

Is Cosmopolitan the New Australian? Flexible Identities in Eva Sallis's Fiction

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Abstract: This paper examines the way in which Eva Sallis fictionalises encounters with Europe, Asia and The Middle-East in her three books, *Hiam* (1998), *City of Sealions* (2002) and *Mahjar* (2003). In her narratives, Sallis depicts the migrant experience in Australia and in foreign places to deconstruct definitions of “home”, of being in the world, and construct the space of the cosmopolitan subject that meanders through historical settings and transnational contexts. Thus, Sallis seems to suggest that the relationship between history and literature is intimate, that narrative and history are multiform and bound, respectively acting upon one another, redefining the boundaries of nations and identities. Looking at how Sallis engages with the political realities and tackles the problems of being different to the mainstream, this paper examines the various meanings derived from intercultural encounters, whether such encounters subvert Australia's settler-history but also its multicultural and post-colonial nature. The novelist's use of geographic space and displacement as major components of contemporary identity-making, conveys an inclusive approach to otherness and constructs flexible identities out of global and cosmopolitan experiences.

Keywords: nationalism, multiculturalism, migration, displacement, geography, globalization, altermodernism, poststructuralism.

Since her first novel *Hiam* (1998), Eva Sallis, now Eva Hornung, has been tackling the themes of migrancy, cultural encounters, with a particular focus on the interaction between mainstream Australia and Arabic life and culture, and more specifically on the integration of Arab migrants in contemporary Australia, through the spectra of politics and the multicultural nation. The author's political commitment in writing is clearly perceptible and extends to her own contribution to the rise of Australians Against Racism, a human rights movement, launched in October 2001. Sallis's diasporic writings are genealogical stories in that the lives of the main characters unfold alongside the lives and memories of their parents so that identity, belonging and social relations are based on ancestral connection and kinship while the notion of boundary is deconstructed through habitation (Ashcroft 181).

The novels *Hiam* (1998) and *The City of Sealions* (2002) explore migrant identity through cultural and geographical references to places as diverse as Australia, Yemen and Vietnam, while the short-story collection *Mahjar* (2003) examines the cultural gaps between older and younger generations, the processes of un-belonging to multicultural Australia and the (geo) political impacts of Middle-Eastern conflicts. The novelist tackles the issue of Australia's multiculturalism in a global perspective, within a space that designs dynamic subjectivities rather than circumscribes individuals to their cultural otherness—a space that complexifies Edouard Glissant's geopoetics and idea of the “tout-monde” (the *Whole-world*), which refers to the concept of the relation that extends beyond the dualistic discourse of “the same and the other” to encourage a new vision of difference as an assembler of the “dissimilar” subjects/objects. Thus, Glissant's idea that recognizes and enables a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, relates to diversity in the global world and initiates a new subjectivity that Nicolas Bourriaud would later coin as “radicant.” An art historian, Bourriaud undertakes to revisit the Glissantian approach to

diversity, and the post-structuralist approach and geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially their use of the rhizome as a model for culture and subjectivity, to depict, in his book *Radicant* (2009), the “space of the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer – the dominant figures of contemporary culture” (Bourriaud 58). Bourriaud contends that the individual of the early days of the 21st century no longer evolves as a rhizome but rather as “a radican”, referring to “a plant that does not depend on a single root for its growth but advances in all directions on whatever surfaces it encounters by attaching multiple hooks to them, as ivy does” (51). According to Bourriaud, “radican” characters evolve and “develop their roots as they advance, unlike the *radicals*, whose development is determined by their being anchored in a particular soil” (Bourriaud 51). I hereby propose to examine Sallis’s three works through the lenses of Bourriaud’s theory looking at how the reader is compelled to encounter Australia through the lenses of otherness and how identities become flexible and thus subvert the issue of multiculturalism and the nature of postcolonial Australia.

Encountering Australia through Otherness

In her first novel, *Hiam*, Sallis explores migrancy and the instability of home through the meanderings in the desert and bush areas of Hiam, a Middle-Eastern female character. Through the development of plot place is conceptualized as a network of relationships and stories that are constantly negotiated and the development of the main character occurs through a process of deconstruction and a view on Australia from the outside and the foreign place. The environment is a context for human experience, constructed in the characters’ movements, memory, encounters and associations. The character’s past and memory, conveyed through the use of a present tense, reflect reality while the actual present and story told in the past tense seem to embody the sense of unreality brought by the trauma of losing both her husband and daughter in tragic circumstances, a trauma that can only be alleviated through denial—“Memories rose around her like coloured helium balloons” (78)—and the escape through unknown territory, the Australian Outback. The dual aspect of Australia’s identity and reality is portrayed within a fragmented narrative that shifts from the present to the past because time, like history, is an abstraction. In her pilgrimage to the deserted and rural areas, Hiam encounters Australia’s cultural others, namely the Indigenous communities, which she ironically misplaces for Orientals (128) as much as her late husband is ironically misplaced as a fellow terrorist by an IRA activist (21), so that the issues of belonging and identity are no longer fixed but are always shifting, signifying the character’s condition as the migrant other who is being displaced either physically or psychologically. Moreover, the narrative emphasizes the shifting identity of the character, the new “Arab” migrant to Australia, by assessing her hybridity as a born-Yemeni brought up as a Lebanese and a Palestinian through marriage, an educated woman who does not submit to men or Islamic values. Yet, Hiam neither completely shares her cultural community’s views nor does she assimilate to her new western life as an Australian subject, remaining an eternal outcast.

In her writings, Sallis shows that feelings of exile and alienation derive from the ideological constructions of identity and alterity that stem from a desire of fixity and enrootedness which, as Homi K. Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, refers to colonial discourse:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. (66-68)

In *The City of Sealions* the clashing of cultural and ethnic identities resulting from the colonial paradigm is explored through a young Australian’s flight from her island home to Yemen.

While Lian clings to her settler heritage “being an islander and an Australian” (5) rather than to her Vietnamese heritage, her decision to immerse herself in Arabic culture and language is sparked by the desire to escape from the ghosts of her mother’s past and from home, an Australia that, from the outside, is multicultural but that, in substance, is discriminating. In a particular scene, the character expresses her frustration and asks: “People are the same everywhere. Why can’t one be at home anywhere?” (81). Not only is she unable to sympathise with her mother’s apparent madness but she curiously seems to bear the patronising and rather prejudicial remarks of the locals, who treat her as the exotic subject. Her subsequent statement and interrogation both suggest that home is not synonymous with fixity since wandering is a human condition and movement binds places or territories. Besides, the narration’s gradual interweaving of past and present experiences extends to the associations that Lian makes between Australia and Yemen, the West and the East—experiences that design a transnational or cosmopolitan space superseding the “home and away” binary common in diaspora discourse. Saana is depicted as the urban centre, on the margins of the desert and rural areas, as a centre that assembles disparate elements but also as a cosmopolitan space of transition where the past, the present and the future are combined, where encounters between Australia and foreign places (Yemen, Lebanon, the occupied territories), or between the East and the West, may occur. The main character’s experience of the city tends to mirror her own perception about Australia and its various forms of cultural otherness. The Yemeni city is thus caught between modernity, capitalism, and traditions as much as postcolonial Australia is still trapped in the colonial past and nationalistic discourse. The city, like the island left at home, is a multiform, heterogeneous and smooth space, where frontiers are blurred and do tend to overlap:

This was modern Sanaa, its hopes and dreams wrapped up in the new service stations and the dingy Pajeros, its suburbs stretching to the circling crown of mountains, unfurled and suckering. But its heart is still the old city, half-broken, half-spilling, half-walled, in high red stones: the beak and the eye of an octopus. (Sallis, *The City of Sealions* 43)

The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, with its western and/or multicultural influences and ramifications, is expressed through the attitudes and perceptions of a cast of wealthy individuals, who stand apart from those others grounded in a more restrictive space on the margins of town. The stress laid on such “diverse diversities” tends to construct but also deconstruct the idea of the cosmopolitan space, of the city that reflects both the diversity of the world and its own limits.

In her three works of fiction, Sallis accentuates the dark side of multicultural associations and constructions, suggesting that the sense of homeliness co-exists with unhomeliness. This dual binding process occurs through an imaginary space that subverts fixed identity positions, something that Sallis highlights when raising the limits of multiculturalism and discussing the responsibilities that all Australians, from various cultural backgrounds, should have towards each other through the spectrum of multiculturalism, and the multicultural nation:

In Australia we don’t yet have a word or a language that includes us all. We have no way to speak naturally of a many in one. The word multicultural doesn’t manage. Multicultural is used to mean some of our cultures, not all of them. Ethnic means some of our ethnicities and not others. Further, each community and each age group has different specifications as to which cultural or racial groups are them, not us. (Sallis, “Australian Dream, Australian Nightmare”)

Sallis not only writes against the binary “us and them” so common in colonial discourse but also insists that multiculturalism does not apply to all Australians, that the term and theory discards rather than unites cultures under the umbrella of nation, the nation surfacing, in fact, as an imagined and invalid concept. The novelist indirectly refers here to what Paul Gilroy calls

the “geometry of colonial power” which, according to Gilroy, is “notable for the stress it placed on recognition and interdependency and the way it pushed cultural questions to the fore: each racial and ethnic type turns out to have its own space where it is at home and can be itself” (Gilroy 51). Yet, it is nonetheless obvious that Sallis’s comments hark back to the beginning of colonization and the implementing of the White Australia Policy, a time when Australia’s geographic position within the Asia-Pacific region was configured as a far-flung outpost of Britain and Europe, on the border of the Asian continent. In her work, Sallis shows that despite the “multiple and hybrid forms of diasporic conditions and consciousnesses, perspectives from mainstream Australian society still unveil a monolithic conception of ... culture and identity by the dominant host culture and its institutions” (Lee 222).

Sallis’s writing examines the various meanings derived from intercultural encounters through the use of geographic space and displacement as the major components of contemporary identity-making, by apprehending the local through the global. The short story collection, *Mahjar*, associates landscape and memories so that both are trans-localised in the process of migration and displacement, so that both become the major components of contemporary subjectivity, of a cultural identity which never stops shifting and becomes flexible—fluid, with different meanings and implications—stemming, in fact, from a cosmopolitan approach to otherness, from all the lands of the Mahjar, the lands of Arab migrations within Australia. Sallis’s writing and characters operate in such a way that they design a social and cultural rhizomatic map which seems to draw on the post-structuralist approach of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari. A cosmopolitan map which is

open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back “to the same.” The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged “competence.” (Deleuze and Guattari 13)

Thus, the stories unfold as the mapping/territorialisation of the middle-eastern nature of Australia and the remapping/reterritorialization of the multicultural nation. The fifteen stories in *Mahjar* fall in three parts that refer respectively to the issues underlying: firstly, the act of integrating in or assimilating to Australian society; secondly, the tangible cracks in the multicultural fabric; and thirdly, the consideration of recent migrants from the Middle-East as eternal exiles, whether in their home-country or the host-country. Set in Australian places or in foreign settings, the plots reconfigure the politics of hybridity and identity subverting the multicultural ideal. By signifying difference between the self and the other, between a “traditional” foreign place (Asia and the Middle-East) and the “modern” West, the narratives focus on the various meanings derived from cultural encounters and allow commonly censored subjects to negotiate agency and freedom from disparate structures of authority.

Indeed, Sallis explores the differences between Middle Eastern and Western culture by depicting the varied experiences of immigrant parents and their native-born children, migrants and refugees, with humorous and at times tragic undertones. The story titled “The Hafli,” referring to a Lebanese dance party, embodies both the domestic and the global space, and provides an insight into Arabic culture and Middle-Eastern migrancy at a time when Australia was caught in the fear and suspicion of otherness, especially non-European and oriental migrant others:

Zein and Amin’s house was a little Lebanon, something Zein told everyone the moment they arrived.

‘You’ve arrived! Ahlaan! Ahlaaan!’ she shrieked. ‘Step ashore!’

Upstairs Christians and Druzes chatted over the railing, hurling the few French phrases they could dig up back and forth looking down on the atrium in which East and West Beirut, Christian and Muslim, met and mingled. ...

The long-time refugees were there, those who had lost Palestine, those who had lost Palestinians. Abdal-Rahman was the most recent refugee and the only Iraqi. ‘Welcome to exile,’ Fahran said to him, nastily, and was haughty to the point of social disgrace. Sahar quickly steered Abd-al-Rahman away.

‘*Haram*, poor Farhan,’ she murmured into his ear but without sympathy. ‘Many people here are very Australian about the new refugees. (55-56)

The irony laid on the last sentence significantly implies first that there will always be an “Other,” a recent and not yet integrated individual, to replace the Other, the integrated or assimilated being, a process that Frantz Fanon had already identified in his work *Black Skin, White Mask*, as the alienation of the newcomer by those who feel they have become disalienated from the mainstream (Fanon 43). Besides, when reading Sallis’s stories, one can also think of Regina Lee’s article on Asian-Australian cultural identity, and Lee’s observations when she examines Aihwa Ong’s book titled *Flexible Identities: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Indeed, Lee refers to the definition of “flexible identity” by A. Ong, as the cultural logics of capital accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions (Lee 214). Besides, Lee’s arguments that “in the process of migration and cross-cultural translation, migrants are inevitably subject to complex negotiations of identity and cultural politics, such that the range of diasporic conditions, subjectivities and consciousness has extended beyond any notion of a single diasporic type or normative diasporic condition,” imply that identities are never stable or deeply rooted (Lee 222). *Mahjar* expresses such ideas by suggesting that local and cosmopolitan cultures and traditions interpenetrate and intermingle to such an extent that identities are no longer politically imagined (through the nation) but socially constructed. In a story titled “Munira’s Bad Day Out,” the narrator highlights the eponymous female character’s desire to shed her oriental looks and to don the mask of western subjectivity:

She [Munira] looked up in the mirror. ... She looked superb. Her pants-suit showed a red rounded thigh under the tailored jacket. Her breasts were high on her chest, beautiful red globes delineated by the fingerline of the fine-stitched seam. It dived to her Scarlett O’Hara waist. The lipstick and the fabric were a perfect match. Her flaming red hair stood up in burnished waves, a mane flowing artistically back from her white brow, fold upon fold of richly interwoven colour. Piquant curls at her temples were intact. (24)

This passage is doubly-ironic since the character’s dream of alterity implies that in becoming Australianised she is in fact rather looking and performing like a Hollywood star, as the reference to Scarlett O’Hara suggests—the reference also ironically refers to Australia’s own Americanisation. Munira’s attitude implies that cultural others have no other alternatives than interact with the Australian mainstream since social pressures are irresistible, an idea which already surfaced in *Hiam* and which is even more acute in other short stories dealing with Australian-born younger generations, which resist the pressures of traditions and feeling both alien to the world of their parents and to the outside mainstream.

In another story of the collection, titled “Music,” the theme of intercultural relations embodied through a mixed-race marriage brings to the fore difficult intercultural relations between mainstream Australia and its Others:

The bride’s parents and people all hung to the other side of the room and were the subject of some savaging in Arabic. They were behaving badly, haughty and

dismissive with the Arabs, drunken and loud with each other. They were clearly unhappy too, something Zein was utterly shocked by, but stored up: her amazement that they despised her son made her fleetingly like her daughter-in-law but raised her irritation. ... Then she distinctly heard ‘sand-nigger’ from the other side of the room, and her fury drove her to the toilet. ... Why did he do it? Why did *she*? She looked across to the young couple. The bride, her son’s wife, was a plain girl. Brown hair, brown eyes. Too skinny. ... They were going to punish everyone here, Arab and Australian, by seizing their independence. (104-106)

The groom’s mother, who observes the scene, criticizes not only the bride’s family, whom she sees as typical “ockers,” rough and uncultivated, who make racist remarks, but also her son’s and daughter-in-law’s decision to be together and live independently regardless of their respective cultural background. The groom’s mother is, in fact, as critical to cultural otherness as the bride’s family is: she emphasizes the “plain” features and “skinny” body of her daughter in law and in so doing casts her as the alien other. Thus, there is a suggestion that the cultural other is everyone in Australia since the mother, just like her son’s in-laws, is a tinge racist. Besides, the attitude of Anglo and non-Anglo Australians somehow operates not as the expression of the community spirit but of communitarianism, which emphasizes the interest of communities over those of the individual in modern Australia. In the short-story collection, Sallis seems to write against such an ideology, stating in the preface to the book that the word *mahjar* “refers collectively to all the lands of Arab, most often Lebanese, migration,” that it “has undertones of separation” (n. pag.). She adds that “Australia is one of the lands of the *mahjar*” (n. pag.). The novelist manages this *tour de force* by articulating the stories with each other either thematically or narratively, especially through the interweaving of fables/folk-tales and accounts of daily life. This narrative process not only binds the realms of fantasy and reality but also forms another narrative form: “Mahjar: A Novel,” as is stated in the title-page. This alternative form, the book developing from the short-story collection to form of a novel, is all the more significant through the cross-bordering of characters. Some characters cross-border from a story to another so that the reader is able to grasp various facets of their personal history and experience, but such character cross-bordering and overlapping of stories both provide an overview of the 20th and 21st century Australia: post-colonial in essence but still boasting values inherited from the colonial period. From the story titled “The Hafli” to the story “The Sea,” the life of Abd al-Rahman, an Iraqi refugee, unravels to depict his harsh and inhumane journey to Australia by sea, the loss of his wife and daughter, and later on his integration on the margins of the Australian mainstream. The two stories bear testimony to the refugee’s tragic life and courage in the face of adversity, deconstructing common stereotypes about refugee motives as asylum seekers. Besides, Abd al-Rahman’s ordeals and painful integration may also ironically hark back to the settler’s sense of courage so often celebrated in discourses of the nation, for example in the national anthem “Advance Australia Fair,” and on the other hand it may yet emphasize the non-inclusion and non-sharing of “boundless plains” with “those who’ve come across the seas” (“Advance Australia Fair”). In Sallis’s stories, the intertextual canvas is a process by which Arabic and Anglo-Australian cultures can interact so that disparate elements can merge and reconfigure the space of postcolonial Australia in an “alter-space”.

Reconfiguring Postcolonial Australia

The reconfiguration of Australia clearly occurs through subversion and the deconstruction/re-interpretation of Australia’s multicultural and post-colonial nature. In *The City of Sealions*, the main character never ceases to wonder about her position in Australian society interrogating the place and perception of non-Anglo Australians and the imposition of settler-history, a history that Sallis tends to reject and subvert by giving voice to other migrant and settler stories. In fact, one might associate Sallis’s depiction and exploration of migrancy to her experience,

her personal story and family background, which have most certainly influenced her work. Sallis's father was a Palestine-born German who was made prisoner of war by the British and then sent to Australia's detention camps in Victoria and South Australia after WWII, her mother was a New Zealand artist. The novelist's family left Australia for a while to go and live in a community in Germany, Sallis was home-schooled and later on as a student went to Yemen to study Arabic. She has therefore become familiar with the Middle-East and Arabic language. Her immersion and experience in the Middle East are such that the novelist claimed that she was writing from an exiled position: "Well, I think I've always been in an exiled position in one form or another" (qtd. in Koval 2004).

The City of Sealions deals with the theme of exile within and outside of Australia, through an immersion in Arabic culture that takes place not only physically, through the displacement of the character, but also through the interpolation of stories in the manner of Arabic and Persian tales and legends. In fact, Sallis highlights that *Mahjar* is dedicated to her father-in-law from whom she said she heard so many anecdotes and stories. In her writing, the experience of migrancy and displacement often naturally encapsulate the mysteries and beauty of Arabic culture and ancient tales – something which has been prevalent since the first novel, *Hiam*, which interweaves tales of the *Arabian Nights* and references to Arabic culture and language. Sallis argues that this interweaving of stories, with its palimpsestic nature, stems from her own experience and is part of her ability to move between cultural spaces:

I think a broader view of culture. I think it led me out of my own culture, whatever that was, and into a kind of space between cultures where you don't belong to any but have a perception on several. It is an exciting position to write from, even though it is sometimes a bit of an isolated position. (qtd. in Koval 2004)

Mahjar intertwines the narrative with oriental stories transposing imagination into imagination incorporating cultural markers and ancient/oral narratives (in italics in the text) so that both the stories and tales create an intertextual space where present and past, modernity and tradition, dream and reality, may be complementary but never merge, where West and East meet, drift and move:

When Rima was very little, her father told her she was a gazelle.
First, he said her sister Marie was an Arab princess. Rima wrapped her arms around his knees, jumped up and down beseechingly, asked, 'What am I?' ...
Then he said, 'You are a gazelle.'

Once upon a time in a land far far away, there was a little lost gazelle. She was so cute, so elegant and fine, that she was a pre-wrapped little lion dinner, something that worried her quite a bit. ...

All that lion could do was say politely 'Ahlan wa Sahlan tafaddalou,' and sit down to a nice dinner of crème caramel with the gazelles.

Which proves how even the silliest stories can put little children to sleep with smiles on their faces. (*Mahjar* 38-39)

In this short-story titled "The Gazelle," Sallis uses the story of the gazelle that she already used in her previous story, *Hiam*, when towards the end of the novel *Hiam* recalls the story of the mournful gazelle who is given a voice to express *Hiam*'s silenced trauma and deliver the truth about the suicide of her husband, Massoud (*Hiam* 97-103). In *Mahjar*, the story of the eponymous gazelle alternates the tale from *The Arabian Nights* with the story of Rima, using the tale as a parable for creativity and imagination, but yet as a means to debunk a fairy-tale world sustained by the father to his daughter, an imaginary space that tends to enclose female subjectivity in some sort of fragile and dependent state, in a masculine world ruled, as the tale

indicates, by lions. In the story, as soon as she has become an adult, Rima manages to virtually re-write the story and claim her subjectivity and sexuality as an independent woman, a re-writing which, the narrator ironically says, “proves just how seductive stories can be” (*Mahjar* 48).

The cross-cultural interactions that occur through the experiences of migrants, the themes of migrancy and displacement, the way characters evolve, echo with Victor Segalen’s ideas on diversity and on the *exote*, which refers to someone who has the ability to feel the diverse and who does not relate to national, ethnic or cultural identities. Besides, Sallis’s positioning in a global space and her critical view on postcolonial Australia seem to call for a reconstruction of the “modern” space, which is a western concept, to construct another kind of modernity suited for a global world, which Nicolas Bourriaud defines as “altermodernity.” In his work *Radicant* (2009), Bourriaud introduces the concept of “radicant” and “radicancy,” drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s geophilosophy and concept of the rhizome in their work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Bourriaud argues that the postmodern world is no longer the space of the rhizome since globalization has generated new forms of interconnected systems and a new modern space past the postmodern, which he calls “altermodern” and which allows for individuals to move in heterogeneous spaces so that their roots are not only put in motion but also incorporate new ones as they advance. Thus, identity is no longer restricted to the extension of a root, it is rather to be understood through a process of translation and exchange, through a new modernity that, as Bourriaud suggests,

designates a construction plan that would allow new intercultural connections, the construction of a space of negotiation going beyond postmodern multiculturalism, which is attached to the origin of discourses and forms rather than to their dynamics. It is a matter of replacing the question of origin with that of destination. “Where should we go?” That is the modern question par excellence. The emergence of this new entity implies the invention of a new *conceptual persona* (in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave this term) that would bring about the conjunction of modernism and globalization. (40)

Thus, Sallis’s stories, with their focus on movement and displacement, on intercultural relations, subvert Australia’s nationalistic perception of multiculturalism and encourage readers to rethink the idea of the multicultural nation through alternative modes of thinking and of experiencing otherness. The idea of fixity or enrootedness that most characters desperately seek tends to operate against their positioning on the margins of the nation. In *The City of Sealions* for instance, the main character’s subjectivity is constantly challenged and undermined: Lian’s departure from home and the nation, which is initially a means to free herself from the family story and her alien mother, translates as the loss of identity in a foreign environment. It is only when she attempts to integrate in the space of the other, abroad, that Lian becomes aware of the sense of uprootedness migrants may feel, as well as of the racist attitudes they have to bear in places which can be as multiculturally diverse as Australia. It is thus only through a foreign setting that Lian can understand the ordeal her mother had to endure within the island-community and the non-integration of Asia within Australia. The character’s almost hopeless quest—even if it is motivated by her desire for cultural immersion and wish to master Arabic—brings to the fore the intertwining of the past and the present (history and life) along with the topography of Yemen and Australia. Memory and the environment tend to be “trans-localized” between geographically distant places which, despite their apparent duality, reflect the displacement of the character (and of all characters) as a condition of identity. Sallis’s writing interrogates the state of the Australian nation in the post-Mabo and post-reconciliation eras, drawing again on Sneja Gunew’s points that transnational discourse on multiculturalism in Australia has to do with political discourse on the issues of origins and indigeneity. In *Haunted*

Nations, the Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalism, Gunew analyzes the political ambivalence and the pitfalls in the discourse on multiculturalism and national diversity. Gunew considers the ways in which postcolonial theory helps understand how imperial cultures have placed cultural diversity at the heart of their civilizing missions and how some cultural others, who are neither Indigenous nor Anglo-Australians, have scarcely been integrated in the national history of the country and settlement. She argues that the Australian cultural discourse tends to circumscribe the notion of “cosmopolitanism” to the terms “European” and “modern” and thus to Anglo Celtic discourse and language, which inevitably discards all migrants from non-Anglophone background and their descendants:

... who is included in those various narratives of Australia’s cultural traditions or other collective histories? The history of Australian immigration has been a very diverse one over two centuries but these nuances are not foregrounded when various compilations attempt to depict or characterize the nation. Of particular concern are the ways we are enmeshed in and positioned by discourses of nationalism with all their contradictions, tensions, and exclusions. The Australian caricatures of multicultural critical theory recall a timely warning contained in Paul Gilroy’s recent study *Black Atlantic* in which he mentions, in the British context, ‘a quiet cultural nationalism which pervades the work of some radical thinkers’ who prefer not to deal with the influences of forces (such as non-Anglo-Celtic nationals and their concerns) they consider to be outside the national borders. (Gunew, “Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism” 27)

Gunew’s reference to Paul Gilroy is interesting and useful since *Black Atlantic* provides a conceptual approach highlighting the failure of culture discourse to resonate and subvert nationalist discourses and the need to re-interpret tradition and modernity.

Sallis’s work reflects Gunew’s and Gilroy’s views on multicultural nations and on the resurgence of nationalistic discourses in postcolonial societies. Indeed, the novelist advocates another inclusive approach to cultural otherness, showing that those other histories, flowing on the margins of Australia, subvert not only the Eurocentric construction of the nation and of multiculturalism that respectively tend to exclude Middle-East culture and input. She contends through the act of writing that other histories and modes of interpretations and readings are possible and that they are essential to the construction of a space common to all:

It is strange that the popular and bureaucratic use of the term multicultural does not include Aboriginal cultures - that is usually a separate entity, portfolio, art gallery, department. To me the faultline in our multiculturalism lies in the silence about Aboriginal cultures, the distinguishing of and the failure to value these cultures as an integral part of us. This is the primary failure. Aboriginal cultures are left to be part of the multicultural nation by ... glaring silence. (Sallis, “Australian Dream, Australian Nightmare”)

In *Hiam*, the encounter and connection of the “oriental” migrant other with Indigenous Australia operates through the overlaying of a geographic space marked by the subtle manifestation of the Indigenous Songlines and a personal experience marked by stories reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*. The novel contends that exile not only implies displacement and confrontation with a new environment but also that such an environment, the Australian Outback, tends to operate on the consciousness and compels readers to rethink Australia’s modernity through globalization, through errantry and/or nomadism. *The City of Sealions*, for instance, shows that “global individuals can no longer count on a stable environment,” that “they are doomed to be exiled from themselves and summoned to invent the nomad culture that the contemporary world requires” (Bourriaud 77). In *Mahjar*, for instance, the characters are estranged from their own “identity,” a state which never ceases to fluctuate so that they never

fit into a specific category or are never integrated into the space of the nation. The constant shifts and displacements that Sallis's characters undergo, between home and the world, seem to operate around Homi Bhabha's theorization of the "unhomely," understood not as a state of lacking home, or the opposite of having a home, but rather as the recognition that the frontier between the world and the home is breaking down. Thus, most characters come to realise that in "displacement the border between the home and the world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that it is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha, "The World and the Home" 141).

The idea that Australian history has been essentially written from a Eurocentric and nationalistic perspective and that the "oriental" others have been pushed even further on the margins of the multicultural and national space is subverted through a mode of writing that operates as a vista onto other histories of the nation, readings of the land and people's imaginaries. In *The City of Sealions*, history is never objectively stored all the more since stories take a world of their own and have the power to influence history. Discussing her work and the role of fiction, Sallis highlights that tackling cultural otherness requires that authors stand behind a context, an idiom, and beyond themselves. She insists that it is then necessary for writers to become observers from the inside (Sallis, "Research Fiction"). Sallis's experience of the Middle-East, which provided her extensive knowledge of Arabic culture and of Arabic, has been an influence on her literary themes and writing skills. Such an experience is relevant in her fine use of languages and exploration of cultures:

I spent several years researching Arab culture and literature, exploring in particular the ways the *Arabian Nights* was appropriated into the Western canon and influenced, or helped codify, the ways the West perceived Arab culture and people, both in the academy and on a popular level. I studied Arabic language intensively and travelled over to the Middle East repeatedly. (Sallis, "Research Fiction")

The novelist's own immersion in Middle-Eastern cultures and her depiction of shifting subjectivities in a global environment both tend to support the idea that national representations are imagined concepts and that the circulation of individuals and cultures invariably initiates new forms of enrootings, in an altermodern space:

Where am I now? Studying Arabic influenced how I read in English. English sometimes has for me an Arabic shadow. Arabic always has an English shadow, as English is still by far my dominant language. Arabic made me appreciate the almost glassy precision of English, and to enjoy its strengths and weaknesses. Compared with each other, English is perhaps like mosaic chips; Arabic like oil paints. (Sallis, "Foster Mother-Tongue" 158)

Sallis highlights with poetic precision the connection or reverberation between Arabic and English, which encompasses the historical ties that both languages established through the scope of Imperialism. The comparison she makes between English and "mosaic chips" suggests that English as a Lingua Franca is traversed by so many geographies that it has become a mosaic, in other words a multicultural space, but that such a space implies respectively a sense of unity through fragmentation, i.e. the "chips," while Arabic like "oil paints" is durable and flexible. Thus, by associating and dissociating English and Arabic (languages and cultures), the novelist clearly writes back to Australia's multiculturalism and to the political and imagined white nation. In so doing, she endeavours to show that multiculturalism is a restrictive concept, that multiculturalism designs a space where the mainstream (Anglo-Australia) has remained strong and articulate, and still operates as the embodiment of the nation and of official history. According to Sallis, the cultural others form the periphery that does not have a proper history, is silenced and subordinate.

In her work, Eva Sallis attempts to reconceptualise migrant and refugee histories, not as liminal histories of the nation's history but as a dynamic history of a people—a collective history that can only operate as a set of interconnected experiences. She is, to use Sneja Gunew's words, "a globaletic writer, someone who facilitates new relations between national cultures and the global" (Gunew, "A Multilingual Life" 12). *Hiam*, *The City and Sealions*, and *Mahjar* seek to demonstrate that culture constitutes an unconnected and mobile entity, that terms like "post-colonialism" and "multiculturalism," which can be totalizing tend to elide difference. Sallis, in fact, joins a long line of Australian authors who depict the nation as the space of *exotes*, suggesting, as Victor Segalen once explained, "that there is no other; rather, there are other places, *elsewheres*, none of which is original, still less a standard for comparison" (qtd. in Bourriaud 67). A novelist and activist, Eva Sallis, now Eva Hornung, not only writes against colonial history but also tackles postcolonial history and Australia's place in a global environment, advocating diversity and warning against the dangers of uniformity, against new forms of nationalisms stemming from multiculturalism.

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