

Transculturalizing Space in Arab Diasporic Poetry: A Spatial Study of Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry Collection *Transfer*

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ABSTRACT

*In the aftermath of the spatial turn that started in the seventies of the previous century, much attention has been devoted to the representation of space in literary criticism. Prior to this, space either served as a background for the events in a literary work or was viewed within an extremely narrow scope which defined it as either central or peripheral. With such reductive readings, the need for a revolutionary critical approach to space in literary criticism has risen, not only in frequently read literary genres but in more recently developing ones. One case in point is Arab diasporic literature, in which space plays an integral role not only in shaping the diasporic relation to native and foreign lands, but in shaping the cross-cultural relations it engages in as well. In the poetry collection *Transfer* (2011) by the Palestinian-American author Naomi Shihab Nye, space is perceived beyond the physical reality of the native or the diasporic place which witnesses the interaction between the diasporic and the foreigner and is, therefore, transculturalized. As concluded from the analysis of a selection of the poems from *Transfer*, this transcultural space is marked a number of features. First, it cannot be defined geographically as central or peripheral, it cannot function outside a specific context, and it cannot be separated from the discourse of the text. In this sense, not only would adopting a spatial approach to Arab diasporic literature help deconstruct more traditional approaches to space, but it would also help address some of the most commonly raised questions in Arabic diasporic literature from a transcultural perspective.*

KEYWORDS

Spatiality, Arab diasporic poetry, peripherality, transculturalizing space, discourse, power relations, social interaction

Introduction

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said explains that a “geographical inquiry into [the] historical experience”¹ of imperialism is necessary to understand the role space has played in the rise, progress and later decline of the Western imperial project. As writers of the empire have chosen to adopt a temporal approach in their literary works, particularly the novel, the role of space has been underestimated and restricted to a mere background against which events in the literary work take place. And this, in return, has led to the internalization of deeply rooted misconceptions regarding the role space has played in shaping the intersecting relations between the Western colonizer, the colonized and the land. Had space been perceived beyond the physical reality of the places which witnessed the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, these relations would have been better understood and dealt with.²

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), 6.

2 A good example on the underestimated role of space in Western colonial literature is Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*. For more information on the role of space in the novel, see Sailaja Krishnamurthi's 2002 article “Reading between the Lines: Geography and Hybridity In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*”.

Said's insistence on the need to devote more critical attention to the representation of space in colonial literature lies at the core of spatial critical studies today. As a recent school of literary criticism, spatial criticism has studied the different ways space interacts with the literary text, shaping it and being shaped by it as well. Thus as the element of space is highlighted in the literary text, new readings and interpretations are brought to the fore in the literary genre being analyzed. A case in point is the recently established field of diasporic literatures which, in many ways, has fallen a prey to the duality on which many of the colonial views Said talks about have been founded. No doubt, space plays a crucial role in the way cross-cultural relations are defined and represented in diasporic literature, but, as in the case of colonial literature, its role has been either neglected or underestimated. In this sense, establishing a discourse of spatiality based on which crucial questions in the body of diasporic literature can be approached paves the way for revolutionary readings of the function of space in it.

How can the relationship between the homeland and the foreign land be spatially defined? How can Said's call for a "geographical inquiry"³ into the diasporic's experience be read? Would the temporal approach adopted in Western imperial literature be apt for the diasporic experience, despite the fact that the relationship is reversed in this case? Would space still be perceived in terms of the same binarism which has resulted in the colonial context from unequal distribution of power relations? These questions and others will be addressed in this study, which aims to shed light on the role the study of spatiality plays in addressing many questions raised in Arab diasporic literature as manifested in the poetry collection *Transfer* (2011) by the Palestinian-American author Naomi Shihab Nye.

Spatial Discourse: From Space to Spatialization

The representation of space in literature has traditionally been restricted to one of two extremes: centrality or peripherality. In the Introduction to his book *Spatiality* (2013), Robert Tally Jr. explains that this duality is a result of dominating Western thought which has since the 1960s defined critical variables in terms of binary oppositions.⁴ The unequal distribution of power relations in the areas of gender, ethnic, colonial studies as well as the more recently initiated fields of queer and spatial studies has resulted in the establishment of imbalanced relations in which the presence of one side is dependent on the absence of the other.⁵ In spatial studies, the imbalanced hierarchies of power relations between the different nations or even within the same nation have led to a random representation of places, with some labelled as central and others as peripheral. Thus a place which is inhabited by a nation that exercises any kind of authority over other nations takes on by analogy the same authoritative centrality of its people and becomes a point of reference against which other places are defined.

3 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 6.

4 Robert Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013), 12–16.

5 Michel Foucault's projection of the knowledge-power correlative in *Punishment and Discipline* (1975) is of relevance here, since according to Bentham's Panopticon model power is produced spatially. As the prisoner internalizes the fact that a specific place of the prison (the tower) is where the guards are found, he subconsciously associates that space with authority and reacts to that association.

Unequal power hierarchies have led to the erroneous misconception that the two terms of “space” and “place” are interchangeable. Dwelling on this point in an article titled “Space and Spatiality in Theory” (2012), Yi-Fu Tuan argues that due to the binary parameters based on which it has traditionally been defined, the elastic notion of space is mistakenly perceived only in terms of its physical reality. Perceiving space as a physical entity turns it into a place that is geographically defined by location and borders. Thus while place is marked by a fixed rigidity that stems from being physically limited by borders and location, space is marked by a sense of fluidity that stems from existing beyond those physical limitations. To this end, Tuan defines space as a

cultural and experiential construction, the meaning of which can vary widely from people to people, and from individual to individual. This fact – that space has an unusual range of subtly differentiated meanings – invites us to engage in [the] tracing of their evolutionary course [...]. In other words, space remains geography, not physics.⁶

Tuan’s description of space as a cultural construction means that it should not be regarded as a fixed entity, as the meaning of that construction differs across nations and among individuals. Thus perceiving space in terms of opposites is sure to result in a fixed kind of identity to those belonging to either side of the spectrum, giving whoever belongs to the central places the power to control those belonging to the peripheral places. Nevertheless, the study of space and the critical approach (spatiality) which has accompanied its rise and development in literature has reversed the set parameters and proposed that in the poststructuralist context which breaks the bond between the two sides of the binary opposition, notions traditionally perceived as fixed are approached in more fluid terms.⁷ In this sense, the notion of space is no longer perceived as a static entity in contemporary diasporic literature, but as a process through which the previously fixed essence of space is reconstructed. As the process of spatialization is put into action, space comes to simultaneously occupy the two opposite sides of the spectrum, becoming a product of the text and a means of its production at the same time. In his masterpiece *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre uses the term “spatial dialectic”⁸ to describe the simultaneity with which space functions in the text both as a product and as a means of production.

Is space a social relationship? Certainly – but one which is inherent to property relationships [...] and also closely bound up with the forces of production [...]; here we see the polyvalence of social space, its ‘reality’ at once formal and material. Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and all is determined by it. Thus this means of production, produced as such, cannot be separated

6 Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space and Spatiality in Theory,” *Dialogue in Human Geography* 201 (2012): 12–13.

7 In the introductory section to volume 14 of the journal *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, Robert Tally notes that, “spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences has occasioned an explosion of innovative, multidisciplinary scholarship in recent years. Spatially oriented literary studies, whether operating under the banner of literary geography, literary cartography, geophilosophy, geopoetics, geocriticism, or the spatial humanities more generally, have helped to reframe or to transform contemporary criticism by focusing attention, in various ways, on the dynamic relations among space, place, and literature. Spatial literary studies enable scholars to reflect upon the representation of space and place, whether in the real world, in imaginary universes, or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality. In examining spatial representation in literary works, spatially oriented criticism has also invoked inter- or transdisciplinary practices, frequently making productive connections to architecture, geography, history, politics, social theory, and urban studies, to name a few.” (1)

8 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Inc., 1991), 39, 78, 85.

either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society.⁹

Lefebvre's words refer to the continuous nature of spatial discourse in the text. Contrary to the secondary role space has played in colonial literature or even in more recent genres, the context in which Lefebvre's perception of spatial discourse does not succumb to any preimposed limitations, whether cultural, social, religious or political. The central and the peripheral in that discourse overlap, with less attention devoted to the differences traditionally kept on opposite poles. It should not be assumed, however, that because Lefebvre frees space from societal impositions that he dehistoricizes it. On the contrary, Lefebvre underscores the process which underlies the production of space and which, more importantly, places the process of its production within a well-defined context. If that context is disregarded, the production of space in the text is reduced to sets of oppositions.

[These spaces] are product of an activity which involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well-beyond the, for these are also political products, and strategic spaces. The term "strategy" connotes a great variety of products and actions: it combines [...] resources from peripheral spaces with the use of riches from industrial, urban, state-dominated centres.¹⁰

The discussion so far underscores the necessity of reading and representing space as a changing state of being, not as a fixed essence. Space is definitely not a place which is formed by monolithic views of politicians, men of religion, social classes or ethnic groups. Beyond all those categorizing constructions, spatial discourse is essentially paradoxical; it turns the text into a contested territory where "the hierarchy that regulated regional, national, or continental (even world) entities, assigning centers and peripheries"¹¹ collapses, placing its components within a reciprocal relationship.

In the context of diasporic literature, the contested territory that spatial discourse creates in the literary text becomes of significance. As borders are crossed and countries and continents are traversed, space begins to lose the rigidity with which a culturally, even sometimes politically, formed perception would impose on it. In place of these rigid and to a large extent inherited classifications, a new set of intersecting spatial relations is formed in which space is no longer perceived as being solely central or peripheral. Different places occupy the two positions as the gap between the two poles of that binarism decreases. This plurality in approach is a definite outcome of choosing to represent space contextually. To dehistoricize space is to fixate its relation to the context within which it works and this explains why the role of space has been regarded as secondary

9 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 85.

10 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 84.

11 Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, "The Spatial Turn in Literary Historiography," *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2011): 4.

to the production of meaning in the text and in reality prior to the spatial turn.¹² Space, however, is now politicized, taking an active part in shaping realities both outside the text and inside it.¹³

As spatial relations are produced discursively, they are freed from all societal categories imposed on them and come to acquire meaning transculturally. A transcultural approach to the study of space in diasporic literatures is therefore necessary to understand the role space plays in shaping cross-cultural relations, whether in positive or negative terms. In an article titled “Towards an Approach to Literary Space: Geopoetics and Geocriticism Crossing the Frontiers of Knowledge” (2017), Alain Montandon et al. shed light on the importance of adopting a transcultural approach to the study of space in developing an open (as opposed to a closed) outlook on cultural identity and in creating a politics of inclusion, i.e. not exclusion.¹⁴ Transculturalizing space in this sense requires “a democratic reorganization of the asymmetries of power,”¹⁵ and necessitates “a new look on space, which is understood to be dynamic in its political and social dimensions as well as in its cultural and literary aspects.”¹⁶

How then can Said’s call for a “geographical inquiry”¹⁷ affect the transcultural experience of the diasporic? How could it affect the kind of identity the diasporic acquires as he crosses borders and shifts his place of living between his native land and the foreign land? How could the deeply-rooted culture-specific outlooks which have been internalized by the diasporic regarding the native land or the foreign land affect Said’s projection of belonging to the two places at the same time? These questions, amongst others, will be now raised with the aim of examining the role of spatial studies plays in facilitating a better understanding of the questions raised in Arabic literature written in diaspora.

Naomi Shihab Nye as a “Wandering Poet”

In a previously published article I co-authored with a fellow researcher,¹⁸ we dug into the roots of a phrase Nye has always used in her interviews to describe herself: “a wandering poet.”¹⁹ Describing herself as a drifter entails the multi-ethnic roots she has as a daughter of an exiled Palestinian

12 This point was elaborated on as early as 1958 by Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* (1958) in which he proposes that contrary to common knowledge the perception of space affects the representation and interpretation of geographical reality: “The reader of poems is asked to consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality.” Indeed, Bachelard attempts to bridge the gap between physical space and what he calls the space of imagination and to restructure internal and external spatial relations.

13 In an article titled “The Phenomenology of the Dwelling Space in Robert Frost’s Poetry,” Faisal Rawashdeh and Malek Zuraikat analyze the representation of space in the poetry of Frost in light of Bachelard’s view of space according to which our memories of the place are “spatially localized” (49), i.e. it is the imagination which structures the reality of the physical place. This point is often reiterated in the poetry collection which will be analyzed in the discussion below.

14 Alain Montandon, et al, “Towards an Approach to Literary Space: Geopoetics and Geocriticism Crossing the Frontiers of Knowledge,” *Literary Spaces and Critical Territories* (2017): 2.

15 Montandon, et al, “Towards an Approach to Literary Space,” 2.

16 Montandon, et al, “Towards an Approach to Literary Space,” 2.

17 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 6.

18 Eman Mukattash, and Bandar Mukattash, “Journeying In and Out: Revisiting the Concept of the ‘Journey’ in the Writings of Naomi Shihab Nye,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 8, no. 4 (2016): 603–629.

19 This description has accompanied Nye since her early two works *Tattooed Feet* (1977) and *Eye-to-Eye* (1978), both of which focus on the themes of the journey and the quest.

father and an American mother of German origin. It also comes as a result of the self-planted passion she has always had for traveling. Thus as the biography of Nye is read the period she lived as a teenager in her native Palestine cannot be discarded, nor can the forty plus years the author has spent traveling among countries in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. In this sense, Nye's itinerant existence is reflected in many of the literary works she has produced, including the poetry collection *Transfer* which she published in 2011 following the death of her father. The title itself refers to the important role space plays in explaining the culturally loaded messages that the poems in this collection impart to the reader. In an interview with Judy Woodruff (2013) following the publication of *Transfer*, Nye explains that though the title of the collection comes from "an actual airlines baggage tag," she has intentionally chosen it to give the reader the chance to consider "all the different kinds of transfers [they] make in [their] lives from one stage of [their] lives to another."²⁰ Thus the use of space in *Transfer*²¹ comes not only to refer to the literal change of place through a physical act of traveling, but as "a geographical traversal of borders and distances and as a discursive traversal of words in the poems."²²

To read the works in this poetry collection from the perspective of a spatial critic is therefore crucial to understanding potential messages in them. A spatial approach helps analyze the production of meaning in poetry like this, especially in a postmodern context which introduces space as a construct continuously being reconstructed. Further, this strategy facilitates the interpretation of multi-ethnic variables in literature produced by Arab authors living in diaspora from a new perspective by shedding light on the representation of space in the native land and the foreign one. To this end, the discussion below will analyze the representation of space in a selection of poems taken from *Transfer* to show to what extent the construction of the different spatial settings in the native land and the foreign land affects the diasporic's relation to both. As the diasporic traverses the multiple lived-in settings, the notion of space is gradually freed from the culturally monolithic perception which usually presents the native land as peripheral and the foreign land as central.

Discussion

Since the publication of her earliest collections of poetry, Nye has realized the importance of focusing on the role of space in the literary text. This has helped her arrive at a better understanding of the different experiences she has been through as an individual with a multicultural upbringing. Whether in America, in her homeland or in the other countries she has visited worldwide, the realization that what has helped her connect with a place is not its physical reality but its spatial reality has always been present in her work. The more she was able produce work and/or live in

20 Judy Woodruff, "Naomi Shihab Nye: 'Telling a story helped us figure out who we were,'" *PBS News Hour* (2013): 2.

21 *Transfer* is one of Nye's poetry collections which gains its specificity from the fact that its poems are written to mourn the death of her father and to reflect on several of the main events in his life before and after his immigration to the USA. In the Introduction to the collection, Nye explains that her father wanted her to write a book with him, but adds that he wanted the book to take the form of a "dialogue," a wish which she could not understand at the beginning. Yet as she explains, later on she was able find a thread that she thought was missing and breaking the "back and forth" (11) in that dialogue. It is the in-between state that her father has occupied in life, as a Palestinian refugee living in America as well as after his death as a spirit that lives in "A country beyond sight" (11)

22 Mukattash and Mukattash, "Journeying In and Out," 19.

a place without judging it by the reductive parameters by which spatial relations are usually read and analyzed, the more she has been able to represent space as an ongoing process in which the central and the peripheral, the physical and the textual, the national and the international are brought together. Thus the spatial aspect of her writings is no new topic of inquiry for readers or critics who already know that space is among the recurrent motifs in her poetry. Nevertheless, the significance of the present study, as pointed out above, lies in adopting spatiality as a critical approach and in employing the specialized terminology involved rather than in analyzing the representation of space in her poetry in a general context. Its significance also stems from the fact that applying the spatial approach to diasporic Arabic literature is a relatively unexplored critical and literary approach which is still in its infancy and thus needs more thorough critical analysis.

The discussion below will be divided into three spatial themes recurrent in the study of spatiality and found in the selected poems. The different places or references to places in the selected poems will be read in the context of these three themes with the aim of arriving at a more thorough understanding of the representation of space in Nye's poetry as well as Arab diasporic poetry in general.

Centralizing the Peripheral

Said's call for a "geographical inquiry into [the] historical experience"²³ of colonialism is a call to subvert the opposition which lies at the core of Western thought. In the colonial context of Saidian critical thought, this call translates into rejecting the dualities based on which space is perceived in Western colonial literature. Yet in a more generalized context it is not only the opposition between the colonizing country and the colonized country that needs revision, but the whole set of nominations of place which are treated by the same reductive standards of centrality and peripherality, such as the West and the East, the Old World and the New World, the city and the countryside. Commenting on the spatial aspect in Said's critical approach, Tally highlights the need to reconsider the function of space not only in the genre of colonial literary texts, but in other contemporary genres as well.

Just as the "country" and the "city" emerged, in different ways, as models for organizing the domestic spaces of Great Britain (and eventually, the world), the ancient dichotomy of "our land – barbarian land" translates into a basic structure with which to organize the spaces of one's imaginative geography [...]. Indeed, narrative is as much the contested "territory" that Said wishes to explore as the physical spaces of the earth.²⁴

Tally's words highlight the deconstructive context in which spatial critics work. Space, therefore, cannot be reduced to fixed essence unresponsive to change. On the contrary, space is constantly constructed and is contextualized during this process. This approach, it must be added, rejects predetermined labels which measure the centrality of a place based on the unequal distribution

²³ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 6.

²⁴ Tally, *Spatiality*, 92.

of power, and fails as a result to transculturalize it. Thus a place is central as long as the individual living in it and interacting with its sites sees it as so, not based on pre-set paradigms.

These two features can be traced in several of Nye's poems in *Transfer*. In "Storyteller," the use of the "door" opposes the fixed view of space and recasts it as a process. The initial question "Where is the door to the story?" goes together with Tally's call to free space from essentialist labels. The space where the storyteller is standing is not closed, nor is it geographically defined in terms of location or borders. Other sites are indeed mentioned in the poem to describe the space where the events took place in the past, such as "trees, stone village, the curling fire, the women "in thick dresses"²⁵ and the men "with smoky breath."²⁶ Here again, though that space is most probably associated with the memory of her colonized native land, it is depicted in the poem as simultaneously central and peripheral and this makes it more transcultural.

We swam so easily
to the stone village,
women in thick dresses,
men with smoky breath,
we sat around the fire pitching in
our own twigs,
the world curled around us.²⁷

The fact that Nye is using verbs denoting action (*swam, curled, sat*) proves that the speaker does not see the space where the past events have taken place as a static place, but one which "curls" around them as they listen to the story. This fluidity helps the spatial relations in the poem to be perceived in a transcultural context. What is more, though the storyteller is narrating the story from his memory, the events are being relived by the speaker at the present moment. Geographically, he is far away from the setting, but this physical distance does not lessen the effect the story has on the speaker; he is able to live the experience as if it was his. "We dropped our troubled / into the lap of the storyteller / and they turned into someone else's."²⁸

The fact that the storyteller's and the speaker's experiences merge despite the physical and temporal barriers supports both Tally's and Tuan's views that space is not reducible to geographical bodies governed by the political interests of the powerful. As it transcends those man-made paradigms, space is freed from the opposition that marks it as central or peripheral.

This deconstructive approach, however, is not received with the same enthusiasm in "We Did Not Have Drinking Water in the Middle of the Ocean" (2011). In the first lines of the poem, the speaker expresses the disappointment he has felt at not finding freedom in "the land of the free"²⁹ (America) he has immigrated to. His disappointment explains why the two places – the homeland and the foreign land – are kept separate throughout the poem.

25 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Storyteller," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd, 2011), 26.

26 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

27 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

28 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

29 Naomi Shihab Nye, "We Did Not Have Drinking Water in the Middle of the Ocean," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd, 2011), 31.

Homeland trampled, ripped in pieces,
 Often by people who weren't there.
 They had their own interests.
 They could not see us.
 We were as tiny pebbles to them [...] ³⁰

The previous lines show how difficult it is to attempt to associate an abstract concept such as “freedom” with a physically restricted place (America here). Freedom, Nye believes, is as elastic as the space where she hopes to reconcile the two cultures she belongs to as a Palestinian-American. Yet, given the disappointment the speaker feels upon realizing that what he has thought of as the land of the free is not so in reality, his hope does not stand on firm ground. As his words indicate, freedom is dependent on what pole of the binary opposition the place the speaker comes from is found. Had those living in the land of the free realized that freedom cannot be associated with one place rather than with another, they would not have seen those coming to their land to enjoy the right to that freedom as “tiny pebbles.”³¹ Still, by the time the reader reaches the closing lines of the poem, he is able to find some hope to reconcile the two so far opposites (the homeland and the foreign land).

In a third poem titled “Where Were We?,” Nye highlights the need for a third space in which the two places she belongs to can be harmonized (transculturalized) . The two opening lines of the poem, “I could go anywhere now / (you are not at the end of any journey)”³² reiterate the spatial feature of elasticity which Tally emphasizes and which Nye recurrently employs to describe different places in many of her poems. Space is inclusive by nature and should not, therefore, be seen only as a product of the distribution of power between cultures or ethnic groups. As a matter of fact, space should not be represented hierarchically based on what nation or ethnic group exercises authority over the other. “Who do we check up on? / No ladder or map or roundabout. / But a need to reach by climbing.”³³

It is interesting that Nye uses no punctuation in these two lines. The fact that the map, the ladder and the roundabout, all of which are means to move from one place to another, are linked together can be interpreted as a sign of Nye’s adopting Tally’s view that places should not be defined by their geographical locations nor by the sovereignty of the politically more powerful. Space ought to be freed from the binary perception which classifies it as either central or peripheral in order for it to be viewed transculturally. And in place of this binarism, an assemblage combining the different natures, beliefs and cultures of the two or more places should be employed to stress the ongoing nature of the process through which space is produced.

30 Nye, “We Did Not Have Drinking Water in the Middle of the Ocean,” 31.

31 Nye, “We Did Not Have Drinking Water in the Middle of the Ocean,” 31.

32 Naomi Shihab Nye, “Where Were We?” in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 78.

33 Nye, “Where Were We?” 78.

Politicizing the Peripheral

In his Introduction to *Spatiality*, Tally warns against adopting the traditional critical approach which dehistoricizes space by reducing it to a mere background against which events take place in the literary work. Read in light of Said's call for conducting a geographical inquiry of historical experience, Tally's view explains why writers of Western colonial literature have found it safer to promote the Western colonial project in a temporal context, not a spatial one. When viewed from a temporal angle, the inclusive nature of space and the discourse it establishes in the text risk becoming decontextualized through an unconscious obsession with the temporal progression by which traditional historicity is characterized.³⁴ This explains the need, as Tally adds, to weaken the obsession writers have with temporality and to stress the need to contextualize space by assigning it a political, a social, a cultural or a religious function. To borrow the words of Tally, "Again, the perception and the experience of space combine, not always smoothly, in transforming the geographical reality of human existence, and this has profound effects for the interpretation of that reality."³⁵ Space, in this context, becomes the contested territory where fixed notions are contextualized and are therefore redefined. Thus in the case of diasporic literature if space is constructed in a context which is culturally or cross-culturally shaped, then the kind of identity the diasporic acquires is spatially constructed and is therefore not fixed.

In the poetry of Nye, space is constructed contextually. This to a great extent is a result of the multi-cultural background she has been associated with. Thus the more she (or the speakers in her poems) is attuned to the culturally diverse settings in her poems, the more those settings are transculturalized. In "Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them" (2011), space is contextualized to produce the effect that Tally refers to in his discussion of Said's attempts at spatializing the Western colonial project and its literature. The reference to "the olive farmer who lost every inch of ground and every tree"³⁶ in Palestine creates a context in which space takes on a political significance. In these lines, the Palestinian experience of colonization and loss is expressed spatially. Thus as the speaker invokes the experiences of the teacher, the shoemaker and the farmer in the lost homeland, he is able to relive those moments because they are no longer restricted to the physical places they happened in, but to the space which is constructed in that politically-relevant context. This shared experience is further universalized when approached in light of Tuan's definition of space as a cultural construct. By relating the context in which the experience happened to other cultural contexts which might be of relevance, the experience is no longer associated merely with the geographical location of one specific place, but is spatially anchored in different places. As the speaker explains in the following lines, what is happening in Palestine is politically relevant in America and in Africa. Thus by politicizing space, the speaker is able to universalize the Palestinian experience and, therefore, to transculturalize its spatial reality. "How much do I think of Africa I always did feel sad / in the back of my mind for places I didn't / have enough energy to worry about."³⁷

34 Tally, *Spatiality*, 12–13.

35 Tally, *Spatiality*, 23.

36 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 33.

37 Nye, "Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them," 33.

As the lines show, the distance separating the Middle East, Africa and North America is no longer politically significant when space is perceived contextually. Thus meditating on the suffering which people in the faraway Africa are going through helps the speaker place the Palestinian experience in a global context and thus makes it universal. Yet, despite the universalizing effect that results from contextualizing space in the poem, the hope for creating a spatially political context within which the Palestinian experience can be understood, is not strong enough to create the desired change, one which requires uprooting old views about space as a mere physical place and replacing them with a new one: "I tried to get Americans to think of them. / But they were too involved with their own affairs / to imagine ours. And you can't blame them, really."³⁸

This hope finds more fertile ground to grow in "Mall Aquarium, Dubai," (2011), another poem in *Transfer*. The question the work opens with, "In how many worlds are we invisible?,"³⁹ confounds the fixity with which spatial reality has been associated in Western thought, but does not place it in the context which Lefevre deems necessary to a spatial experience. This might cause the reader to form a shallow understanding of the poem. The following lines clear things up, however, by employing the metaphor of the aquarium with fish and clarifying it with a detailed description of the fish to contextualize the spatial reality of the place. How do the fish perceive the expansive space of the aquarium they find themselves in? And, to what extent, can the aquarium be seen to symbolize the peripheral Palestinian settings such as the lost farm in the previous poem? These questions draw the reader's attention to the fact that Nye's perception of space goes along with Lefevre's call to politicize it. Thus as the fish can be perceived in very much the same terms as the farmer who has lost his land in "Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them," the peripheral setting of the aquarium, rather than the central natural habitat (the sea) the fish are born into, can in very much the same terms be perceived as the lost homeland that the farmer is mourning. Thus though the metaphor Nye employs here is open to multiple interpretations, the background knowledge the reader has so far accumulated reading Nye's poetry is sufficient to read its spatial reality in the political context of the Palestinian experience of loss and diaspora.

A similar metaphor is employed by Nye in another of her works to achieve a similar effect. "Real Estate" (2011), a poem which employs an opposition between the physical reality and the spatial reality of the house, highlights Tally's deconstructive perception of spatial reality by establishing a binary relation in the opening lines and breaking it later on. The work opens with the speaker's father searching for a new house for the family in what seems to be a foreign place. His search highlights the opposition between the first and the second homes; the two are placed at opposite poles of the spectrum and that makes the father's task more difficult.

Daddy picked up pamphlets at every stop.
He was looking for another home, a place
to get away to. If you lose
your first home you loved so much
you may be doomed.⁴⁰

38 Nye, "Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them," 33.

39 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Mall Aquarium, Dubai," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 47.

40 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Real Estate," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 55.

The gloomy tone the speaker uses to describe the search for the new home in the opening lines of the poem discards the least hope for the establishing its spatial reality away from the traditional binary perception of space. If losing the “first home”⁴¹ which one loves dearly means he is doomed, then finding another home is not expected to reverse that condition. Nevertheless, the following lines provide more hope as the speaker manages to reintroduce the spatial reality of the house in a culture-specific context.

Even in the last months when all the blood
from the haven of his olive-skinned body
cycled through a filtering machine every two days
he was thinking *hilltop view*- could he see all the way
across the ocean from there, the wrought-iron staircase,
the red-tiled roof?⁴²

Though the last stanza in the poem comes in the form of a question, not a statement, it does help refute the binary perception of the spatial reality of the home found at the beginning of the poem. The hilltop location, iron staircase and red-tiled roof situate the house the speaker is describing in a culturally defined context helps the reader to refrain from perceiving the spatial reality physically, and to come to read it in a politicized framework which reveals a hidden meaning to what might seem upon a first reading of the poem a search for a new house. Indeed, the search for the new house becomes in this context a search for a space that is transculturally constructed and has been given meaning.

Textualizing the Peripheral

Apart from its political, social and cultural function, space serves an ideological function which, as Tally explains in a chapter titled “The Spatial Turn” (2013), has played an intrinsic role in the rise of the spatial turn towards the end of the previous century.⁴³ Spatial critics call for prioritizing the discourse of space to that of time in the text to aid in approaching certain questions regarding the function of space and its interaction with other elements in the text from new perspectives. Thus their efforts have been directed to studying the discursive formation of spatial relations in the text, which when compared to temporal relations replace the temporal features of progression and sequentialism with the spatial features of simultaneity and expansion. In a literary context, these features draw attention to questions of spatial referentiality, a perspective which has not been provided with much attention prior to the turn to spatial studies. When approached in the context of spatial criticism, spatial referentiality questions the relation between the real place and its representation in the text. A place, therefore, is created textually, taking the form of discourse, rather than being only physically present outside it. Are the real and represented spaces the same, or is there a gap between the two that can be bridged? Is space solely a product of the text or does it as well play a role in the production of meaning in it? When approached in light of Lefebvre’s

41 Nye, “Real Estate,” 55.

42 Nye, “Real Estate,” 55.

43 Robert Tally Jr., “The Spatial Turn,” in *Spatiality* (London: Routledge), 24–26.

interpretation of the spatial dialectic, these questions find convincing answers. In fact, a nomadic view of spatial discourse entails that the study of spatiality is a two-way route; an intersecting relationship between the spatial reality of the text and its discursive formation.⁴⁴

In several of Nye's poems, space is textually constructed. One example is "Storyteller," a poem in which places are introduced as part of a story told by an unidentified narrator. The door to the story is not a physical door, but rather metaphorically constructed to replace its physical reality with a spatial one. The physical reality of other culturally constructed places such as the stone village, the fire "pitching in / our own twigs"⁴⁵ and the "trees outside [their] screens"⁴⁶ is likewise spatially constructed through its discourse. Thus although the places mentioned in this poem gain meaning in a cultural context, the spatial reality of those places is created discursively, and as Lefebvre explains, this causes the poem to acquire the feature of transculturality.⁴⁷ The discursive formation of spatial relations in the poem breaks the one-to-one relationship between the place and its spatial reality and frees the place from the physical entity with which it is by default associated in the mind of the reader. It also redefines this relationship so that the singularity with which it is traditionally viewed is replaced with a plurality that allows for transculturalizing space. This is clear in the last two lines of the poem in which the troubles which fall into the "lap of the storyteller"⁴⁸ are "turned into someone else's."⁴⁹ Though the reader is not given any hint about an intended change on the part of the speaker, the change takes place. Thus the storyteller's troubles turn into someone else's as the physical space of the storyteller's lap is created discursively and its physical reality is replaced with a spatial one. And this in turn creates the transcultural effect that Tally discusses in his book.⁵⁰

The same effect can be sensed by the reader in the poem "Is Misery Near Kansas. I Asked" (2011). In fact, the title itself emphasizes the need to define the physical reality of the geographical Kansas spatially; otherwise the intended meaning of a transculturalized diasporic experience is lost. The speaker opens the poem by describing the search for the way as a "pleasure,"⁵¹ since he emphasizes the multiple routes that lead to or from Kansas. At this level, the poem can be perceived as a text that centralizes peripherality by rejecting the binary view of space. But when the last line, "We have so much to talk about!"⁵² is read in light of Lefebvre's "spatial dialectic," a new interpretation is added to the poem. The multiple ways which the present moment has been freed from the limiting physicality are formed discursively. As in the previous poem "The Storyteller," space is produced textually, which explains why the speaker insists that there is "so much to talk

44 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 84–85.

45 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

46 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

47 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 85.

48 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

49 Nye, "Storyteller," 26.

50 Tally, *Spatiality*, 90–95.

51 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Is Misery Near Kansas. I Asked," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 32.

52 Nye, "Is Misery Near Kansas. I Asked," 32.

about!"⁵³ though only one place (Kansas) is mentioned in the poem. In the transcultural context that Nye creates in the poem, the real Kansas is freed from its physical and geographical reality and is constructed through the discourse of the text. Hence, Kansas not only refers to the geographical location⁵⁴ we are familiar with; Kansas comes to stand for a transcultural space which defies geographical categorization and which effaces cultural differences.

Integrating the spatial reality of places with the discursive reality of the text is also seen in "Lying While Birdwatching" (2011), in which Lefebvre's view that spatial relations are produced through the discourse of the text is made clear: "so they won't keep telling you / where it is."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the need to become acquainted with the spatial reality in these two lines is not enough to arrive at the intended meaning. A quick reading of this short poem might explain it as a description of an act as simple as birdwatching, yet this act is defined at more than one level. On the one hand, the act of birdwatching is described spatially as an act that is not limited to the physical action of lying down and watching birds, "Yes Yes / I see it."⁵⁶

Read in light of Lefebvre's interpretation of the discursive function of space, these two lines show that the act of watching the birds is not restricted to the act of physically seeing the birds; it is metaphorically meant to indicate the continuity of the action in its spatial reality. It also adds more depth by constructing the spatial reality of the act of birdwatching through the discursive structure of the poem. Thus telling "where it is"⁵⁷ is not only spatially shown, but discursively as well. And this, as in the two other poems above, is what gives the poem, despite its shortness, the transcultural effect which, as Tally explains,⁵⁸ helps free space from cultural and geographical limitations.

The same transcultural effect is created by forming the spatial reality of the physical place with the discursive reality of the poem "Where Were We?" (2011). As the speaker boasts that he "could go anywhere now,"⁵⁹ the reader wonders to what extent that "anywhere" could be reached and how realistic this claim might turn out to be. A transcultural reading of the poem is likely to come to the mind of the reader from the outset; nevertheless, this reading might still be not as appealing "as it seems since its effect is far-fetched. / (you are not at the end of the journey)."⁶⁰

As the speaker tones down his hard-to-curb enthusiasm in the second line, he provides a better chance for the reader to accept his initial claim.

Who do we check up on?
No ladder no map no roundabout
But a need to reach by climbing

53 Nye, "Is Misery Near Kansas. I Asked," 32.

54 The text does not provide sufficient information for the reader to guess which Kansas the speaker is referring to in the poem. This ambiguity, however, suits the spatial approach of the present study, since it refutes the idea that space refers only to the physical location of a place.

55 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Lying While Birdwatching," in *Transfer*, by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Boa Editions Ltd., 2011), 77.

56 Nye, "Lying While Birdwatching," 77.

57 Nye, "Lying While Birdwatching," 77.

58 Tally, *Spatiality*, 92.

59 Nye, "Where Were We?," 78.

60 Nye, "Where Were We?," 78.

And here are the elements we recognized,
 doing nothing helpful- windows,
 bare trees, tables, telephone wires.⁶¹

As in the previous poem “Lying While Birdwatching,” the physical reality of the objects mentioned above cannot be denied, yet when viewed spatially the physical act of climbing (like that of birdwatching in “Lying While Birdwatching”) is better understood: the speaker dispenses with the need for a ladder, a map or a roundabout to achieve it. The ongoing nature of the act of climbing necessitates that the reader perceive it spatially, and here lies the contradiction. How can the act of climbing be carried out spatially without any need for a map or a ladder? True enough, if the speaker is quite sure of his ability to “go anywhere now,”⁶² then a different interpretation might become possible. Here again, Lefebvre’s understanding of the discursive function of space shows that the spatial reality of the act of climbing is formed through the discourse of the text. In other words, the speaker’s enthusiastic claim that he could “go anywhere now”⁶³ can finally be accepted. As space is discursively created in the text, its fixed referentiality to the physical reality of the place is broken and is replaced with a more flexible one which is constantly being formed in the text.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows that a spatial reading of diasporic literatures may help the reader to approach many of the questions raised in that genre in new ways. As space is freed from the dualities that label it as either central or peripheral, the diasporic’s relation to the native land and the foreign soil can be established on more equal grounds. Instead of defining itself in relation to one place as opposed to another, the diasporic manages to establish a more balanced relationship between the feelings he has towards each of the two places. The reader will experience neither an extreme sense of attachment nor of hatred to either place.

Moreover, when space is not only seen as a background against which events in the literary work take place, but is presented as part of a well-defined context, long lost feelings of belongingness and attachment to either of the two places can easily be revived, even when the diasporic is physically far from it. The slightest memory in this case can be sufficient to help the diaspora relive the past experience and to recreate it spatially. We also must not to forget that a contextualized representation of space can make it politically significant, as seen in several of the poems by Nye discussed above. Thus as events taking place in Nye’s native Palestine are represented in a historically relevant context (that of the Palestinian cause), they are seen politically relevant not only in America, but in Africa as well.

Politically significant spatial relations are discursively significant as well. In Nye’s poetry, this is reflected in the fact that spatial relations across cultures are not only shaped by the physical reality of the place, but through the discourse of the text as well. Not only does spatial discourse

61 Nye, “Where Were We?,” 78.

62 Nye, “Where Were We?,” 78.

63 Nye, “Where Were We?,” 78.

help free spatial relations from culturally imposed views, but it questions those views in an attempt to change them. In this sense, spatial discourse is not only seen as a product of the outer reality; it contributes to shaping this reality as well. In the genre of diasporic literature, this dual nature of spatial discourse (as a product of meaning and a means of its production) is of great importance since it helps define the relation holding the diaspora to the native and the foreign lands, thus the cross-cultural relations are formed from new perspectives. The moment is depicted in several of Nye's poems in which the speakers do not hesitate to establish relations with individuals from different cultures nor to express their feelings towards their native land while living in the foreign land.

No doubt a spatial reading of the various works from the poetry collection *Transfer* can help readers understand the role space plays in those poems in from transcultural scope. Viewed within a context in which different cultures and nations come into contact and interact, place can be easily socially reconstructed, allowing sufficient space for cultural acceptance and tolerance. In future research spatiality might be applied as a critical approach to literary works in diasporic literatures produced by non-Arab authors to compare and contrast the representation of space in culturally-specific genres and to help understand the culturally different perceptions of space with regard to the production of meaning in the text.⁶⁴

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⁶⁴ Spatial criticism intersects at several points with ecocritical criticism. Both focus on the effect of the surroundings on the characters, the events and the production of meaning in the text. The scope of spatial criticism, however, is wider since its focus is not restricted, as is the case with Eco critical criticism, to the natural surroundings where the events take place and the characters interact. A hybrid approach (bringing together spatial and ecocritical criticism) would therefore serve as a rich ground for future research.

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