraf testifies.

Concluding Remarks

In constructing home, identity, and history, individual and collective memories are jointly linked. Ashraf's memories are evocative of memories of a whole generation who has experienced the brutality of the Civil War. This reveals interactions and interrelationships between personal and collective identities. The power of memory manifests itself in the reconstruction of identity through narratives that seek to act against the official public discourses; it percolates into the past to come to terms with a better future. Any attempt at reconciliation should start with doing justice to the families of the victims through the "right to memory". In this light, these literary narratives keep the question of Lebanese history open to controversy, for they deny single stories about the past. The recourse to personal traumas in El Hadge's text shape collective memories that are meant to share with the present generations some historical knowledge about "sad moments" of the Lebanese people during the devastating Civil War. In the main, post-war Lebanese diaspora literature, which is mainly shaped by the war, acts as counter-hegemonic discourses by narrating the past and representing it in the present for the present communities of Lebanon. The power to manipulate memories through ideologies is resisted and rendered weak by the civil society whose aim has been to fill the gap created in state discourses in politics, public spaces, as well as in educational textbooks. According to the Lebanese writers, the construction of homeland is binding. In this sense, these writers are active players in the Lebanese narrative identity system.

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