theories and methodologies

Eliminating Diasporic Identities

IMAN MERSAL

IN *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*, MILAN KUNDERA, A WRITER IN DIASPORA, PUTS SABINA, A PAINTER IN DIASPORA, IN THE POSITION OF THE artist facing the imposition of a ready-made identity. Kundera writes:

> Sabina had once had an exhibit that was organized by a political organization in Germany. When she picked up the catalogue, the first thing she saw was a picture of herself with a drawing of barbed wire superimposed on it. Inside she found a biography that read like the life of a saint or martyr: she had suffered, struggled against injustice, been forced to abandon her bleeding homeland, yet was carrying on the struggle. "Her paintings are a struggle for happiness" was the final sentence.
>
> She protested, but they did not understand her.
>
> Do you mean that modern art isn't persecuted under Communism?
>
> "My enemy is kitsch, not Communism!" she replied, infuriated.
>
> (254)

I take Sabina's dilemma and her frustrated voice as my point of entry in interrogating the possibilities and limitations of diasporic identities. I contend that while the term *diaspora* is usually associated with a search for identity, the diasporic artist or writer is burdened with the imposition of a great number of ready-made identities circulating through cultural and institutional discourses. This burden is imposed without the writer's participation or permission. Sabina's problem speaks to my own experience. What does it mean to be a writer who writes in Arabic, who grew up in an Arabic-speaking Islamic environment, who came to live in North America, but who sees herself not as an Arab American writer, not as a writer of color, not as a Muslim writer? Who are you, when you find yourself constantly participating in labeled activities, with no way of avoiding the labels, as when you are invited to read poetry in a "reading by women of color"? Or when you give an interview about writing that is published—to your surprise—in a magazine's special issue on "Islamisme" (Daniel)? Who are you, when you can no longer be received simply as a writer in Arabic?

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A good example of diaspora's being taken to imply a search for identity is the anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Kadi). The writers in this collection recount their discovery of their identities, of being who they are. Life-story narrative is the main genre here: identities are interrogated, and discoveries are based on such diasporic experiences as racism, the image of Arabs in the media, and reading biased historical accounts. No matter how difficult the journey of discovery, it is satisfying.

But I ask, Is diaspora only a search for identity? Is it not also a refusal of identity amid a surplus of identity? Is Sabina seeking identity or rejecting imposed identities? This imposition is worthy of attention. Who imposes? Who accepts or refuses, and why? Does the imposition have universal features, applying to all writers in all diasporas, or does it vary according to culture and historical moment? How does it vary?

For Sabina, the German political organization has defined her identity without her participation: the barbed wire symbolizes and stereotypes the artist who escaped communism and its persecution of the arts. The German organization is an institutional agency that deals not merely with the artwork but with the artist as well. Sabina must choose between accepting this marketing image of victim and positioning herself outside it.

In her examination of essentialism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak underscores the importance of positionality and the danger of essentializing identity. She sees that "[i]dentity is a very different word from essence" and suggests that one "'recognize' oneself as also an instantiation of historical and psychosexual narratives . . ." (4, 6). "When a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the center wants an identifiable margin, claims for marginality assure validation from the center" (55). The awareness of positionality for an artist in diaspora requires not only the view from the margin to the center or from the center to the margin but also an understanding of the artist's dynamic position as caught between the two.

The Imposition of Identity

Displaced people are reduced to being from elsewhere, whether elsewhere means nation, religion, color, geographic area, or era. For artists in diaspora, *elsewhere* often implies an oppression out there—dictatorship, patriarchal society, the veil, communist totalitarian authority—and the works of art are considered its evidence. The artists have escaped this oppression and therefore are defined by it. There is the sense that elsewhere is completely different from here, that the role of here, a tolerant environment, is to provide the refugees with shelter, space, and sympathy, provided that the artists accept this definition and that their art proves it.

I suggest that these features of elsewhere are generally associated with the postcolonial era: communism, decolonization, Third World–ness, dictatorship, Islamic fundamentalism, and related military conflicts. Elsewhere is reduced to its differences from the center (the space that contains the diaspora) and is considered peripheral even if it lies in the east of Europe or in the south of the United States. Its label (whether "Iraq" or "Cuba," "Yugoslavia" or "Islamic society") invokes oppression.

I am talking not only about the identity that comes from a text originating elsewhere but also about the identity that is imposed on artists, placing them in the opposition: being anti-Islam; being a victim of dictatorship; being a feminist, a liberal, a democratic activist. This placement may have nothing to do with their artwork and life journey, yet it is a way by which institutions recognize, categorize, and accept the artists and their art. I call this process kitsch. "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes

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according to style, but remains always the same" (Greenberg 12). This definition describes the artists in a margin constructed by the center, and it describes that construction. Diasporic misfits who avoid a kitschy position reside neither at the center nor at the margin as constructed by the center; they reside in a margin unrecognized by the center.

The imposition of identity always carries stereotypes of elsewhere, stereotypes that change from one historical moment to the next. The imagined elsewhere of the first generation of Arab writers in an American diaspora (during the early twentieth century) was not what it is now, particularly after 9/11. At that time, it was anchored by selective readings of the orientalist archive. The life story and career of Kahlil Jibran (1883–1931) are an example of an imposition of diasporic identity. *The Prophet* (1923), the most famous book produced by any Arab writer in the West, represents a pivotal moment in the making of that identity, though neither America nor any other specific place is mentioned.[1]

The first stage of Jibran's career ended with *The Madman* in 1918. Until then, Jibran wrote in Arabic, his mother tongue, since he was directing his writing to an Arab audience in the East. He shared with all those who had preceded him in experiencing life in the West, from Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi onward,[2] a desire for modernizing and revolutionizing stagnant societies in the East by borrowing Western civilization without challenging Eastern spiritual values.[3] He criticized the East as barren and corrupt, or as an ill person whose children don't try to cure him (Huwayk 24). Many scholars consider this discourse to form the core of what Arab intellectuals term the *Nahda* ("renaissance") or *Yaqaza* ("awakening") of Arab culture beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century.[4]

Jibran was a member of al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya ("Pen Bond Society"), an organization that was formed in New York in 1920 and continued to exist until 1930. The society represented the first generation of Arab American immigrant writers, who produced what became known as *adab al-mahjar* ("literature of emigration"; see Saydah 210). Most of the writers in this group were Christians from the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine). Although most wrote in Arabic only, Amin Rihani (1876–1940) and Jibran wrote in both Arabic and English.[5] Werner Sollors's description of ethnic writers applies perfectly to the writers of the *mahjar* ("emigration"), especially those who wrote in English. Sollors understands that ethnic writers confront a double audience, actual or imagined, composed of insiders and of readers who are not familiar with the writers' ethnic group (249). I would add that beyond confrontation is adaptation: writers orient their ethnicity and marginality to match audience expectations, which may differ from one center (a place or historical moment) to another.

Travel allowed Jibran to evaluate the difference between the Arab diaspora in Paris and Boston by Eastern spiritual criteria. "This is Paris, where the fingers of the gods are performing! Oh, how happy we were here! How far from the world of buying and selling!" (qtd. in Huwayk 202). After settling in New York, Jibran wrote a letter to al-Huwayk in 1911, in which he complains of the materialism and crudeness of that city. Describing New York as a place of exile, he envies al-Huwayk's Parisian paradise. At the same time he dreams of returning to Lebanon (212).

After returning to New York, Jibran began writing against the Ottomans. During the First World War, he helped raise funds for Lebanese facing wartime shortages. He also started to write in English, directing his work toward a Western audience, for whom he sought to bring a spiritual message from the Orient. After publication of *The Madman* in 1918, all his books appeared in English—among them *The Prophet* (1923), *Sand and Foam* (1926), *The Wanderer* (1932), and *The Garden of the Prophet* (1933).

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How is one to understand this transformation? Nash argues:

> Jibran has sublimated the agonizing search for identity of the modern Arab writer into a construction of a transcendental subject at once "idealistic, essentialist, anti-historical." [The quotation is from Eagleton 60.] . . . In his English writings Jibran succeeds in collapsing the differences that attend his function as an Arab writer in a western metropolis into a homogenizing universality that has captured a huge popular readership in the West while its reception in the East is ambivalent. (33)

Any understanding of Jibran's journey must take into consideration the way Jibran positioned himself in the diaspora in relation to the way the diaspora imposed identity on him. The imaginary orient that he presented is what was expected of him. Nash gives importance to the literary context in which the book was written, a period in which young America, shaped by Romantic, orientalist tastes, was open to Eastern spirituality. Thus in his "mystic phase," "Jibran modeled himself on a line of oriental savants and sages who visited America around the turn of the century, including Tagore, Krishnamurti, Swami Vivekananda . . . and the Baha'i leader, Abbas Effendi . . . whose portrait Jibran painted" (40). But his Eastern predecessors and the public's demand for Eastern spirituality should be viewed alongside other narratives of his transformation.

A significant element in the development of Jibran's identity as an artist is how the experiences of his family life positioned him in the diaspora. In 1885, Jibran immigrated, with his mother and older siblings, to Boston. The general cause was poverty in his native Lebanon; the specific cause was the disgrace his father had brought on the family through shady business dealings. The family lived in Boston's Chinatown district. Jibran's mother and siblings worked as domestics to earn money; Jibran, too young to work, became interested in drawing and writing.

Jibran's first experience of diaspora was with Fred Holland Day, a photographer who found in Jibran what he sought of Eastern mythology and spirituality. Day began to take pictures of Jibran in exchange for a fee, ". . . and asked Jibran to grow his black hair and leave it on his shoulders; he dressed him in Eastern costumes, and would sometimes photograph him as an Eastern prince, or as a Moroccan boy" (Jabr 23; trans. mine). Such details, which we find in many narratives about Jibran and his life, are important for understanding how Jibran learned of his difference from others, and how American diaspora manufactured his Easternness. Sitting for Day dressed as an Eastern prince was an imposition of identity. Jibran must have sensed the contradiction: he was not a real Eastern prince, but it was expected of him to act the role of one.

I do not wish to give all my attention to the author's biography and portray the author as either entirely victim or genius. Rather, I want to view him as a kind of discourse, "pierced by," as Mikhail Bakhtin would have it, "the general ideas and conceptions of others" (Todorov 52). Jibran and his text are productions at once inside writing and inside the social history of diaspora. In *The Prophet*, he neither brought universal humanity to the East nor brought the Eastern spirit and wisdom to the West. Rather, he constructed West and East in response to orientalist expectations, by transforming his identity.

Institutional Agency and the Imposing of Identity

There are many ways in which institutional agencies impose identity as kitsch. The small numbers of Arab immigrants to America during the nineteenth century were identified as coming from Turkey in Asia, as Syria was not yet an independent nation. "Many of the early emigrants were, in fact, labeled as 'Turkos,' Arabs, Asiatic Turks, and sometimes

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as Armenians and Greeks in U.S. immigration records. It was only in 1899 that the Immigration Service began to classify such immigrants as Syrians" (Khalaf 18). A Christian from Lebanon fleeing Ottoman religious persecution might well have been identified as Turkish. This is an example of identity given by an institutional agency. A more current example of the imposition is the use of the label Muslim for people coming from various locations and with varying backgrounds. But I am more interested here in the position of the individual artist or intellectual who must accept or refuse such imposition. How can intellectuals conceptualize or practice self-positioning or self-identification when their being in diaspora depends on cultural institutions that may not recognize this self-identification? Sabina refused the barbed-wire image and martyr biography imposed on her by the German organization. She escaped a communist totalitarian authority but did not view this fact as defining herself or her art. She received it as kitsch.

Without kitsch the institutional agency cannot interpret or even value artists or their art. Kitsch therefore allows marginalized voices to be heard. In this sense it is not a lie. But one must be aware that after a while these voices will no longer represent their marginality. Furthermore, to eliminate the position of kitsch, it's not enough to be honest about its existence; one must also be able to refuse the context in which whatever one does will turn one into kitsch.

Recently, the University of Alberta invited Irshad Manji, self-proclaimed Muslim refusenik, to deliver a public lecture in March 2006. The event received sponsorship across campus.[6] This keen interest in Manji is understandable in post-9/11 North America. In an environment of real or imagined fear of militant, extremist, patriarchal, oppressive, backward-looking Muslims, Manji's visit, Manji herself, becomes significant. To understand those Muslims, it is necessary to invite a self-identified Muslim refusenik feminist, activist, journalist, and lesbian who is also a talented stand-up comedian. Manji's book, *The Trouble with Islam* (2003), has been a best-seller. It reinforces the image of a desperate religion in need of reformers. Out of hundreds of Muslim reformers since the nineteenth century who have been debating and writing about Islam, human rights, modernity, democracy, and feminism—among other topics—Manji, with the shallowest and most flawed knowledge about Islam, Muslim societies, and Islamic history, as many critics (e.g., Lalami) have pointed out, is suddenly seen as an outstanding voice.

Her visit had its impact in the classroom, in discussions among faculty members and students. Since I am considered as someone from the same elsewhere as she (Muslim women of color), a solidarity was imposed on us by the institutional agency, and I was also suddenly thrust into the fray as a representative voice. Her visit forced a longtime leftist like me, who has never cared to identify with, let alone defend, a religion, to save Islam and Islamic scholarship from a historically and intellectually thin, not to say virulent, attack by Manji. I am not the only one whom Manji managed to convert. It seems that, when it comes to the elsewhere of Islam and Islamic or Arab society, many North American leftists willingly shift from leftism to neoconservatism: not to defend Islam but to enlighten Muslims. What colonialism, postcolonialism, cruel capitalism, and its democracy-promoting bombs have failed to deliver has now been discovered in the baggage of "natives" like Manji, whose voice is needed and whose performance is required, not in front of Muslims, for whom she might lead an operation of reform, but in front of those who know best what kinds of reforms those Muslims must have.

Laila Lalami describes Manji's stance as "missionary" (23) and her book as "a narrow polemic, selectively citing events and anecdotes that fit one paradigm only: Muslim

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savagery, which of course is contrasted with Western enlightenment" (32). Lalami argues that after 9/11 there has been little critical examination of the work of Muslim women activists such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Manji. The loudest responses have been either hagiographic profiles of these "brave" and "heroic" women, on the one hand, or absurd and completely abhorrent threats to the safety of these "apostates" and "enemies of God," on the other (24).

Intellectuals in diaspora do try to fit the stereotype and make it their identity. It serves as a badge, a political card. Some may know it is a game, some may not. My concern here is the participation. Manji's participation in making kitsch is not about morality; it is misrecognition of her position. Misrecognition means that intellectuals accept the label or categorization provided by the institution as a way to recognize them and to address their art. In this case, the artist plays the role of the native informant, and the artwork is the informant's document. In *"Reflections on Exile,"* Edward Said criticizes how the notion of text has been transformed into something almost metaphysically isolated from historical experience. He calls for situating "writers in their own history, with a particular emphasis on those apparently marginal aspects of their work which because of the historical experience of non-European readers have acquired a new prominence" (xxix). His call is made in the context of criticizing cultural centralization.

In approaching intellectuals in diaspora, cultural institutions generally select representative voices from the margin to play the role of native informants, and those voices are unquestioned and uncriticized. It makes no difference whether or not one tells one's story, because the context of the story determines its historical interpretation. Spivak writes:

> The way in which one conceives of oneself as representative or as an example of something is this awareness that what is one's own, one's identity, what is proper to one, is also a biography and has a history. That history is unmotivated but not capricious and is larger in outline than we are. This is different from the idea of talking about oneself. (6)

The calls for listening to the silent subaltern, giving weight to historical experience, are calls for recognition. But bringing representative voices into certain contexts without questioning them is like watching a freak show. Each character represents a flaw. While the flaw itself is real, its representation provides the spectator with the luxury of being outside the show. Nothing in the show can touch the audience. There is a superiority in simply being among the healthy, watching this representation of elsewhere. Spectators may feel disgust or sympathy or pity, but they will not—or, rather, cannot—give up their position.

A Way Out

The journey of a consciousness in an environment, history, and society is universal, but in diaspora this journey becomes invisible. Being an outsider in one's culture or society may be the most important feature of one's identity. But the questioning of oneself *there* gets lost *here*. Though one might have been outside the mainstream culture there, here one is considered to represent that culture. What is the hidden life or subjectivity that remains unseen in diaspora? How can one negotiate being a member of a larger collectivity that cannot or will not make this distinction between outsider and representative? In order to position myself, I am concerned with diasporic identity as manifested in everyday details. When lecturing about Arab literature, how can one avoid becoming the voice of these identities—the voice of the Arab, the Muslim, the woman of color? When translating, publishing, or reading poetry in Europe or North America, how can one deal with expectations—and disappointments—when

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one reveals oneself as not a feminist, not a libertine, not a political radical?

In 2003, I was invited to the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam. I was asked to keep a diary, which was then published on the festival's Web site. It was an incident in which I was aware of kitsch but was unable to avoid it. Below are two excerpts from the diary.

Monday 16 June 2003

My first extended reading in Rotterdam was with Katalin Molnar (France) and Boris Maruna (Croatia). I gave an interview to Cornel Bierens. I had no way of predicting the kind of questions on Bierens' mind though I had a hunch that as an Egyptian Muslim poetess I would be asked the standard questions where I would have to make an effort to direct them, in order to create a dialogue transcending the inevitable preconceptions that the interviewer or the listener would have on Arab culture. I was not far off with my guesswork, for although some of the questions were on poetry, there were also the expected ones like: "You just read a poem on Marx. Are you a Marxist? Describe your interest in Marx. How do you write about a man as an Arab poetess and how have others received this poem?"

Responding to these questions involved the attempt to change many misconceptions. I had to explain the stature Karl Marx had for Arab intellectuals, the impact the collapse of the Soviet Union had on that stature, the role of the 1991 war where Egypt participated beside the United States in killing Iraqis, and the role of the war in re-stating questions about the meaning of Arab Nationalism in the same way that the American occupation of Iraq has raised questions about Western democracy. I wanted to pass on the honour of explaining feminist Marxism by instead alluding to a map of Arab national defeats of which the Marxist dream was the worst one of them all. I had to invite Bierens to read what other Arab poetesses had written on men in the course of fourteen centuries, so that he could learn by comparison what a failed audacity my contribution as a poetess in the nineties had been. Over and above I had to emphasize that as a member of an Arab generation we all shared these concerns and that in the end I was expressing my own opinions.

After the evening was over, I thought about how the politician still controls and directs the intellectual everywhere. Both I and Bierens did our best to say what we wanted to say which had been prepared beforehand. I am now sure that I was going to say what I said as a response to whatever questions he might have asked even if he asked: do you like stuffed grape leaves?

He had an image about how the interview was to be conducted, and I had one on how to direct its course. Nonetheless, it was the essential step to open a real dialogue once one could admit to having experienced failure, misunderstandings and many attempts at clarification. He had stereotypes about everything and I had the awareness of fitting in that stereotype.

Tuesday 17 June

A stray dog once bit me when I was a student in University. For the duration of twenty-one days I had to go every morning and stand in a long queue in front of the nurse's office at the Hospital of al-Mansoora to get an injection against rabies. While waiting, I would hear repeatedly the same question from others in the line: "A dog or a cat or a horse?" It took a while before I understood that one injection was generally given against all types of bites, and that the inquiries were a way for those waiting to get to know one another, seeing that everyone had a dramatic account of the type of bite while veteran patients advised newcomers on what to expect at the moment the injection was inserted in the stomach.

I remembered that scene as I listened to some of the invited poets, who began introducing themselves to others by stating the number of years they had been imprisoned, and the types of torture they had undergone. It was not that the experience of prison and torture is not worthy of listening to and empathizing with, but this preface on the part of the writer or the poet was presented as if it had a positive qualitative value in addition to writing.

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When she leaves for America, Sabina tries to find a way to avoid the kitsch of the intellectual escaping communist oppression: "From that time on, she began to insert mystifications in her biography, and by the time she got to America she even managed to hide the fact that she was Czech. It was all merely a desperate attempt to escape the kitsch that people wanted to make of her life" (Kundera 254). But is it possible to hide part of your history without hiding yourself?

Notes

1. Jibran's protagonist-prophet, Mustafa, is a stranger in a city called Orphalese. There he spends twelve years of his life awaiting a ship that is to carry him back to the isle of his birth. Before he leaves the city, his disciples gather around him, begging him to stay, but he refuses. A girl appears, Almirta, and requests that he provide them with his wisdom about the journey of the human being, between life and death. This opening positions the narrator as prophet, as his listeners expect and wait for his wisdom. That *Mustafa* is also the name of the Prophet, Muhammad, opens the text to the shadow of the eastern Islamic world. In the book, Mustafa delivers twenty-six sermons on twenty-six different facets of human life on earth. This prophet then leaves the city to return to the isle of his birth. The sermons, all written in a biblical style, contain a mixture of antimaterialism and prophetic individualism. Whether this style resulted from intertextuality with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as Mikhail Naimy indicates (128), or was a development of the early Rihani, as Geoffrey Nash sees it (13), the social context was a major factor in the composition of *The Prophet*. America, with her Western materialist civilization, as portrayed by the city and people of *The Prophet*, sharply contrasts with Mustafa, the outsider. Yet the people need his words of wisdom. And though the prophet insists on departing, he is also determined to leave a part of himself—his wisdom—in order to transform the people. Jibran himself never returned to Lebanon, but he did leave this book to the American readers.

2. The Egyptian Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi (1801–73) is considered the father of the Arab renaissance in the nineteenth century (Awad 25–47).

3. In the short stories that compose *Al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida* (1908), Jibran criticizes Eastern traditions and social strata (in "Wardat al-Hani"), encourages rebellion against feudalism and the men of religion (in "Sirakh al-Qubur"), and discusses themes of love and infidelity (in "Madjaʿ al-ʿArus"). His later *Al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira* (1912) narrates a love story confirming the sacredness of love even before marriage. The same themes are found in his articles gathered together in 1914 as *Damʿa wa ibtisama* ("A Tear and a Smile").

4. According to Louis Awad, Tahtawi viewed civilization as having two domains: the moral and the material. The moral domain includes culture, manners, religion, and law; the material domain includes progress in practical knowledge, such as agriculture, industry, and commerce. Some features of Tahtawi's discourse are an uncritical acceptance of the self as backward and consequently the need to borrow the material portion of Western civilization; the establishment of conditions for borrowing from the moral domain of Western civilization; exaggeration of the past glory of the golden age of Near Eastern civilizations, from ancient Egypt and Babylon to Abbasid times, and of their contribution to modern Europe, which morally justifies borrowing as rightful reclamation; Western strength, whether described overtly or not, rooted not only in Western civilization but also in knowledge of the East (Awad 25–47).

5. According to Nash, an important difference emerges between the most important figures in this school. Whereas Jibran started out writing in Arabic and concerned with issues of the East, this concern disappeared from his later discourse, so that he could form himself in the image of the Eastern prophet. Rihani, on the other hand, started out writing in English, wanting to find the West and East in terms of each other. But this literary focus ended with his return to Lebanon, when he adopted an Arab nationalist discourse. The key question here is, Why and how did Rihani and Jibran, products of the same place and time, take opposite directions? To answer this question, I consider the ways in which these authors and their texts reflect the creation of an identity in diaspora.

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