Thursday, 9 January 2014

71. The Diasporic Arab Novel in Comparative Contexts

1:45–3:00 p.m.

Program arranged by the Division on Arabic Literature and Culture

Presiding: Stephen Sheehi, Univ. of South Carolina, Columbia

1. "Collaborative Transnationalism and the Arab Novel in English," Nouri Gana, Univ. of California, Los Angeles

This paper examines the transnational beginnings of the Arab novel in English and outlines its most pressing preoccupations in various diasporic contexts. It will focus on the cultural politics of the Arab novel in English, the ways in which it brings into intimate collision the intensities of the British and American imperial and interventionist presence in the Arab world and the diasporic and migrant experiences of Arab subjectivities in Europe and North America. In the meanwhile, the paper will argue for a comparative approach to the Arab novel in English, one that is rooted in the Arabic literary tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other, open to the collaborative transnational entanglements of which the novel as a genre is a product.

2. "Anxieties of Diasporization and Impossible Returns in Abdelkader Benali's Wedding by the Sea," Ahmed Idrissi Alami, Purdue Univ., West Lafayette

The recent emergence of a body of narrative texts and other forms of cultural production by Dutch Moroccan authors has expanded the debate on the nature of North African diasporic identity and the question of shared memory. Abdelkader Benali's debut novel Wedding by the Sea (1996; 2000) represents a crucial shift in the rhetoric used to reflect the complicated discourse of negotiating diasporic identity that is underwritten by a posture of bitter ironical critique of the nostalgia for an imagined past.

In this paper I argue for the need to further characterize how we approach the concept of identity, and particularly mixed Arab-European identities, by my exploration of how the narrative mediates the question of Dutch-Moroccan identity through a fragmentary and decentralized narrative structure. Marking a more general literary shift away from notions of romanticized return, often projected through imagined nostalgic memories of family celebrations and spaces, Benali deploys a persistently ironical and dystopic tone that underlines the impossibility of returning to the homeland and the need to further engage with, inevitably, an unsettled diasporic identity.

One of the foremost contemporary novelists in Brazil, Milton Hatoum has been widely studied as a writer who deals with memory. Yet not much attention has been paid to the strong link between Lebanon and the childhood experiences that establish the framework of his first two novels, *Relato de um certo Oriente* (1989, *Tale of a Certain Orient*) and *Dois irmãos* (2000, *Two Brothers*). In a country where the ideology of racial democracy premised on the concept of cultural anthropophagy (Brazil’s version of the melting pot) has come into crisis with the rise, since the 1980s, of multiculturalism and the celebration of ethnicity, Hatoum’s novels depict Lebanon as an undigested legacy. In fact, in the intricate and speculative meditations on memory staged in his novels, Lebanon is not so much remembered as refracted in second-hand recollections by Brazilians of Arab descent, where it often serves a centrifugal force driving them outward and away from their immigrant parents and their nostalgic reconstructions of the Old Country. I interpret this dynamic in relation to the crisis of racial democracy and situate it in relation to other Brazilian writers of Arab descent.

*Respondent:* Christopher Micklethwait, Saint Edward's Univ.