

Entrevista com Pauline Kaldas

Priscila Campolina de Sá Campello

Pauline Kaldas is the author of **Egyptian Compass**, a collection of poetry, **Letters from Cairo**, a travel memoir, and **The Time Between Places**, a collection of short stories. Her most recent book is **Looking Both Ways**, a collection of essays. She also co-edited **Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction**. Her work has appeared in a variety of anthologies, including **Inclined to Speak, Others Will Enter the Gates**, and **Home: An Imagined Landscape**. She was awarded a fellowship in fiction from the Virginia Commission for the Arts, the Silver Award for **Dinarzad's Children** from ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Awards, and the RAWI Creative Prose Award. Kaldas was born in Egypt and immigrated with her parents to the United States at the age of eight in 1969. She is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia.

Recebido em: 21/08/2017

Aceito em: 30/08/2017

Priscila Campello - How does immigrant literature contribute to the understanding of the experience of exile in times of constant movement of people?

Pauline Kaldas - Immigrant literature gives voice to the experience of losing one's original home. At times, that loss is chosen, and at other times, it is forced as in cases of refugee status. Regardless of how it comes about, and even when that experience is a positive one, I believe that it is one of trauma. The loss of home, environment, family, language, and status and the attempt to recreate those things in a new country requires a strength and resiliency that is difficult to imagine for those who have not experienced it. This is where immigrant literature opens a door to that understanding. It takes us inside the lives of those who have gone through this traumatic upheaval, allowing us to see the internal transformation of people as they cross these borders and create their identities and their homes in a new location.

One novel that addresses these issues is **Rise the Euphrates** by Carol Edgarian, which relates the story of a young girl who is a victim of the Armenian genocide. The novel allows us to see how the past continues to influence her life as well as the lives of her daughter and her granddaughter. Today, as so many refugees seek asylum in

new countries, immigrant literature enables us to see beyond the political controversies and instead gives us a glimpse into the tremendous experience that these refugees are going through as they attempt to find a place of safety where they can build new lives.

PC - Ellen McCracken, in **New Latina Narrative**: the feminine space of postmodern ethnicity, affirms that ethnic literature is viewed as a commodity, since there is explicit interest in the exotic and the different. To what extent is this statement true? Do you see your own literature as a commodity?

PK - It is difficult to make such generalizations as each reader comes to the book they are reading with their own set of expectations and life experiences that influence their approach to the text. It is also important to recognize that this statement is based on the assumption that readers of ethnic literature are not of the same ethnicity as the writer or another minority group. Essentially, it assumes that the reader belongs to the dominant culture. This is not to say that the statement does not represent a certain truth. There are many readers who do view ethnic literature as a commodity. I remember when Diana Abu Jaber's novel, **Arabian Jazz**, was published, and one reader told me how she felt that she understood the Arab

world after reading it. The comment shocked me; as this reader took one fictional work and used it as a way to understand an entire culture. In that statement, there was a blurring of fiction and anthropology, negating the role of imagination in a work of fiction. Would we take a novel by a white American writer and then say that it enables us to understand American culture?

I don't see the literature that I write as a commodity, but I am concerned that it might be read that way. This is perhaps most relevant when it comes to my travel memoir, **Letters from Cairo**. While the book was written to chronicle our experiences as a family living for six months in Egypt, I worry that it can be read as a kind of travel brochure. The assumed audience for the book are those who have not been to Egypt, since the letters at the heart of the memoir were originally written to family and friends in the States. Nevertheless, the book has a great deal to do with the notion of returning to one's homeland, the experience of my children as second generation immigrants, the reconnection with family, and that sense of both belonging and not belonging to a place. I would hope that readers can see these multidimensional aspects of the book.

Like any other writer, my work emerges out of my experiences and my imagination. I would like my work to be read for its artistic merit, its use

of language, and the experiences it portrays. This is not to say that its cultural content is unimportant. It exists at the center of the work because that happens to be my experience, but there is more to it than that. I would hope that a reader could see all that it has to offer. Nevertheless, the fact that my work is more likely to be published by a journal or a press that specializes in the literature of the Middle East, rather than a more general forum, already points to the way that we isolate ethnic literature and narrow the lens through which we view it.

PC - Do you agree that immigrant writing is a legacy for generations of descendants who desire to leave their history and experience registered for the sake of posterity?

PK - Immigration begins with loss — loss of family, home, nationality, identity, and even material possessions. When my parents and I immigrated in 1969, my family had already established a home filled with furniture, decorations, clothes, and everything that one acquires. In addition to our carry-on luggage, we were each allowed two suitcases. Imagine how much life can be packed in six suitcases and how much must be left behind. My parents sold their furniture, gave up their apartment, and distributed their personal belongings among relatives.

We said goodbye to aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents. We also let go of the future we would have had if we had stayed in Egypt. That loss was packed in our six suitcases, tucked into corners and hidden. When I sit down to write, the attempt to retrieve that loss spills onto the page. The characters, the places, and the conflicts I write about, whether through poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction, emerge out of that sense of loss. My younger daughter once asked me, “Can’t you write about anything that doesn’t have to do with Egypt?” I’m sure I could, but the answer I gave her was “No.” My desire and my need to write was born out of my immigration. I’m not sure I would have become a writer if we had not left Egypt and come to the United States. I don’t mean to speak for all immigrant writers here, only to say that for me, the attempt to retrieve what is lost is one of the main things that drives my writing.

It’s interesting to see that many immigrant works move from the first to the second generation, which affirms the claim made in this question. One such work is **The Namesake** by Jhumpa Lahiri where we follow the immigrant couple through their lives and then move to their children. Their immigrant experience impacts the next generation, seeming to determine every action that their son takes and the way he frames his identity and his sense of belonging

in the United States. We see how the experience of immigration continues to influence subsequent generations.

Perhaps that desire to bequeath history to the next generation is most apparent in creative nonfiction work. My most recent book, **Looking Both Ways**, is a collection of personal essays, and while I believe it is a work that can speak to a large audience, there is a sense of intimacy to the essays in this book that I hope will one day speak to my descendants. So to answer the question with another question: As immigrant writers, are we writing for the future or are we writing for the past? Perhaps we do both. I’ve often seen my role as someone who documents—I feel a responsibility to document certain events and people to ensure that they are not lost. Hopefully, that speaks not only to the past but also to future generations.

PC - Can we affirm that the experience of women in exile is different from that of men? Do your characters show any difference?

PK - Yes, I think that is a fair statement to make. The lives of men and women differ all over the world and they carry those differences with them when they emigrate, so naturally their experiences in exile will also differ. The differences are complex and nuanced and always dependent on the specific people, so it’s

very difficult to make generalization. Instead, I think it might be possible to point to those aspects of their lives that are impacted by immigration. Economics is certainly one — some men who had status and a high income in their homeland are not able to achieve this in their new country, and the result on their identity and their role within the family can be devastating. On the other hand, some women who had few opportunities in their homeland might find new possibilities for having a career and earning money. This shift is something I express in some of my work, especially in my short story collection, **The Time Between Places**. “Airport” has a great deal to do with how the male and female characters envision what America can offer them. Imbedded in the story is also a breaking of stereotypes about gender roles in the Arab world. Hoda hopes to be released from the expectation of living a life focused solely on being a mother and a wife, and Samir, rather than looking for a subservient wife, recognizes that succeeding in America requires not only a different kind of woman but also a new type of marital relationship. “The Top” also revolves around this notion, showing the effects of what happens to Shoukry when his status is diminished as a result of immigration while his wife establishes a career for herself and rises above him.

As a writer, I’m always interested in what my characters do for a living. Work matters to me, and I wonder if that has something to do with being an immigrant writer. Many of the immigrants I know came here to improve their lives, so jobs and money matter in a particular way and the expectation to succeed economically is passed on to their children.

PC - Do you think that immigrant literature is an attempt to understand its own migrant, hyphenated, and hybrid conditions?

PK - Certainly that is one of the things that immigrant literature does — it explores the experience of what it means to migrate from one location to another, from one identity to another, and from one community to another. The experience is multifaceted and as diverse as the people who experience it. As a writer, I find it to be full of endless possibilities. In my story “He Had Dreamed of Returning,” I attempt to explore that hyphenated identity through the experience of a character who decides to return to Egypt only to discover that the transformation he has gone through as a result of immigration has irreparably changed him, creating a hyphenated identity that can no longer live comfortably in either world.

When I was growing up in the United States, I felt completely isolated. It

wasn't really until I was in graduate school in the mid-1980s that I began to encounter other people whose sense of identity was also grounded in more than one place. This is also when I began to read multicultural literature and I started to do research about the history of immigration. I was astounded by the enormity of the immigrant experience and the way it had impacted not just me as a single individual but so many people across history and from so many countries in the world.

PC - What role does language play in immigrant literature?

PK - I think that depends largely on the writer and whether or not they are bilingual or at least grew up hearing their native language. I grew up speaking Arabic and English, so I hear the world in two languages. Each object, each emotion is expressed for me with two words whose sounds and meanings can differ drastically. **Call it Sleep** by Henry Roth is the first book where I came across this notion of how two languages can exist in a single language text. In that novel, when the characters speak their native language, their words are fluent and poetic, but when they speak in English, we see the broken awkward sentences and the difficulty of creating clear meaning.

I've tried to make space for both of my languages in my writing. This is

especially relevant in dialogue. When I have a character who is speaking in Arabic, I hear their words in Arabic and try to translate them as literally as I can to capture the nuances of the Arabic language while still writing in English. I have also used transliteration in my work and even Arabic script in some of my poetry. But of course, it is more than simply using the words of another language. The language we use serves as our vision of the world, and if you are writing a story that encompasses more than one country then you are trying to portray those multiple visions. Language also serves to express displacement, and perhaps that is why it plays such a strong role in dialogue. Whether a character is speaking in their first language or their second language shows their sense of comfort or discomfort in relation to who and where they are.