

YOUR MYTHS SHALL BE MY MYTHS

Middle Eastern and American Narratives of Contact and Rupture and the Traveling of Metaphor

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This talk proposes to examine narratives of border, translation, and immigration in our contemporary historical situation, which one may tentatively designate as postmodern. The title of the talk is coined from a famous sentence from the Book of Ruth, from the famous oath Ruth pronounces: “whither thou goest, I will go; ... and thy God [shall be] my God: Where thou diest, will I die.” I propose to read this traveling narrative as an example of contact and rupture between Middle Eastern and American culture. Indeed the Book of Ruth was adopted by many texts in American literature and culture. Examples range from William Bradford to films such as *Fried Green Tomatoes*, where the figure of Ruth enables contact and rupture in the racialized south of the U.S. In this exemplary narrative from which many a myth develops, I propose to examine how metaphorical models of nation, generation, territory and politics result from what I call the traveling of metaphor, that is, from the way narratives create points of contact and rupture among cultures.

The next series of questions posed by this talk derive firstly from the narratives elaborated from the Book of Ruth, and secondly from the so-called “new world order” we have learned to inhabit for the last three decades. In a postmodern world where the end of great meta-narratives has been proclaimed, never has the intolerance of the other been so great. Everywhere we see battles over peoples and territories (in Greek *demos*), which challenge the very foundation of the *democratic* ethos. It is therefore urgent to read the new narratives that have emerged from the dual movement of globalization and fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern world. If culture has been predicated for a long time on national or cultural myths, what new myths are going to emerge from a world whose *texture* has radically changed?

The last set of questions has to do with America’s position in the current process of globalization. It is noteworthy, for instance, that second largest export industry of the U.S. is the Hollywood cinema industry. What is true culturally and economically is also true politically, and one may say—a bit provocatively—that if Hollywood comes second, what comes first in terms of U.S. exports is the concept of “democracy.” If the U.S. seeks to export its cultural and political models to the rest of the world, it is important to see how these models interact—and maybe compete—with local models. It is essential to ask the question whether the Middle East (and the rest of the world) today is respond to U.S. traveling cultural and political metaphors: your myths shall be my myths.