At the Border of the Imagination: Figures of Arab American Immigrants

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The first wave of Arab immigration in the period from the 1880s to the 1920s is typically associated with the literary production of Kahlil Gibran, whose 1923 book *The Prophet* has attracted a wide international readership. Gibran and his contemporaries in the New York Pen League, a group of Arab immigrant writers that included Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy, are considered the first Arab American literary formation. These writers had all immigrated from the Ottoman Empire’s Arab province that later came to be known as Lebanon. They also all belonged to the Christian minority communities in the Arab Middle East and can be seen as an international manifestation of the Nahda (the Arab national awakening), which gave expression in mid 19th century to Arab modernist cultural politics.

In the context of early 20th century North America, post-Nahda cultural politics in the literary works of Gibran, Rihani and Naimy tends to reiterate certain tropes of the exotic Arab orient, a sensibility that was echoed in the 1921 film production of E.M. Hull’s novel *The Sheik*, starring Rudolph Valentino. The work of these writers may have provided US readers with access to modern Arab cultural ideals in English, but it did not disrupt the cultural images of Arabs. That said, Gibran in particular and the Pen League more generally have played an important role in establishing the foundations for Arab American writing. Their writing also provides important historical points of entry into the early history of Arab immigration to the US and for this reason that moment is the ground zero for historicizing Arab American literature of migration, a point from which most studies of Arab American cultural production begin, even when seeking to move beyond it, as is evident in *Post-Gibran: Anthology of a New Arab American Writing* (2000).

The foundational aspect of the Pen League authors to contemporary Arab American writing remains significant not because of the sharing of a style and preoccupations, but because of the persistent cultural cross-lighting that has conditioned most noteworthy Arab cultural production in North America over the last hundred years. Arab American writing has always been conditioned by Arabic literature and the broader cultural trends extending from the region and also by the figuration of Arabness in the US imaginary. I am not here referring to the familiar cultural tension between the old country and the new country, which is often a dominant theme in Arab American literature and the sociology of Arab migration to the US. Rather than address the general issues of cultural negotiation figured in Arab American literature, this paper focuses very specifically on the ways that stories of Arab immigration have been politicized in the post-9/11 context. To this end, this paper analyzes the works of Arab American writers, such as Rabih Alameddine (*Kool-Aids*), and works by non-Arab American writers, such as Dave Eggers (*Zeitoun*) and John Updike’s (*Terrorist*). In so doing, I try to illustrate the various ways that Arab immigrants exist at the borders of a contemporary Americanist literary imagination, even as they have figured centrally in the current public discourse in the US.