

## **(Re)Writing the Middle East: Tension, Engagement, and Rhetorical Translanguaging**

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What it means to teach and research writing in the Middle East today depends an awful lot on what one supposes the Middle East to be. The countries that make up the Middle East have intersecting though distinct and internally complex historical, economic, and linguistic histories. As I have touched on elsewhere (Moghabghab et al.), the “Middle East” itself is a construct that we should use with unease given the plurality of these histories (121).<sup>1</sup> Characterized by what Vertovec termed “superdiversity,” the countries of the Middle East include not only diversity of societies but also great diversity within the groups that constitute these societies (Hodges et al. 49). Disparate colonial histories and postcolonial legacies,<sup>2</sup> the religious and socio-political positioning of Arabic as a regional language,<sup>3</sup> and the influences of globalization and translanguaging create nuanced and multilayered multilingualisms that challenge any articulation of overarching models and methods for the teaching and research of writing in the region.

At the same time, the Middle East is currently in the throes of economic and political unrest combined with violence and interspersed war in several countries; tensions that have marked the region for many years and are often reflected in the work of the region’s writing teachers and scholars. Some of these include the enduring trauma in countries like Lebanon, in particular after the August 4, 2020 explosion and the country’s ongoing complete economic collapse; the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the wars in Syria and Yemen; the multiple refugee crises; negotiating regional and international political relations between the various countries of the Gulf; and navigating international affairs with/in the region, to name but a few. In this ecology, the writing classroom and the discipline of rhetoric and composition become potential discursive spaces where these tensions are played out and encountered critically. As teachers and researchers of writing adapt their rhetoric and practices to create discourse communities using critical language pedagogies and postdigital rhetorics, they engage with the past and present ideological, cultural, economic, and political tensions of the region.

The earliest institutions of higher learning adopting an American liberal arts curriculum in the region date back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The American University of Beirut, in Lebanon, was originally founded as Syrian Protestant College in 1866 and adopted a liberal arts model in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years, older models have been coupled with the proliferation of English-medium universities and international branch campuses in numer-

ous Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Arabian Gulf. However, the American “model” for writing studies does not integrate seamlessly into local cultures and communities.<sup>4</sup> Even terms like “English as a Second or Foreign Language” or “bilingualism” are problematized in this context where multilingual speakers negotiate varied linguistic backgrounds with competing nationalist and religious ideologies and postcolonial perceptions about the “prestige” of speaking a foreign language.<sup>5</sup> For instance, at the American University of Beirut, a French-language educated Catholic student and an Arabic-language educated Shia Muslim student come not only at English, but also at a shared Standard Arabic (Fus’ha), with significantly different language attitudes because of their different religious and communal backgrounds. As representative of regional diversity, the Lebanese example highlights the ever-increasing need for focused scholarship on writing studies, pedagogy, and writing centers in the Middle East also noted in Arnold et al. (11). More importantly, such scholarship needs to emerge directly from the research, expertise, and experiences of the researchers, teachers, practitioners, and writing program and writing center administrators of the region.

Prevalent assumptions in U.S.-based writing studies are complicated inside Middle Eastern writing classrooms as the value and applicability of western pedagogical models are questioned and renegotiated. When most of the student population at AUB, for example, is multilingual, speaking and learning English and/or French in both their homes and their classrooms from age 3 upwards, the concept of ESL or EFL diverges sharply from commonly accepted definitions in Western writing scholarship. One way of approaching this difficulty has been through the production of culturally relevant, custom-made textbooks. These textbooks, produced by the teachers and researchers at institutions in the region such as the American University of Sharjah, Texas A&M Qatar, Weill Cornell Qatar, and the American University of Beirut draw from common writing studies wells, but differently than many North American audiences might expect. For instance, *Pages Apart: A Reader for Academic Writing*, currently in its fifth edition and created by the instructors of the Composition Program at AUB, is considered a successful example of efforts that reconcile student needs, multicultural readings, multimodal materials, and both regional and international scholarship (Hodges et al. 51). Aided by these textbooks, students begin to consider the multiple digital, social, cultural, political, and ideological components that make up their own linguistic and rhetorical practices while also keying into the intersections and divergences between those and others in the region and in the world.

Additionally, combining this rich but divergent sociolinguistic landscape with the current affordances of digital technologies leads to the innovation of creative writing spaces that are conducive to the reterritorialization of linguistic

borders at individual, communal, and national levels. One such combination can be witnessed in the emergence of projects such as the bilingual Wikipedia editing project, *2Rāth* (“AUB Communication Skills Program”). Launched in 2019, this project involves creating articles about Arab writers and poets who previously had minimal presence online. In so doing, it addresses the cultural and gender gap in Arab representation on Wikipedia and immerses students in the practical and rhetorical dimensions of digital composing. As an enactment of postdigital critical language pedagogy, this and similar projects allow teachers of writing in the Middle East to contend with the ideological force of the languages of power in all its manifestations, linguistic and otherwise. The writing classroom thus becomes an open space for students and teachers to engage the contradictions and ruptures in subjectivities that arise from a plurality of sometimes competing colonial/postcolonial histories and their associated educational, social, and cultural contexts.

More broadly, postdigital rhetorical translanguaging can offer the region a framework attuned to its particularities. Involving a critical social, cultural, and political examination of the multimodal digital performances of multilingual speakers, it fosters critical understandings and negotiations of the strategic decisions made through these dynamic processes. Considering that composition has reached a point where all writing involves digitality, postdigital translanguaging allows teachers and researchers of writing in the Middle East to navigate the complex and competing demands involved in these processes within the particular ecology of the Middle East, its history, and its multiple realities. One example of such work is the digital humanities movement that is taking on issues like intercultural, (multi)linguistic mapping, post/(de)colonial futures, computational multiliteracy studies, and countering digital hegemonies. This movement is fostered by the rise of digital humanities projects, institutes, and degree programs in multiple universities in the Middle East such as at New York University, Abu Dhabi, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, the Doha Institute in Qatar, and the American University of Beirut, among others.

On an institutional level, writing research in the region involves questions about the very nature of writing and writing instruction. These are coupled with writing programs tasked with addressing programmatic and institutional concerns such as enhancing the culture of writing within the institution, using writing to promote liberal arts instructional models, the creation and expansion of WAC and WID programs, and positioning writing centers as integral to students’ critical development. In response to these concerns, this branch of the research attempts to design and implement curricula, textbooks, and programs in conversation with teachers, researchers, and administrators from both the region and North American writing studies scholarship. In relation to Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines in particular,

these efforts begin with developing methods to convince faculty across the disciplines to take responsibility for and apply consistent writing practice and pedagogy in their classrooms.<sup>6</sup> At the level of writing centers, Zimmerman underscores the momentum of this growing body of research and the efforts made to create and maintain institutional and discursive relationships between writing centers, writing programs, and the university (138).

However, writing researchers in the Middle East face numerous obstacles in attempting research projects such as accessing articles and books that are region restricted or simply too expensive to be carried by certain institutions in the region. Severe limitations on resources and access, as well as the economic difficulties of some countries, like Lebanon and Syria, are currently restricting the free flow of ideas from and in these countries, with consequences reverberating throughout the Middle East. While these might come across as mundane or logistical challenges, they represent a significant impediment to the production and distribution of locally sourced knowledge as well as to the proliferation of digital humanities research projects. Often, neither researchers who publish their work in international journals nor their colleagues have access to these very journals through their institutions. These challenges to an emerging body of literature similarly complicate efforts of community building and cross-institutional collaboration. However, this major concern is giving rise to continuous efforts to invest in locally sourced material, rely on open-access research, and activate ties across national, linguistic, and cultural borders to promote effective teaching and learning.<sup>7</sup>

By relying on decolonizing critical pedagogies, the promises of postdigital rhetorical translanguaging, and the proliferation of professional and scholarly ties, teachers and researchers of writing in the region continue to challenge constraints and develop models that expand the discipline and layer it with their institutional and cultural frameworks. Taking the larger tensions and characteristics of the region into consideration, writing scholarship in the Middle East complicates assumptions and renegotiates Western paradigms as it revisits, encounters, and engages complex colonial and linguistic histories and political and socio-cultural realities.

## Notes

1. See Bonine et al.'s *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* for an interesting series of debates about what the Middle East is, or if it is at all.

2. See Betty Anderson's *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Norbert Bugeja's *Postcolonial Memoir in the Middle East: Rethinking the Liminal in Mashriqi Writing*, Anna Ball and Karim Matta's *The Edinburgh Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East*, Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan's *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, and Andrew Wilcox's *Orientalism and Imperialism: From Nineteenth-century Missionary Imaginings to the Contemporary Middle East* for an

overview of the colonial and postcolonial histories of the Middle East and their contemporary extensions.

3. As the language of the Qur'an, Arabic is tied to cultural and socio-political identity formation in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. See Yasir Suleiman's *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology* as well as *Arabic, Self and Identity: A Study in Conflict and Displacement*. Murre-van den Berg et al.'s *Arabic and its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and Their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920-1950)* also offers well-grounded situated discussions of the relationship between Arabic, other languages, Islam, and Middle Eastern identity.

4. See Arnold et al.'s *Emerging Writing Research from the Middle East-North Africa Region* for relevant explorations of the historico-geographical delineation of the region and writing research and teaching.

5. See Rula Diab's "Lebanese University Students' Perceptions of Ethnic, National, and Linguistic Identity and their Preferences for Foreign Language Learning in Lebanon," Hadi Banat's "The Status and Functions of English in Contemporary Lebanon," and Fatima Esseili's "A Sociolinguistic Profile of English in Lebanon" for discussions of language learners' attitudes toward English as a foreign language in Lebanon.

6. As Hodges and Kent argue: Locally relevant ways such as hybrid writing consultants are instrumental in mediating between disciplinary "faculty members' expectations and multilingual students' development as writers" (201).

7. Ties involve the formation of professional writing and writing center associations and maintaining regular writing and language conferences and symposia in and across the various countries of the region. Some such associations include but are not limited to the Middle East North Africa Writing Center Alliance, TESOL Arabia, and the Association of Teachers of English in Lebanon. A few examples of regional conferences and symposia are the Oman International ELT Conference, the AUB International Conference on Effective Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and The IAFOR International Conference on Language Learning, Dubai, among others.

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