TRANSCULTURAL *LIBANITÉ* IN AMIN MAALOUF'S *ORIGINES*

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ABSTRACT: *This article critically engages with Amin Maalouf's novel Origines (2004). By drawing implicitly on Mikhail Epstein's theory of transculture, I intend to explore the libanité paradigm, and to examine how it shapes the view of the Lebanese subject towards the West. By libanité, I refer to the religious and political elements that are central in defining Lebanese ethnic identity. I argue that within the Lebanese context, the transcultural process is not limited to immigrant characters who live in the West, but also it emerges in subjects who decide not to leave their homeland. What distinguishes this paper is its analysis of the relaxed, nomadic attitude adopted by characters when faced with issues linked to cultural allegiance. They appear to be 'in place' and 'out of place' whether they stay in Lebanon or decide to be geographically dislocated to a Western country. Furthermore, the main country of destination discussed in this novel is Cuba, which history has been mainly examined on the experiences of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and its impact on the Caribbean society. In terms of migration, therefore, very little investigation exists on the early 20th century Arab migration into Cuba. Maalouf's Origines gives voice to Arabs to speak about their experience with the new island. On a larger scale, this introduces a new dimension to the study of minority communities from Muslim-majority Eastern regions who reside in the Caribbean societies today. This is a salient issue in the islands to develop further their cultural diversity.*

KEYWORDS: transculture, identity, migration, history, maalouf

INTRODUCTION

This article critically engages with Amin Maalouf's novel *Origines* (2004). The French Lebanese-born author was raised in a Catholic family that produced twenty writers since the 18th century. Maalouf studied economics and sociology at Beirut's Jesuit schools, but he decided to follow his father's steps in becoming a journalist who covers various conflicts throughout the Middle East and Africa. In 1975, one of Lebanon's bloodiest chapters opened with the civil war. Shocked by the profound ethnic tension, Maalouf moved with his family to Paris, where he resides today. The intense feelings he lived in his country of origin were revisited in his novels through questions he raised about identity, memory, migration, and an exploration of cultural acceptance between the East and the West. His literary work, written in French and translated into more than forty languages includes more than ten novels, numerous essays, and four opera librettos. One of Maalouf's nonfiction books is *Les croisades vues par les Arabes* (1983), *The Crusaders Through Arab Eyes*, which examines the historical origins of mistrust that has led to clashes between the Arab East and the West. His most widely held works also include Leo Africanus (1986), *The Rock*

of Tanios[1] (1993), *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*[2] (1992), among many others. The remarkable quality of Maalouf's literary work has gained him literary prizes and several honorary doctorates.

Origines is an intergenerational saga that recounts the family history of Maalouf's paternal grandfather, Botros. It is set during the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in the mountains of Lebanon and in Havana, Cuba. The story excavates the hidden past of Botros, a poet and an educator who, despite dreaming about living abroad all his life, never leaves Lebanon, and Gebrayel, a wealthy self-made businessman, who settles in Cuba and is not nostalgic about coming back. What provides the framework of the novel are the letters exchanged between the two main characters. Also, the author describes his own journey to Cuba on the outlook for every possible trail from the past regarding his family. According to Maalouf, the history of Botros and Gebrayel, which is compounded of many belongings, has made of him the person he is at present. In this book, the events move across time and space bringing to light the obscure corners of late Ottoman nationalism, and the dynamics of Lebanese sectarianism. But the narrative never loses track of its central thread: lift the legendary shadow from family's past to allow a more vibrant cultural insight.

The significance of this research is in adopting an approach different than those linked to memory which has been by far taken by scholars who analyzed *Origines*. By drawing implicitly on Mikhail Epstein's theory of transculture, I intend to explore the *libanité* paradigm, and to examine how it shapes the view of the Lebanese subject towards the West. By *libanité,* I refer to the religious and political elements that are central in defining Lebanese ethnic identity. I argue that within the Lebanese context, the transcultural process is not limited to immigrant characters who live in the West, but also it emerges in subjects who decide not to leave homeland. This is present throughout the whole narrative, and particularly is embodied in the figure of Maalouf's grandfather, Botros, who is able to navigate between Eastern and Western cultures without undergoing a lifelong physical displacement as seen with his brother, Gebrayel. This study has the potential to promote an account of integration in subjects of Eastern origin who choose to stay in their homeland, and not to migrate to the West. So, what distinguishes this paper is its analysis of the relaxed, nomadic attitude adopted by characters when faced with issues linked to cultural allegiance. They appear to be 'in place' and 'out of place' whether they stay in Lebanon or decide to be geographically dislocated to a Western country. Furthermore, the main country of destination discussed in this novel is Cuba, which history has been mainly examined on the experiences of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and its impact on the Caribbean society. In terms of migration, therefore, very little investigation exists on the early 20th century Arab migration into Cuba. Maalouf's *Origines* gives voice to Arabs to speak about their experience with the new island. On a larger scale, this

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[1] Originally, Le Rocher de Tanios (1993)
[2] Originally, Les Identités meurtrières (1998)

introduces a new dimension to the study of minority communities from Muslim-majority Eastern regions who reside in the Caribbean societies today. This is a salient issue in the islands to develop further their cultural diversity.

Understanding the history of the Lebanese Mountains:

In this section, I throw light on the history of early to mid 19th century Mount Lebanon, in which the peoples lived under the constant threat of foreign great powers. The novel provides an alternative narrative of unheard, common-person stories that challenge in their complexity the well-documented "historical facts" of the Lebanese Mountains.

The inhabitants of the Lebanon Mountains were viewed with contempt by Ottomans: They were the villains who lived in remote, isolated areas. Ottoman rulers found it costly and irrelevant to govern the locals directly; for that, they relied on creating familial hierarchies to enforce their authority through the hand of notable families of the region that would collect taxes for the Empire and ensure order and security in its territories (Mansel 2010, 92). To prevent any act of treachery or political competition, the Ottoman rule tried to play out locals against each other, and to seek military intervention when necessary (Hakim 2013, 17).

At the time of revival of Beirut as a commercial center in the Mediterranean East, U.S. and British protestant missionaries arrived at the capital city, and later extended to the Lebanese Mountains where their presence failed to influence the Maronites and old Roman Catholic groups, such as the Jesuits and the Lazarists, who resisted them in the mount and back in Beirut (Salibi 2003, 161-62).

Starting from 1820, Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Ottoman governor-general of Egypt, gained power - from the Sultan- over the Levant. Under his rule, taxation was equalized among the public of the Lebanese Mountains, and economic as well as administrative laws were modernized. While foreigners and merchants admired the new changes, locals rejected forced labor, military conscription, confiscation of crops, and other forms of state monopolies. This led to domestic rebellions and encouraged Maronite peasants to shift their political and religious loyalties from muqata'jis[3], who were bribed by the British to terminate local insurrections, to their own communities. Sectarianism became an integral part of the political agenda as the region was increasingly falling under various foreign occupations at multiple levels. For instance, Muhammad Ali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, armed the Christians to fight the Druze rebellion; thereby initiating the first confrontation between Lebanese sects after a long-lived peaceful balance that neighbors enjoyed in their mounts (Traboulsi 2012, 12). But in 1840, Richard Wood, a servant of the Ottoman and British governments, stated that sects, in Lebanon, were remarkable for their hatred of each other (Royal Historical Society 1966, 243-44). In that year, Wood managed to bring the Maronite and Druze communities together, only to make them rise against Egyptian

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[3] Muqata'jis were feudal notables, such as the emirs and sheikhs of the old landed elite families.

occupation. The success of this plan brought with it local invitation of European protection which was embodied in the extension of foreign schools, embassies, and consulates (Hourani 2013, 276). So by mid- 19th century, many communities living along the Lebanon Mountain range acquired knowledge of foreign cultures and languages. But it also produced politically collective identities as locals sought to use foreign powers to support their own national goals (Harris 2012, 277). Sectarian conflicts were never fully repaired, and eventually led to the 1860-61 blood shedding in the Lebanese Mountains, and later on to the country's civil war that lasted 15 years (1975-1990). Religious divides between and among Christians, Muslims, and Druze still persist up to this date in Lebanon because of confessionalism. This is an official system that allocates positions in government and parliament between diverse religious communities, commonly denoted in Lebanon by the term 'confessions', according to their demographic proportion in the country (Haddad 2002, 292).

On Epstein's transcultural theory:

As Mikhail N. Epstein explains, a transcultural orientation is acquired by living "diffused" in a new dimension (a "Continuum"), simultaneously "inside and outside of all existing cultures." (Epstein 2009, 333). Transcultural sensibility records the confluential nature of cultures, where the traditional dichotomies—the West and the Rest, dominator and dominated, native and immigrant—that have thus far characterised multicultural and postcolonial discourses are superseded. It also expresses the re-shaping of national collective imaginaries in their efforts to adjust to the path laid down in a new age of transnational economic, political, social, and cultural processes. A transcultural orientation is a mode of reflexive identity that is, in Mikhail N. Epstein's terms, "the self-distancing, self-estrangement and self-criticism of one's own cultural identities and assumptions"; and the critical perspective that sees cultures as relational webs and acknowledges the transitory, confluential, and mutually transforming nature of cultures (Berry and Epstein 1999, 307). Accordingly, transcultural identity does not mean to disown or ignore the culture we are born into and the effects of that particular culture in our cultural make up and sense of identity. As Epstein points out, origins "are essential"—as are the deconstructionist attempts to demystify them—but instead of insisting on their affirmation—or their deconstructive demystification—we should transcend them. Epstein concludes his reasoning stating that the main purpose of culture is, through a creative and historical process of "disorigination and liberation," to make us human beings "a river and not a dam"; that is, "Culture has any sense only insofar as it makes us dissidents and fugitives from our nature, our sex, or race, or age" (Epstein 2009, 341-42).

The transcultural show us new modes of identity-building as well as new models of interpretation that perhaps can, in Epstein's words, "opens a possibility for globalization not as homogenization but, rather, as further differentiation of cultures and their 'dissemination' into transcultural individuals" (Epstein 2009, 328). Maalouf's *Origines* is a transcultural literary work which definition Arianna Dagnino proposes to be "a work that transcends the borders of a single culture

43

in its choice of topic, vision and scope and contributes to feeding the need for a wider global literary perspective" (Dagnino 2015, 178). I will focus on analyzing the character Botros Maalouf who experiences an emerging transcultural sensitivity – "the freedom of every person to live on the border of one's "inborn" culture or beyond it" – that appears better suited to the needs of a rapidly globalising society (Epstein 2009, 334).

Transcultural *libanité* in *Origines*:

In Maalouf's literary work, Lebanese identity undergoes a cultural metamorphosis that is inherent in the "dispatriation" process (the transcultural process that may be triggered by moving outside one's homeland borders– physically or imaginatively). Using a transcultural lens which in Berry's and Epstein's words is "a perspective in which all cultures look decentered in relation to all other cultures, including one's own," I focus on the analysis of the narrator's paternal grandfather, Botros Maalouf (Berry and Epstein 1999, 312).

Analysis:

This memoir in study develops a wide network of characters linked to the first-person narrator's origins by different familial and societal ties, but it focuses particularly on the narrator's paternal grandfather, Botros Maalouf.

Botros is the character who presents more inner contradictions than any other character. He is a man of the world, advanced for his time, and constantly judged by his comrades because of his sophisticated behavior. Apparel is a distinctive feature of Botros. He always goes in public wearing a black cloak and bareheaded, "neither with an oriental turban nor with a European hat" (Maalouf 2008, 98) This is a way to set himself as a revolutionary man of the world, who is not confined to neither of the socially constructed binaries. Botros is beholden to nowhere, and he expresses his individual cultural identity as "a mode of being experienced at the crossroads of cultures" (Epstein 2004, 48). So by deciding to not cover his head, Botros expresses his *libanité* by distinguishing himself from both tradition and the West.

The transcultural path allows a process of transformation – a metamorphosis – that even if played at an individual level can have a collective resonance. Botros is a schoolteacher who lives "between notebooks and inkwells" (Maalouf 2008,180). He continues his studies in an American school, and becomes an innovative educator as he decides to build with his wife Nazeera the "École Universelle" ("Universal School") where neither religious confession nor gender is set as a requisite for admitting children (Maalouf 2008, 181). The radical difference the Universal School sets from the existing Catholic School leads to a heated competition that represents the tension between two different worldviews. The competition does not cease, and eventually divides the community. Being transcultural leads Botros to admiration and repudiation from neighbours in the Lebanese Mountains. Even Botros's brother, Theodoros, who is a Catholic leader in the

community, advises Botros to close the Universal School when the tensions are at their peak. However, Botros's engagement with non-confessional education does not surrender to the attacks of fanaticism in the neighbourhood. The narrator depicts Botros as a man inspired by Enlightenment values and an activist who dreams of bringing "the Orient" on an equal footing with the "developed Occident." Later, Botros flees with his wife and family, spending much of his time in Beirut, where he continues as an educator giving private lessons in a room he calls "The Office of Knowledge and Work."

Furthermore, contradictions between different religious allegiances are also evident in a family fight that develops within the narration. Botros's libertine way of thinking makes him decide not to baptize his children. He wants them to decide to which religious community they belong when they become adults. He also expresses that a "community of believers is not a tribe to which one belongs from birth" creating for himself many enemies among the religious sects (Maalouf 2008, 186).

Tensions lead Theodoros, the Melkite priest, to baptize his brother's sons in secret. This egoistic decision generates reactions in the members of the mother's family. To seek vengeance, the children's maternal uncle inscribes them in the census as Protestants. As a result, Maalouf's father and his brothers do not know at some point to which religious community they belong. According to the narrator, it is not a coincidence that later on his father's older brother becomes a religious fanatic who expresses a feeling of reverence for the Crusades or the Inquisition and professes that there is no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church. It is surprising that a son of Botros can profess such things, and Maalouf links this to the fact that Botros's children are forced to be baptized by Theodoros – against Botros's will – before they become adults.

This is not the only example of tensions between family members because of religious extremism. I have mentioned how Botros and Theodoros differ in terms of religious allegiances and how this tension is reproduced again in Botros's children. The narrator's particular position in this regard is clear in the text. The narrator's parents were afraid that he would take the path of his fanatical uncle, and they would tell him that the lack or excess of religion can be a tragedy for families. Enlightenment ideals of rationality, liberty, and progress are zealously championed by Botros whose efforts to improve his Lebanese land illustrates the messianic hopes and bitter disappointments of a Levantine liberalism that is still half-born.

In his telling, the narrator states that "[Botros] proclaimed proudly that he was an "Ottoman citizen," "and his dream was to see a large state made up of many nations, in which all men would be equal, regardless of religion or language, and would exercise their rights under the leadership of an honest, benevolent sovereign" (Maalouf 2008, 108). Even to the disbelief of village neighbors, Botros insists on naming his first female child "Kemal" out of his respect for Turkey's secular leader, Kemal Ataturk. Botros does not feel like a European in a multi-cultural atmosphere

of the Empire. He glorifies the imperial history of the Middle Eastern empires, including the Ottomans. Not only in this novel, but also in *Disordered World: Setting a New Course for the Twenty-first Century* (2009), another novel by Amin Maalouf, Ataturk is presented as a powerful leader and a symbol of progress who has had a lasting influence on the Middle East (Baktir and Mert, 84).

Despite all the conflicts the Ottoman Empire faces, Botros hopes for the Middle East to be reformed and restored to its splendid days. He admires Enver Pasha, Niyazi Bey, Abdulhamid II and Ataturk for their efforts to modernize the state. Yet he is also critical of Pasha and Bey for their emphasis on national ideas which he believes to be deadly for the Middle East (Baktir and Mert 2019, 81). He says: "When the rebellion first broke out, everyone was convinced that the two officers would be brought back to Constantinople in chains and made to suffer a punishment that would serve as a warning" (Maalouf 2008, 99). Botros first expresses his feelings about these "valiant soldiers who shed their blood for the sake of freedom" (Maalouf 2008, 100). Then he explains "that the whole world is watching us and saying, "The Ottoman people are no longer in chains. Now that the pretext they invoked to justify their backwardness has been swept away, let's see what they will do!" (Maalouf 2008, 101). As an Ottoman subject, Botros believes that it should again be possible for the diverse people of the Middle East to lead a peaceful life under the Ottoman Empire. His wish has been a dream of the Orient for a long time and it should become reality: "The desire for change, liberation, and a galvanizing force for the "awakening of the Orient" had been budding for decades in many provinces throughout the empire—even as far as my village" (Maalouf 2008, 105). This dream reflects a strong desire to witness the rebirth of the Orient . Besides, Botros states that this wish explains why the Ottoman Empire joined the First World War and stood beside Germany. "First, there was the war, the Great War, which the Sublime Porte had entered, in November 1914, on the side of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Enver and the Young Turks expected from this a miraculous renaissance of the Ottoman Empire, but ultimately, as we know, it led to its disintegration" (Maalouf 2008, 192). Botros here implicitly refers to the policy and tricks of Abdulhamid II to create conflict between the Europeans. He compliments Abdulhamid II and flatters him and the Ottoman family in a poem " Of course, our first and last words of praise must be addressed to the person who is behind all beneficent actions, His Majesty Abdul Hamid Khan, our venerated sovereign, sultan, and son of sultan, may God extend his flourishing reign … If you want to know what metal virtue is made of, Look to the Ottoman family. Destiny, which is often cruel, has shown its benevolence By giving us Abdul Hamid as sovereign" (Maalouf 2008, 107).

Throughout the narrative, Botros is presented as a man of ideals who could have taken the chance to leave Lebanon and live in Cuba but decides to stay in his homeland and fight against all the present ignorance. He has a dream to restore and reform "the Orient" which has been the center of enlightenment and knowledge for centuries.

46

"If you wonder what is wrong with the peoples of the Orient and why they are so often denounced. You will find that they have many qualities and only one shortcoming: ignorance. This disease is curable, but it is treated through knowledge, not emigration! Knowledge was born in the Orient before it migrated to the West, and it ought to return to the fold (Maalouf 2008, 97).

For Botros, progress in the Western world is not independent of Middle Eastern influence. Originated from the Oriental world, wisdom is transformed into the Occident. Botros believes that the Orient should first excavate the past and discover the possible causes for the present corruption. It is not possible for his people to compete the Europeans without understanding the real reasons for the underdevelopment. And, it is not possible to imitate the West in order to compete with it. The root cause which is corruption is what needs to be eradicated from the Orient. Accordingly, Botros's transcultural *libanité* is not based on a blind imitation to the West, but rather on using its necessary modern inventions to restore the country. By abolishing ignorance and paving the way for an accessible, high-quality education, he dreams of a developed and modern Orient. Botros takes the Europeans as an example and avoids mimicry as he tries to expand the activities of his Western-style school to increase literacy and to convey knowledge to more people. This particular position is explicitly mentioned within the dialogue of a play written by Botros himself: "It is not enough to just want to imitate the West, it is also important to know what is worth copying and what is not!" (Maalouf 2008, 98).

What Botros desires yet struggles to achieve is to bring the West under the roof of the mighty Ottoman Empire. This highlights Epstein's concept of the transcultural being of having an inclusive vision of culture/s that stresses the power of confluences, overlappings and interactions rather than that of polarities.

Many Lebanese viewed Latin America as a place to make fortune. But those who end up emigrating cannot live without the constant pressure from their comrades at home who constantly judge them. "They never escape the gaze of the relatives they left behind" (Maalouf 2008, 142). As I have mentioned, the "eyes" of the others are always a determinant for all characters in *Origines*. They cannot escape the gaze of their family members even when they are in another country. This is clear in the main migration story in the memoir. Botros's trip to Cuba is explained by the family and neighbors in the Lebanese Mountains as one of Botros's heroic actions. It is said that Botros goes to the other side of the world to rescue his younger brother, Gebrayel. However as the narrator moves on in his research, he understands that the story is slightly different. Botros seriously considers the possibility of leaving his hometown several times when his brother, Gebrayel, offers him a job and a place to live in Havana. When Botros travels to Cuba, he does not dismiss the possibility of staying, but the events on the island do not proceed as he expected. Nevertheless, even when he comes back to Lebanon, Botros considers starting a new life in Havana. "Under the mask of the wise adult, there was a distraught young man. A young man who wanted to leave, who envied Gebrayel for having left, but who didn't dare take the plunge. And

47

he tied his own hands with all sorts of moral arguments to justify his indecision (Maalouf 2008, 70). Botros constantly reflects on whether migrating is an act of courage or an act of cowardice. He even writes a play in which the characters discuss the pros and cons of migration. At the end, his decision to stay in the country is in part the result of several accidents and his hesitation to emigrate is also determined by the feeling that his people need him. Botros sees, in Ellen Berry and Mikhail Epstein's words, that "the goal becomes to "mutate" beyond any singular or bounded mode of cultural identity – even a hybridized identity – in order to "become transcultural" (Berry and Epstein 1999, 130)

Botros is a transcultural character and an imaginative writer who, by choice and by life circumstances experiences cultural dislocation, lives a transnational experience, cultivates bilingual proficiency, physically immerses himself in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, exposes himself to diversity, and nurtures plural, flexible identities. "When speaking English, Botros changes his name to 'Peter', and in French Botros becomes 'Pierre'." (Maalouf 2008, 165). Botros's hybrid identity flows from a background that is particular in its capacity to navigate allegiances to different languages and nationalities and also in its understanding of different religious and political bonds. In my grandparents' thoughts, these different allegiances had their own "compartment": their state was "Turkey", their language Arabic, their province Syria, and their homeland the Lebanese Mountains" (Maalouf 2008, 211). On top of this, their diverse religious allegiances were not experienced in harmony, but there was a certain fluidity that has disappeared with the rise of nationalisms.

Identity is thus constructed within the memoir in relation to others and also in relation to the political and historical context. The narrator describes how the crisis of the Ottoman Empire affects his family and shares how it is impossible to separate the political from the personal. What interested Botros was to know if he, being born into a minority community, with a Christian religion and Arabic language, would, in a modernized Ottoman Empire, obtain his full place as a citizen without having to pay the price of his birth for the rest of his life. In addition, Botros redefines his allegiances through the territories as he feels connected to Cuba because of his personal involvement with his brother who lives there. However, this form of being affected combines feelings of transculturalism with feelings of dislocation that every act of migration entails. Botros's transcultural *libanité* is similar to that of liquid modern individuals whose hybrid identities and locations inspire a mix of feelings. "Locations where the feeling of belonging was traditionally invested (job, family, neighbourhood) are [for them] either not available, or untrustworthy" (Bauman 2013, 30).

Botros lives with a multiple sense of belonging, made of plural affiliations and a somewhat dispersed sense of allegiance (and of place/home), where the borders of a single nation are transcended in favour of a planetary view of humanity (and community). This takes the reader in a new direction and towards a new solution to the eternal problem of identity. That is, the

48

development and acquisition of a plural, flexible, metamorphical identity, with multiple states of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Origines (2004) by Amin Maalouf is a book for marginalized groups in the societies they inhabit. It encourages majorities trapped in fixed identities to pay attention to the diversity of minority life. This is a literary work interested in the interactive dynamics across cultures. It is a transnational narrative that deals with an exploratory travel, migratory flow, diasporic experience, and neonomadic trajectory. For that, this research article aims to analyze Maalouf's memoir using Mikhail Epstein's theory of transculture to analyze the *libanité* paradigm. I focus on the narrator's grandfather, Botros Maalouf, to highlight how individual identity can be fluid and intermingled through complex permeations.

Origines is a literary expression of what it means to understand the nuances in cultural transactions and cultural transformations through maps of humans and not roots of trees. Migration as constitutive of identity is discussed within the narration as a positive act of openness towards a global world. By examining *Origines* through a transcultural lens, the reader is able to grasp and interpret in a more profound way the often-unpredictable influence of other cultures in our contemporary. Our identity is something we learn and is far from being innate. And, we all possess the incredibly powerful ability to influence another person's identity when we transcend the narrowness of monocultural constraints.

It is a question of changing mindsets and cultural approaches to develop transcultural understanding of our identities that are in a perpetual motion. This is significant because it promotes the value of confluence in place of heightening conflicts and cultural clashes and calls attention for more fruitful encounters and mutual respect.

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