

Harbors, Flows, and Migrations

Harbors, Flows, and Migrations:

The USA in/and the World

Edited by

Vincenzo Bavaro, Gianna Fusco,
Serena Fusco and Donatella Izzo

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>Vincenzo Bavaro, Gianna Fusco, Serena Fusco, Donatella Izzo</i>	
Part I: Arrivals and Departures: Local and Global	
CHAPTER ONE	13
Arrivals and Departures	
<i>Werner Sollors</i>	
CHAPTER TWO	33
“The Inalienable Right of Man to Change His Home and Allegiance”:	
Historical Perspectives on the Freedom to Move	
<i>Donna R. Gabaccia</i>	
CHAPTER THREE	51
Harboring Empire: London, Canton, Boston	
<i>Lisa Lowe</i>	
Part II: The Nineteenth Century: Re-readings and Re-writings from Offshore	
CHAPTER FOUR	75
The Old Melville and the Sea: Ideas of the Harbor in Melville’s Literary Career	
<i>Paolo Simonetti</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE.....	95
Walt Whitman’s “Sea Drift” Cluster: The Encounter of Sufi and American Selves at Paumanok	
<i>Elena Furlanetto</i>	

CHAPTER SIX.....	111
“The voices came from the sea”: Ghostly Encounters and the <i>Mary Celeste Nicolangelo Bece</i>	

Part III: Across the Atlantic—and back

CHAPTER SEVEN	129
A “battered and accommodating beauty”: New York Bay Revisited by Henry James in <i>The American Scene</i> <i>Marie-Odile Salati</i>	

CHAPTER EIGHT	145
Neither Old nor New but Other: Willa Cather’s Syncretic Experience of History and Love <i>Cristina Alsina Rísquez</i>	

CHAPTER NINE	163
Dangerous Trips: War Tourism in Willa Cather’s <i>One of Ours</i> and Ernest Hemingway’s <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> <i>Anna De Biasio</i>	

CHAPTER TEN	181
Is Home Where the Anchor Drops? Representations of the Harbor in Joshua Slocum’s <i>Sailing Alone Around the World</i> <i>Emanuela Zirzotti</i>	

Part IV: Transatlantic Views: The Euro-American Circulation of Ideas

CHAPTER ELEVEN	199
The Transatlantic Making of the American Middle Class: The Origins of an Essential Category of the American Century <i>Matteo Battistini</i>	

CHAPTER TWELVE.....	217
“Roundtrip to Anglo-Saxon Democracy”: Beatrice Potter Webb’s Appraisal of Industry and Society <i>Roberta Ferrari</i>	

CHAPTER THIRTEEN	237
The Mirror of Alienation: T. S. Eliot and the Other Modernity	
<i>Mena Mitrano</i>	

Part V: Topographies of Slavery and Colonialism

CHAPTER FOURTEEN	255
Derek Walcott: A Shipwrecked Mind	
<i>Marina De Chiara</i>	

CHAPTER FIFTEEN	275
Excavating the Voice: The “Sea’s Strange Fruit” Touches Liamuiga’s Shores—Safe Native Harbor Turns into Colonized Hell	
<i>Camilla Fascina</i>	

CHAPTER SIXTEEN	295
Harbors and Port Towns in Paule Marshall’s Memoir <i>Triangular Road</i>	
<i>Ada Savin</i>	

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	309
Topophilia and Topophobia in Solomon Northup’s <i>Twelve Years a Slave</i>	
<i>Meltem Kiran-Raw</i>	

Part VI: Tropes of Migration and Harboring

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	325
Adrift: The Language of Migration and Harboring	
<i>Barbara Kreiger</i>	

CHAPTER NINETEEN	331
Mythologies of Migration in Henry Roth’s <i>Call It Sleep</i>	
<i>Valerio Massimo De Angelis</i>	

CHAPTER TWENTY	347
The Malady of Remembrance: Contagious Memories in Georges Perec’s <i>Récits d’Ellis Island</i> Translated by Harry Mathews as <i>Tales of Vagrancy and Hope</i>	
<i>Mariacarmela Mancarella</i>	

Part VII: Trans-Pacific Encounters

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE	361
Founding Chinese America in Louis Chu's <i>Eat a Bowl of Tea</i> <i>Francesca de Lucia</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	377
Contending Forces: Chinese American Identity and Chinatown as an Ambivalent Harbor in Ng's <i>Bone</i> <i>Pirjo Ahokas</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE	397
When the Transpacific Encounter Becomes a Contagious Fluke: Ruth Ozeki's <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i> <i>Fulvia Sarnelli</i>	

Part VIII: Inflections of the Italian American Experience

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR	415
Stories of Linguistic Displacement and Cultural Longing: The Narrative of a Second-Generation Italian-American <i>Albert Latorella Lehner</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE	431
Italian Language and Italian Dialects: Tendencies and Perspectives among the Young Italian Americans in the Greater New York City Area <i>Rosemary Serra</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX	453
The Fallacies of Political Hybridity: Transcultural Identities and the Italian-American Vote in Italy's Election and Referenda <i>Stefano Luconi</i>	

Part IX: Italian Americans between Fact and Fiction

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	473
Pete Panto's Story between Facts and Fiction: Jim Longhi and His <i>Two Fingers of Pride</i> <i>Elisabetta Marino</i>	

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT	487
In the Name of the Father and the Son: Italian Migrations in the Art of Joseph and William Papaleo <i>Fred Gardaphé</i>	
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE.....	511
About Family Reunions: When <i>The Sopranos</i> Met Their Cousins from Naples <i>Francesco Chianese</i>	
Part X: Representing Muslim America after 9/11	
CHAPTER THIRTY	531
Pulling the Rug of Religion and Race from under Uncle Sam’s Feet: The Subversive Fiction of Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby, <i>The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf</i> and <i>Once in a Promised Land</i> <i>Fatma Saleh Assef</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE.....	551
Veiling and Unveiling: Vulnerability and Self-Protection in Mohja Kahf’s Work <i>Mirella Vallone</i>	
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO.....	565
The Proximal-Ancillary Coverage Continuum and the Discourse of the American “War on Terror” <i>Robert Moscaliuc</i>	
CONTRIBUTORS	587

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

VEILING AND UNVEILING: VULNERABILITY AND SELF-PROTECTION IN MOHJA KAHF'S WORK

MIRELLA VALLONE

*Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?
And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?*
Judith Butler

over there is over here
Suheir Hammad

In the well-known essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” published in the December 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Don DeLillo responds to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, trying to make sense of them and assess the consequences, although he is aware that it is probably too soon. He evokes the shock, the horror, the primal terror, and the need for even marginal stories to be set against “the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (35). Among the images that most traumatically remained imprinted in people's minds are those of men and women falling from the Twin Towers, and the improvised memorials or “secular shrines” (Bernstein 27) at the subway stations, that is, the many photographs of people missing, accompanied by a list of identifying features, and surrounded by votive lights and candles. As Charles Bernstein has perceptively argued, they say “missing—not in the sense of ‘looking for,’ but rather, *feeling the loss*” (27). Indeed, they speak of grief, loss, and vulnerability. One of the most effective results of the terrorist attacks was, in fact, the exposure of the vulnerability of the nation-state and the permeability of its borders.

On September 20, while American people still had reason for fear and mourning, President Bush declared war on terror and announced that it

was time for grief to be superseded by action. Many security measures were put into place, including the U.S.A. Patriot Act, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, which increased discrimination against Muslim and Arab Americans, thus reflecting, as Nouri Gana has pointed out, “the protean forms and shift in focus and locus of racism from ethnic and color lines to religious and cultural affiliations or differentials” (1573). In that political climate, Lisa Suhair Majaj’s appeal to Arab American writers, at the end of the century, for more texts that could translate political realities into human terms, creating a space for empathy on the part of readers—thus counteracting ignorance and misinformation about the Arab world—became almost a necessity. The years following 2001 registered, in fact, an increase in publication by Arab American novelists and poets, and on Arab American history and literature.

In 2003, the University Press of Florida published Mohja Kahf’s *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Kahf’s poetry collection includes fifty-two poems, many of which written in the 1990s and previously published in journals and book collections. The Syrian American poet addresses topics such as diaspora, migration, discrimination, religion, and cultural translation, moving between two geographical and cultural poles: the U.S.A. and the Middle East. All these issues invite a reflection on body vulnerability—that is, on its porosity and relationality, its exposure to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally. So, even before the 9/11 attacks made vulnerability—the limits of its representation, ways to counteract it, its unequal geopolitical distribution—an issue of public debate, Kahf’s poetic voices had offered a deep, multifaceted, and transnational exploration of it.

Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1967 and immigrated to the U.S. with her parents at the age of four. Like other second- and third-generation Arab American writers who were born or raised in the U.S. from the mid-twentieth century onward, Kahf expresses a transnational vision in her work, one that defies the separation between “over there” and “over here.” Starting from that period, in fact, Arab American identity has been increasingly shaped by political crises, wars, and upheavals in the Middle East, as well as by U.S. direct political and military involvement in the Arab world. While national and international crises rendered Arab Americans all the more vulnerable to prejudice and racism, they also urged Arab American writers to “move from the insular immigrant mold into a more public U.S. domain” (Fadda-Conrey 31); unlike the older generation, they produced antinostalgic literary mappings of original homelands and inserted “the complex political, religious, and national landscapes of Arab

homelands into discursive constructions of U.S. space" (Fadda-Conrey 29). The result was, as in Kahf's work, a revision of dominant understandings of U.S. identity together with a broadening of conceptualizations of U.S. belonging, through a constant struggle against the racialization of the Arab body and its exclusion from the national imaginary.

Voyager Dust: Diaspora and Vulnerability

The first form of vulnerability Kahf addresses in *E-mails from Scheherazad* is the diasporic subject's. In the poem that opens the collection, "Voyager Dust," memory, diaspora, and intergenerational transmission are conveyed through the metaphor of dust: "When they arrive in the new country/ voyagers carry it on their shoulders/ the dusting of the sky they left behind" (1). That dust is for voyagers a connection to their native land as well as a promise of return: "We will meet again" (1). The scent on the clothes of a young girl from China, met on a bus, reminds the poetic self of the voyager's dust laid on her mother's scarves. She imagines her as a new student, like the woman on the bus, getting home, shaking out the clothes from her suitcase, hanging up, one by one, the garments from the old country. She reminds how on washing days she and her brother liked to help her stretch the wet georgette and shake it out, and to dash under the canopy, receiving its soft spray on their faces. But, in the space of a metaphor, the latter suddenly turns into the ash of debris after the destruction of a city, "its citizens driven out across the earth" (1). An image of war—the debris it leaves and the consequences it has—breaks out, like an explosion, inside the Western setting of the poem along with the children's belated realization of the dramatic past that was on their mother's shoulders and the recognition of its transmission to them: "We never knew/ it was voyager dust. It said:/ We will meet again in Damascus,/ in Aleppo. We will meet again./ It was Syria in her scarves./ We never knew it/ now it is on our shoulders too" (1).

The many social and emotional meanings and consequences of the heritage of diaspora are examined by Kahf in the following poems. *E-mails from Scheherazad* is, in fact, an immersion into the lives of Arab Americans, their inner conflicts, opposing allegiances, and constant negotiations with American society and culture.

As James Clifford has argued in his seminal essay "Diasporas," "Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres . . . Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place"

(308, 311). Kahf's poetic voices move in search of both roots and routes, using memory and imagination to fill in gaps, to create connections able to resist distance, forgetfulness, and assimilation, and to counteract vulnerability. Kahf mostly focuses on the second generation, the one born or raised, like herself, in the United States, whose sense of dislocation is even stronger than their parents'. While the latter still feel deeply rooted in their place of origin, the children feel caught between opposing allegiances and compelled to a constant movement between two different worlds. There is a poem in the collection that describes this situation from the point of view of a brother and a sister, aged nine and ten. It is entitled "The Passing There." The poem is set in the Indiana landscape and the passage mentioned in the title is through a soybean field the two children, Yaman and Mohja, cross on their way home. It is golden and it is not theirs. They are attracted by raspberry bushes and stop to pick them, on their little knees, knuckles bleeding, getting scratches, "forgetting everything but gold and green" (18). But they are caught by the owner of the field who, with a rifle in his hand, shouts racial insults at them. They start running home but feel trapped between a golden field which is not theirs and a house of "alien expectations" (18), where their parents thought they had succeeded in growing little hothouse Syrians. The only way out from this feeling of dispossession and vulnerability is to imagine a parallel life in Syria where a plum tree has their name on it, where the vineyard watchman chases away children whose names he knows, "yelling at them/ in the language of their parents/ and their parents' parents,/ their parallel-universe Syrian selves among them,/ hearing their names called among the others" (19)—a place where they, silhouettes cut out of a photograph, think that one day they will return, perfectly fitting back in. Singing Syrian anthems in family and the pledge of allegiance at school, Yaman and Mohja try not to feel like traitors and they live, even as adults, with the impossibility of choosing a world over the other: "How we have been running/ to leap the gulch between two worlds, each/ with its claim. Impossible for us/ to choose one over the other,/ and the passing there/ makes all the difference" (20). The constant negotiation between cultures and parts of the self makes them vulnerable—a vulnerability enforced by processes of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion from the U.S. national imaginary.

What diasporic subjects and people from minorities know is the fact that we are not only constituted by our relations but dispossessed by them as well. The gaze of the other can open a wound and destabilize identity. Dislocation results from the narrow ways in which the body is read, that is, from the rigid frameworks imposed on the body in the public sphere.

The children in the poem feel doubly dispossessed, and imagination seems their only way out or strategy of self-defense, that is, to imagine a home in Syria waiting for them, where the ache of belonging finally vanishes, where there is no sense of otherness, where even to be chased away from a field is not so fearful because the vineyard watchman knows their names and yells at them in the language of their parents, and they can run towards a place that really feels like home.

To find roots in the imagination is a common strategy diasporic people use in order to heal the discontinuities of place, culture, and language. As Lisa Suhair Majaj has pointed out—recounting her childhood spent in the United States, Lebanon, and Jordan—home was something slippery and unattainable: “If a sense of rootedness was what gave life meaning, as my parents’ individual efforts to ward off alienation implied, this meaning seemed able to assume full import only in the imagination” (“Boundaries” 71).

The disruptive effects of diaspora can crystallize in a “wound you carry/ without knowing its name” (Kahf, 96). But when you think that to find the salve for it you must return to the house where you were born, in the old country, you realize, as the poetic self of “The Fork in the Road,” that the time spent in the new country has created equally strong ties with it.

Although the poetic voices of *E-mails from Scheherazad* return to their native place only in the imagination, the journey is necessary in order to heal the ruptures of diaspora, finding out “what is the riddle of father and mother?” (15), like in “The Dream of Return,” or to counteract the fear of forgetting and being forgotten, like in “The Cherries.” In the latter poem, Kahf is sure that Syria still remembers its children “who live in late capitalism,/ an information age away” (11), and imagines that if she went back she would be embraced and protected. In long verses and lists she celebrates Syria the way Walt Whitman celebrated America, highlighting the richness and diversity of its social, ethnic, religious, and cultural features and evoking its colors, smells, and tastes.

Thanks to the creative power of poetry she makes “hatreds based on class and sect” disappear “along with political prisons and electric torture-prods” (13). But in the end, reality prevails over imagination and self-confidence, revealing a country that forces its children to go away and to live with the effects of that removal—namely, loss, uncertainties, questions: “And where did I go/ And what did I become?/ And in my new home did I eat cherries? . . . What happens to a child who can no longer speak/ the language of its mother?” (14); and, in the poem “Jasmine Snowfall”: “What is like to have neighbors/ who know you before you are

born?/ What is like to have a grandmother/ who waters the flowers like tribes,/ a grandfather who grows by the side of your house/ like a tree?" (93-94).

The trajectory of "being as becoming" (Hall 225) of the second generation can be hindered by the anti-assimilationist stance of the first generation members, who do not understand that "the longest exile is exile of the heart/ the only passage for return is love" (88). In fact, as Radhakrishnan has pointed out, the problem of divided allegiances created by the tensions between the old and the new home is experienced differently by the two generations and requires a renegotiation inside the family and the community. The poetic self of the poem "Redwoods," speaking on behalf of his generation, complains about the wounds the old generation adorns them with: "No one in this country understands grief/ This blood you smear on our necks every morning/ only brings the wolves to our throats" (88). He invites the fathers and mothers to overcome nostalgia for the "old palm trees," to relinquish their boundaries, and make themselves porous to "the revelation of the redwoods,/ magnificent, underneath which rivers flow" (88).

Modern Scheherazades: Vulnerability and Resistance

The transnational and transcultural vision of Kahf's poetry collection is announced by the title in which the ancient art of storytelling, evoked through the character of Scheherazade, is turned into the most used form of network communications, the electronic message, able to connect people in real time across enormous geographical distances. On the other hand, *The Thousand and One Nights*, since Antoine Galland discovered and translated it into French in the early eighteenth century, has traveled across time, place, genre, and medium. The frame story is one of the most popular ever told. Betrayed by his unfaithful wife, the king Shahryar decides to take a new bride every day and, to prevent her betrayal, executes her the next morning, until the vizier's daughter, Scheherazade, asks her father to be married to the king. Thanks to her mastery in controlling narration and desire, she manages to save the virgins and herself from the king's murderous neurosis. As Peter Brooks has pointed out, "Scheherazade knows perfectly well that narrating is never innocent, that telling a story can change a life" (78).

The recasting of the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights* by contemporary Arab American writers and performers, as Sami Sabry has argued, does not only commemorate, but also questions the politics involved in translating collective cultural production. While in the Arab

world Scheherazade represents a woman provided with culture, intelligence, psychological insight, courage, and able to resist unjust laws, her journey to the Western world has turned her into an odalisque, a passive object of desire, or a tranquillizing storyteller of bedtime stories which "will please and soothe," and inventor of fairy creatures "who will grant you wishes" (Kahf 44). The literary works of contemporary Arab American women have become "an arena of resistance" to such Orientalist discursive practices (Sami Sabry 3).

One of Kahf's primary concerns in *E-mails from Scheherazad* is, in fact, to question the way in which Arab American women are "translated" into mainstream American culture, and to counter their representations as oppressed, silent, or exotic sexual objects of desire. Muslim American women who choose to wear the veil are, of course, more exposed to misreadings and discrimination, because their bodies cannot escape being marked as other. Kahf addresses the issue of the veil in her work moving along two lines: the role that the veil played in the Western construction of the Orient, in the poems "*Thawrah* des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective" and "If the Odalisques," and the contemporary "reception" of the veil in American society, in a number of "*Hijab* Scenes." She is aware, however, that the two lines converge into one, being the political and cultural representations with which contemporary Arab American women contend affected by an older Orientalism.

Kahf questions the colonial logic that identifies veiling with oppression and unveiling with freedom, and through her portrayals of Muslim American women she attempts to restore the richness, variety, and depth of their lives, pointing out the different possible meanings and uses of the *hijab*. In the essay written for the volume *The Veil* (2008), "From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed," she focuses her analysis on the experience of forced unveiling; in fact, although the story of a forcibly unveiled woman almost never makes the cover of *Time*, "being stripped of their veil is a trauma masses of women in the twentieth-century Middle East know" (31). At the end, while she hopes for an overcoming of the current obsession about the veil, she calls for a re-framing of the relation between veil and power, arguing that it is possible that the power is not given or taken away from Muslim women by the absence or presence of the veil, but by the presence or absence of economic, political, and family rights.

Most of the poems in *E-mails from Scheherazad* were written in the 1990s, before the subject of women in Islam as well as the burka of Afghanistan became pervasive images in the media, disseminating "the administration's rhetoric of the war on terror as being also a war to liberate

Muslim women” (Ahmed 223). The veiled women in Kahf’s poems find themselves in a situation of deep emotional distress and vulnerability, feeling frustrated for being marginalized and treated with ignorance, or even completely ignored. In fact, as Samaa Abdurraqib has argued, in a diasporic context the veil can be perceived as “an erected boundary that solidifies distance and difference,” becoming “metonymic for the larger difference between us and them” (59). In “Descent into JFK” Kahf presents Khaleda, who is about to land in the United States, as feeling exposed and vulnerable: “‘Local temperature 17 degrees./’ People reach for coats and caps./ She reaches for protection from the weather/ and other kinds of cold, rummages up/ lipstick to change the color of her words,/ earrings to dangle like her fears,/ things that cover and reveal” (37-38). She is aware of the diminished perception of her identity in the U.S.A. (“They’d never know Khaleda/ has a Ph.D./ because she wears a veil they’ll/ never see beyond”) as well as of the need to adjust herself for the descent into another world: “‘Arrival time 10.42 P.M./’ People synchronize their watches./ She tunes the dials within/ for descent into another world./ Other eyes will look at her with other/ expectations” (38). As Khaleda is portrayed in a moment of suspension between two worlds, while she is preparing to face the rigid frameworks that will be imposed on her body in the U.S. public space, the Muslim-American woman protagonist of “*Hijab Scene #7*” must resist a series of assumptions, related to her wearing the veil, when responding to her interlocutor: “No, I’m not bald under the scarf/ No, I’m not from that country/ where women can’t drive cars/ No, I would not like to defect/ I’m already American/ But thank you for offering” (39). At the end of the poem, she loses her control and admits that she, indeed, carries explosives: “They’re called words/ And if you don’t get up/ Off your assumptions,/ They’re going to blow you away” (39). Words seem the only means this woman, like a contemporary Scheherazade, has to assert her identity, resist negative stereotypes, and transform the passivity imposed on her into action.

An even stronger denial of cultural diversity characterizes “*Hijab Scene #3*,” in which a physical marker of identity like the headscarf paradoxically makes the woman who wears it invisible. The scene takes place at a school where a Muslim American mother tries to join the Parent-Teacher Association, but the school administrator, who can’t see in her “a regular American mother,” completely ignores her: “‘Would you like to join the PTA?’ She asked,/ tapping her clipboard with her pen./ ‘I would,’ I said, but it was no good,/ she wasn’t seeing me./ ‘Would you like to join the PTA?’ She repeated./ ‘I would,’ I said,/ but I could’ve been antimatter” (25). No signal seems to work for receiving attention: “I sent

up flares,/ beat on drums, waved navy flags,/ tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,/ Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax,/ Lt. Uhura tried hailing her/ for me in another frequency” (25). In the end the veiled woman, using the metaphoric frame of the TV series *Star Trek*, understands that “the positronic force field of hijab/ jammed all [the] cosmic coordinates” (25) of her interlocutor, but at the same time she is aware that they are on the same ship and committed to the same enterprise. Ultimately, it is the Muslim American mother who is able to turn her extreme vulnerability into the recognition and acceptance of the other woman's limits and fears: “Can we save the ship we're both on,/ can we save/ the dilithium crystals?” (25).

Kahf's poems, on the one hand, speak of the defense of American identity boundaries, personal as well as national, of the inability to come to terms with cultural diversity and social inclusion, of the supposed self-sufficiency of the mainstream personal and social body, of the fear to be contaminated—as it is the case with the Midwestern matrons of the poem “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears,” who fear “a contamination of American Standards/ by something foreign and unhygienic/ requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray” (26). The scenes Kahf presents in her poems reveal not only how myopic that defense is—those boundaries being already traversed by the Arab American poetic voices—but also, in a kind of role reversal, how that defense is actually an expression of the fear of being exposed to the other—and as such, ultimately, an expression of vulnerability.

The emotional and physical permeability to the other that characterizes, on the other hand, the Arab American women of Kahf's collection is associated with their ability to develop a transcultural vision, to see “at multiple angles”—like the granddaughter of the above-cited poem, who, thanks to such a vision, can prevent a “clash of civilizations” (26) between her grandmother and some American women. For Kahf, feeling vulnerable is also the premise for sharing others' vulnerabilities, as the poems on the consequences of wars and terrorism further demonstrate.

War, Terrorism, Vulnerability

The poem that opens *E-mails from Scheherazad*, “Voyager Dust,” presents the reader, as we have seen, with an image of war: “the ash/ of debris after the destruction of a city,/ its citizens driven out across the earth” (1). Besides being a symbol of diaspora, dust also represents the physical vulnerability of people exposed to wars and terrorism, and it is an image that, in different guises, traverses all the poems dealing with violence and

conflicts. The unexpected appearance of war in the safe Western setting of the poem suggests the impact that the First Persian Gulf War had on Arab Americans who watched it on TV screens, before taking “the last subway to the Lower East Side” (Kahf 94). As Leila Ahmed has pointed out, the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 was among the events that had the greatest impact on the history of Islam in America. The overall sentiment among Muslim and Arab Americans was of deep opposition to the war and to the subsequent sanctions imposed on Iraq. The war was a turning point for many Arab American writers and activists, as testified by their work. Nadine Naber, in her contribution to *This Bridge We Call Home*, recalls how, at that time, memories of her childhood and the discomfort she felt in living between cultures, coupled with scenes of the Gulf War’s fire and bombs on her TV screen, “inspired [her] transformation” (“Resisting the Shore” 303). She joined Arab and Arab American women and activists and started working against all forms of oppression. Similarly, the diasporic Iraqi artist Dena Al-Adeeb remembers being transported to the war zone via satellite television, until, as the war escalated, the living room itself, where the family gathered, became “‘a war zone,’ a liminal space between the war in Iraq and its impact on our lives while we were forced to remain in the United States” (“Dissidents, Displacements” 215).

Emotional involvement, grief, mourning, helplessness, and guilt are some of the feelings we find in Kahf’s poems in relation to the Persian Gulf War and to acts of terrorism all over the world. Kahf’s reflections on violence, loss, grief, and the unequal distribution of vulnerability on the geopolitical scale seem to be moved by the same questions that a few years later, in the aftermath of 9/11, philosopher Judith Butler would bring up in the light of recent global violence: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what *makes for a grievable life?*” (*Precarious Life* 20).

Kahf’s primary concern is to restore the dignity and reassert the humanity of people whose lives have been annihilated by violence. Her emphatic gaze and transcultural vision allow her to develop a point of identification with victims of conflicts and wars across the world, like in the poem “Disbeliever,” which was inspired by the massacre of one hundred and twenty men, women, and children by terrorists in a movie theater and in a little mosque near Algiers in 1998:

By the limping of the people of Iraq/
By the sound of frantic running in
Qana, in Kosovo/
By the men and boys of Hama massacred/
By the swollen bodies in a river in Rwanda/
and Afghani women and the writers
of Algiers, / I am a disbeliever/
in everything that refuses to kiss/
full on the lips the ones still living/
and receive them in the bosom of the self, / no

matter the religion or the nation or the race/ I am a disbeliever in everything/ that does not say "How was the movie? I love you." (75)

The poetic self's resistance to such violence is expressed by her desire to rescue the victims from anonymity, oblivion, and indifference and put them inside a framework that allows for their recognition. In order to do that, she feels the need to be physically close to those bodies laying on the sidewalk, mourning and caring for them: "I need a body outside my life that can travel and kneel/ on the sidewalk beside a movie theater in Algiers/ over the bodies of the supple children" (75). Physical and emotional proximity can be reached moving "outside this history" (75); the different timing suggests the need for a change of perspective—one that, in the name of the purity and sacredness of every human body, can overcome difference: "I need time outside this history/ where I can whisper in the ear of each of them,/ By God, you will never be forgotten/ By God, I will make sure the world/ buries its face in your beautiful hair,/ sings to you, learns your name and your music,/ lifts you up in the crook of its arm like a gift/ I am a disbeliever/ in everything but the purity of the bodies/ of the men and women—with or without the veil,/ with or without the markings of the right identity—/ in everything but the suppleness of the children/ I am a disbeliever in every scripture/ in the world the leaves out/ 'How was the movie? I love you. I love you'" (75-76).

In *Frames of Wars*, a book that follows from *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler presents a cogent reflection on precariousness, vulnerability, and responsibility, focusing on the cultural modes for regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence. She argues that the unmournability of specific lives serves to dehumanize them and it is only by challenging the dominant media that certain kinds of lives may become visible or knowable in their precariousness. She underlines that only under conditions in which the loss matters the value of life appears. Thus, "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (14). Those lives that are not "regarded" as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death. Our obligation, she argues, is precisely to the conditions that make life possible, and "those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions" (23). Kahf's poems, even before the 9/11 attacks, suggest the need for a different cultural frame, one able to develop affective dispositions towards Third World populations through the recognition of a mutual vulnerability that may, in turn, open the possibility of an ethical encounter.

In the poems focusing on the consequences of the Persian Gulf War, Kahf presents the vulnerability of the Iraqi population as physical exposure to “U.S. bombing, depleted uranium, Saddam, and sanctions” (77); in “Parturition 1999” she focuses on one of the most terrible consequences of that exposure, that is, the birth of “babies with no faces, missing organs/ stumps for limbs/ no genitals” (77). The readers are compelled, like the speaker of the poem, to witness those pictures of “Hiroshima on the Tigris.” Unlike the previous poem, in this one there is no possibility of redemption of such “obscurities” because “[e]veryone in the world today/ belongs to the age of deformity./ God too” (77).

A sense of guilt prevails at the end of the poem “Snowfall on the Colossal Ruins,” in which “unexpected snow falls like a gift from heaven” (79), setting on the bodies of the Iraqi refugees massed in the Roman amphitheater in Amman. The poetic voice tries to restore the stories and lives of those people who once had families, professions, and dignity, but she is aware that they remain “exposed/ to whatever is to fall upon them next./ and not upon us, not tonight” (80).

Following the 9/11 attacks, loss, grief, mourning, and vulnerability became prevalent feelings in the U.S. population. While the U.S. administration responded to the breach of the national boundaries extending surveillance mechanisms and waging war against Afghanistan, under the illusion of restoring the loss and regaining mastery, control, and impenetrability, Judith Butler developed an ethics of grief, namely, she wondered whether grief could serve as an ethical and political resource: “Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? Is there something to be gained in the political domain by maintaining grief as part of the framework within which we think our international ties?” (*Precarious Life* 30). Unlike many people who think that grief is privatizing, and that it confines us to a solitary situation, Butler argues that it provides “a sense of political community of a complex order,” by foregrounding “the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22).

Mohja Kahf also responded to the 9/11 attacks in her work. Like everyone else, she was traumatically impressed by the images of the bodies falling from the Twin Towers, images that “epitomize the tragedy and the horror of the September 11 catastrophe in Western cultural memory” (Fitzpatrick 85). Even when working on this topic, Kahf’s poetic imagination cannot dispense with her transnational vision. In the poem “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers,” she turns the images of the bodies

in motion towards their death into an image of future, comparing the woman and the man who held hands and leapt together from the burning tower of the World Trade Center with the bride and groom of bombed Beirut who walked across death-filled debris to be married, even knowing that "beneath their feet/ everything that kills hope was being unleashed,/ they held fast to the handclasp" (83). The final verses of the poem express what that event has so harshly evoked, but they can also be considered a condensation of Kahf's poetics: "That our lives have always been as fragile,/ as dependent on each other, and as beautiful/ as the flight of the woman and the man,/ twin towers in my sight,/ who jumped into the last air hand in hand" (83).

Kahf's poetry, like Butler's argumentation, invites readers to re-think vulnerability as interdependence, and consider the self's innate porosity to the other as a source for an ethical connection.

In *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Adriana Cavarero reminds us that two poles of an essential alternative are inscribed in the condition of vulnerability: wounding and caring, and that "inasmuch as vulnerable, exposed to the other, the singular body is irremediably open to both responses" (20). Although vulnerability's ambivalent potentiality is often obscured, as Murphy points out, by a rhetoric that overwhelmingly associates vulnerability with the likelihood of violence, "vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but one that can enable us," being a condition of "openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (Gilson 310).

Kahf's poetry, while presenting situations of vulnerability as exposure to different forms of wounding and dislocation, is, at the same time, an act of caring. Like a modern Scheherazade, Kahf turns, through words, that vulnerability into something generative of new meanings and new visions, opening a space for cultural debate.

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