BOOK REVIEWS

19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East by Naomi Shihab Nye (Green Willow Books, Division of Harper Collins Publishers, U.S.A., 2002), 142 pp., $16.95.

Naomi Shihab Nye's new collection of Middle East poems appears for the first time in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*—a splendid and timely book, sixty poems to accompany us as we carry the world with us into 2003.

This is not the first time, however, that Naomi Nye has written from her Arab American heritage nor is she new to the world of poetry. Nye, a Guggenheim Fellow has been a recipient of the LAVAN Award from the American Academy of Poets, as well as four Pushcart Prizes and, numerous honors for her book for younger readers. Her current volume of Middle East Poems is quite appropriate for high school and college students.

In her "Introduction" to *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye begins with a 50-line poem ("Flinn, On The Bus) written on September 11, 2001:

> Three hours after the buildings fell,
> he took a seat beside me.
> Fresh out of prison, after 24 months,
> You're my first hello!

She questioned how she could tell him what happened that day.

> I could not, he'd find out soon enough.
> Flinn, take it easy. Peace is rough.

Naomi Shihab Nye, it seems, was created for this moment in time—to speak in the language of poetry with the depth of being who she is and who she has become. Her own strong and loving family relationships inspire her creative reality. Nye was born to an American mother and a Palestinian father. Her grandmother (who died at age 106) was a special treasure in her life and a positive influence. Nye has dedicated this new book of poems "to the wise grandmothers and to the young readers in whom I have always placed my best faith." In fact, at the end of her "Introduction" Nye asserts, "If grandmothers and children were in charge of the world, there would never be any wars."

In my own reading of Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle*—not my first awareness of her as a writer, but my first acquaintance with her new poetry–I found a rich, challenging and new relationship, a poet friend through her book.

For poets and poetry readers, even readers who do not read much poetry. I recommend with enthusiasm this wonderful book of Middle East poems. If, in fact, all the current news of Palestinian and Israeli killings leaves you with distrust and confusion, this

may be the time to read these human *Poems of the Middle East.*

A few lines quoted here from her magnificent poem, "Holy Land's Biggest Snowfall in 50 Years", created from a Jerusalem headline in 2000:

> "If the snow piles up past everyone's windows
> all of the windows
>
> Palestinians and Israelis worked together
> in the West Bank to Rescue
>
> a sweeter sentence than baklava
>
> than all the oranges of Jericho
> offered up to God!"

Naomi Shihab Nye's *Poems of the Middle East* may become her most significant contribution as a poet for Americans, Palestinians and Jews around the world.

San Antonio Texans can be proud of this writer not only as "their" poet, a profound and scholarly author, but as a deeply caring human being in their midst.

19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East is not only excellent writing, it also becomes a deeply human experience.

Marion C. Smith
Writer and Speaker
Educator and Administrator (Retired)

Dreaming Under a Ton of Lizzards*,* by Marion Michener (Duluth, MN: Spinster's Ink, 1999), 139pp., $12.00.

Dreaming Under a Ton of Lizzards tells the story of a writer's recovery from alcoholism. Author Marion Michener shows that in order for a person to live a sober life, she has to have friends who do not drink or use drugs. The main character, Olivia, lives an erratic life that centers on drinking and its culture. For anyone who is an alcoholic or has been in a relationship with an alcoholic, stories here are all too familiar. Through Olivia, Michener describes how it feels to wake up in the morning sick from drinking too much. She writes about being incapacitated from drinking and walking around the street at night, alone, barely able to stay upright or to even see straight. Some days, maybe many days, Olivia cannot remember the previous day's events or what was said the night before.

The story is centered on the period of time when Olivia decides to stop drinking. Her story is fairly uneventful and straight forward as compared to other recovery tales that almost romanticize the detoxification process. However, Olivia's process is important because her recovery shows that there are many paths to sobriety.

Olivia is a writer. In fact, being a writer is what saves her. When she decides to stop drinking, she first seeks solitude and creates it for herself by moving away from her friends and into a house on the coast of Oregon. Her descriptions of life there transport the reader to the misty, chilly seaside. In the cottage where she lives, she keeps a bottle of

Beefeaters on the refrigerator as if to at least have the objectified part of the disease under control. Olivia is tormented by not writing because even though she is compelled to write, her ideas escape her. When she faces her drinking problem, she faces her creative block. On the coast in Oregon, the solitude that she lives gives her space to recreate herself. However, Olivia is afraid of that solitude. She is afraid of being alone.

Before she stops drinking, she tries to assuage her loneliness by surrounding herself with people whose lives are at least as unpredictable as hers. Her loneliness is exacerbated by a relationship with a woman who is not unique in her neurosis as she plays psychological games with Olivia which only distract them both from the real issues in their relationship. Olivia's leaving the relationship fulfills her need to be alone which, in turn, beckons her to redeem her sanity and leaves space for hauntings that come from memory.

Michener shows that Olivia cannot survive and grow into her sobriety without the variety of women who pass through her life. She struggles with her sobriety until she goes to a party one night and drinks. Although the night ends with her drinking the gin that she has resisted so well, she moves closer to sobriety because of a woman who turns out to be a positive influence on her.

Michener's love of women is apparent in the ways that she describes Olivia's love relationships and friendships. Erotic love is woven into the pages of this novel with descriptions of women that show the different forms that beauty and intelligence take. There is, also, a deep sense of despair depicted through Michener's characterization of an alcoholic woman who lives on the street. Olivia's interaction with the woman shows the realities of homelessness and destitution. Michener reminds us that it is our recognition of ourselves in other people that is often the reason for our turning away from them. As Olivia watches the woman waste away, she recognizes herself in the not so distant future. Olivia knows that if she does not stop drinking, she will die.

Marian Michener's novel is insightful and creates a poignant camaraderie with the reader. This camaraderie is characterized by understanding and recognition of things that are subtextual in human relationships. Michener articulates, pointedly and poetically, experiences that we all have. Ultimately, she shows that what we speak can manifest through many tellings and that there are certain things over which we have no control.

Darwin Davis
Adjunct Lecturer
SUNY Oneonta

SAVAGE BEAUTY: THE LIFE OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY, by Nancy Milford (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), 550 pp., $29.95.

THE SELECTED POETRY OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY, Edited and with an Introduction by Nancy Milford (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), 167 pp., $16.95.

The further I got into this new biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was called "Vincent" (for the patron saint of the hospital where she was born) by her family, the more I

wondered what carefully selected (censored) poems of hers I had been fed in high school so that I did NOT meet the wild, sensual, extremely complicated female about whom I am now reading. Whatever the "snow job" done on me about Millay was, it was so *good* a job that I did not re-encounter her during the course of acquiring a Master's degree in English; Nancy Milford's new biography of Millay, "Savage Beauty," makes me regret that absence in my life.

I don't mean to imply that I entirely approve of Edna St. Vincent Millay; if Nancy Milford is right about her, I don't. According to Milford, Millay's sexual adventures (many, with both genders) seem mostly to have been conducted for what she could gain from them, and I abhor such behavior… not from a prudish standpoint, but simply from the point of view that relationships (and most other things) should be what they seem to be, not some sleight of hand. Nothing about Millay, however, seems to have been what it "seems to be": Milford might as easily have called this book "Legerdemain" or "The Curtain is Up," as having named it for Millay's lanky, sexy, red-headed beauty.

Nancy Milford, author of "Zelda" ("Zelda," about the wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald, written over thirty years ago as Milford's doctoral dissertation, was a *New York Times'* bestseller for 29 weeks and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize), has seemingly reached up and grabbed lightning and forced it to strike twice. Milford, who acquired for "Zelda" many hitherto unpublished or unknown documents, has pulled off the same trick for "Savage Beauty": she was the "only person authorized by the (Millay) family to see thousands of private letters, papers, and photos," and worked in close cooperation (and sometimes conflict) with Millay's sister Norma to produce this new work.

The first book to discuss "the dark side" of Millay's life, "Savage Beauty" talks about virtual servitude to the demands of fame, about drinking, and about Millay's "addiction to morphine," all of which Milford says "eventually took (Millay's) life." First serial rights of "Savage Beauty" went, seemingly appropriately, to *Vanity Fair*; hardly another journal title could better capture the spirit of Vincent Millay, unless some publishing house were to bring out a journal entitled *Tell Me What I Have to Do to Please You, and I'll Do It, But You Must Promise to Love Me*.

Sent by various sponsors to be educated at Vassar, Millay made it clear through her behavior what kind of life she intended to lead. Though almost thrown out of school for staying out all night after attending the opera (she was already "campused" – grounded – for a similar offense, and the Vassar faculty voted to suspend her "indefinitely"), Millay managed through the petition of 108 members (about half) of the Vassar class of 1917 (and through the intervention of friends) to receive her diploma.

The young graduate continued to have "friends." Though Millay was a talented (and published) poet from an early age, author Milford often attributes Millay's success to the love or infatuation of patrons, or to exchanges of provocative letters with magazine editors (among others, editor Mitchell Kennerley, who also published D.H. Lawrence). Millay did do some work as a tutor, on the stage, and in poetry readings, but seems primarily to have excelled at marketing herself and her poetry, at living to excess, and at studying the things for which she felt great passion (Millay studied Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, and Spanish at Vassar, and did well in all but Greek!). Millay herself sums up her *modus vivendi* (or *morituri*) in her "First Fig": "My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night' / But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends / It gives a lovely light."

In "The Selected Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay," edited by Milford, Modern Library has re-released a selected volume of Millay's works to coincide with the release of

Milford's new biography of Millay. In the "Selected Poetry" introduction, Milford points out: "These are the poems that made … Millay's reputation when she was young." The collection includes "Renascence," the poem that introduced Millay to the New York literary scene in 1913 (she was 20). There are also poems from several Millay collections, and eight of her sonnets. Many of the pieces generated controversy when they appeared, as did "The Suicide"; this poem not only speaks in the voice of a suicide, but the death described is not negative: "There in the night I came, / And found them feasting, and all things the same / As they had been before. A splendour hung / Upon the walls, and such sweet songs were sung / As … Had called me from the House of Life…" The suicide is rewarded only, and not rebuked. The poem says there will be no more work, ever: "Thou hadst thy task, and laidst it by…" (Millay would eventually die from falling down the stairs. The cause of death was listed as "fracture of cervical spine"; her neck was broken. She was found with the penciled draft of a poem. She had drawn a ring around several of the lines – among them: "I will control myself, or go inside. / I will not flaw perfection with my grief").

Much of Millay's poetry also provoked strong reactions because of its open sexuality: "Each hour more deeply than the hour before, / I drink – and live – what has destroyed some men… I miss him in the weeping of the rain; / I want him at the shrinking of the tide; / …you were something more than young and sweet… / …(There) is no warmth for me at any fire… / I kneel, spending my breath in vain desire, / At that cold hearth which one time roared so strong…" Some of the poems were more base, and lacked any element of the permanence of love: "…if I loved you Wednesday, / …what is that to you? / I do not love you Thursday – / And why you come complaining / Is more than I can see. / I loved you Wednesday, … but what / Is that to me?" For her time, though she had a man's name, Vincent was "no gentleman" in her beliefs, and she does not seem to have cared much where or how she made those beliefs quite clear.

Nancy Milford's "Savage Beauty" tells the story of Millay's life through the use and serious examination of new documents; the companion volume of "Selected Poetry" tells the same story through Millay's verse. Between them, these two books provide an interesting new look at the life and work of a woman who "obsessed America even as she tormented herself." Even if you have never read or been interested in Vincent Millay, these books are well worth your attention.

Freda J. Fuller-Coursey
Department of English
Midwestern State University

Playing With Light: A Novel by Beatriz Rivera (Houston,TX: Arte Publico Press, 2000), 245 pp., $12.95, paperback.

Beatriz Rivera's *Playing with Light*: For Those Who Prefer "Lite" Reading.

Playing with Light is a "lite," whimsical novel-within-a-novel, although the reader may not catch on to its two-fold structure until page 50. It is set in Miami Beach, Florida in 1996, while the imbedded novel takes place in late nineteenth-century Havana. The contemporary Cuban-American Rebecca Barrios is one of those "superficial useless bored rich men's wives" (44) who escapes the painful reality of her life by reading: her father has recently suffered a stroke and her husband has lost his business. She decides to revive the traditional Cuban *tertulia*, an afternoon gathering of women who talk, recline in rocking chairs, and indulge in pastries served with ice water. For the modern American women, however, her party will be different–they will read and discuss a book also entitled *Playing with Light*, in which their own story is foretold by a nineteenth-century man with Rebecca's last name. He is Umbertico Barrios, hired by the wealthy, eccentric Santa Cruz family to entertain their dress factory seamstresses by reading them a novel. This novel just happens to be the story of Rebecca and her life, taking place one hundred years in the future.

The "novel within a novel" structure is non-chronological. The second chapter introduces Umbertico Barrios, who has just read the first chapter to the factory workers. However, forty-four pages later as Rebecca looks for a good novel for "las girlfriends," she sees some people in the bookstore arguing over one of the books on sale. We later realize that they are members of the Santa Cruz family who have appeared in the contemporary time warp, and they are apparently offended by the way they are portrayed in the novel. After they noisily leave the store, Rebecca rushes over and purchases twelve copies of the book, *Playing with Light*. On page 51, Rebecca says "The novel we're about to read begins on the next page." Indeed, the story of the aristocratic Santa Cruz family does begin on page 52, but wasn't Umbertico Barrios's reading to the factory workers in Chapter 2 part of this novel? Before rereading the book, I thought there were three novels: Rebecca's story, the Santa Cruz family's story, and the novel being read to the seamstresses.

In fact, it seems that Umbertico Barrios is Rebecca's ancestor, and that as the story catches up with the twentieth century, the lives of the characters of both novels become intertwined. "...Umberto Gomez's theory that reality [is] parasitically dependent on fiction" (101) becomes a theme. Fictional life imitates art when Rebecca and her reading club friend Alma soon start fantasizing that they are the main character of the novel they are reading—"the one who steals the light" (176). Trudi wants her wedding to be "as much fun as Mafer's and Ernesto's" (219) of the Santa Cruz family. Rebecca and Mafer can both read the future (202). When Rebecca starts reading the book out loud to make a recording for her book club friends who have no time to read, she duplicates the role of her ancestor Umbertico and later, of Mafer, who takes over from Umbertico. As events in their modern lives blend with events in the novel, and characters of one novel imitate those of the other, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the two stories.

"Playing with Light" is a metaphor for the author's freedom to play with the lives

represented, with all their refractions and appearances in other time periods. "That light. Where did the Cuban light go?" (8). "And who is that Fidel who will ruin the architecture and make the light go away?" (20). Real human freedom of women, of slaves, of the Cubans and Cuban Americans themselves remains elusive.

In addition to blending cycles of time, this postmodern novel uses intertextuality with American pop music. The well-wrought dialogue of the Miami setting is frequently expressed in Spanish. *Playing with Light* is an amusing portrait of the Cuban-American woman's experience, and its playfulness recalls that of the master of magical realism, Gabriel García Márquez.

Janice H. Kaufman
Assistant Professor
SUNY College at Oneonta

So Vast the Prison (Vaste est la prison) by Assia Djebar (Translated by Betsy Wing)(NY: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 363 pp., $24.95.

Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison* (*Vaste est la prison* 1995), is the third installment in what has been called the "Algerian Quartet." In this novel Djebar explores the voyage through time and space of its narrator, Isma (who is also one of the two antithetical narrators of *L'Ombre Sultan*), intertwining her story with that of Algeria and its women, and their struggles for independence from French colonialism and patriarchal domination. This domination is reflected within the notion of "enemy language" which in Djebar's case can be identified as French, having been imposed on the Algerian people for over a century by her colonizer. She, however, writes in French in order to interpolate herself into the dominant culture as a form of resistance, which reflects another of her more universal, as well as personal goals: to make a connection to the maternal world colonization denied her.

Through Isma, Djebar explores and finds herself in terms of her status as a woman, which is in contrast to the image established by traditional Islamic law, the Sharia'a, used in the past and in some countries (Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia) to replace the civil judicial system. However, Djebar's novel also gives a voice to women who have not been able to speak for themselves by introducing the reader into the private spaces where they convene in order to share the stories of their lives

The entrance of the reader into Djebar's private space is in effect a counter-stance and resistance to the limitations presented to women in Algerian society. Hence, patriarchy continues to control women's movement, denying them the right to see from within the confinement of their "prisons" and in return to be seen as well. As such, Djebar transgresses a series of taboos, subverting her status as an object by incorporating herself into a world controlled and belief to be designated only for men.

The communing of any group of women in a private space, as is the case in *So*

Vast the Prison, becomes a symbolic collectivity where individual women find outlets where they allow their voices to speak up and share experiences and frustrations. This act is witnessed by the reader as Djebar introduces the *hammam* in her prologue, where women come together and physically remove themselves from the male's gaze, and from within their veils which allows for their own physical and emotional unveiling. It is here where Isma will begin her voyage, where she will formulate the structure through which she will work to interpolate herself into language, into the dominant culture in order to free her self and others like her, from the norms, traditions and laws that dominate them. Her confrontation with the notion of "*l'edou*" serves as the stage from which her voyage will begin.

In her search to appropriate and reconcile with the maternal world, Isma will incorporate the concept of "*l'edou*" as a way of recognizing a parallel universe to that which she has been distanced from since childhood. By juxtaposing the notion of "enemy" with "husband"/man, the Other, Assia Djebar, through Isma's narration, gazes upon her opposite, and introduces a resistance to established norms and expectations which corresponds to the idea that Djebar is aware of the transgressions she is committing by writing "against the grain" and usurping herself onto the masculine world. Thus, the "I" of the writer extends to become the "we" that will take up the struggle for all Algerian, and by extension Arab-Muslim women.

Enrique Morales-Díaz
Assistant Professor of Spanish
Hartwick College

Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb **by Jarrod Hayes** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 307 pp., $20 (paper).

In Jarrod Hayes's impressive study of postcolonial Maghrebian novels, he weaves together multiple perspectives–feminist, queer, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic–to reveal the queering of "the" nation. His analysis includes a range of authors, including Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, Rachid Boujedra, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Tahar Djaout, and Leila Sebbar. The majority are Algerian writers though Sebbar falls within the Maghrebian diaspora.

Hayes starts from the premise that the hegemonic discourses of nationalism typically excluded or repressed marginal and dissident identities in the Maghreb as well as marginal experiences and "histories." In a genuine *tour de force* study, he demonstrates that postcolonial writers in French reveal and employ marginal sexualities, gender insubordination, and cultural hybridity to create an alternative to the dominant nationalist narratives. By foregrounding gender and sexual dissidence, these writers challenge (and destabilize) not only the overarching nationalist history, but hegemonic Maghrebian male

heterosexualitychence, "queering" the nation. Their fictional efforts assist in the creation of a positive national identity to replace the suppression of muslim Arabo-Berber identity by the French colonial regime, and displace orientalist views of the Maghreb, especially western ideas of "oriental" sexuality. Hayes reveals how the various authors resist the hegemonic, not by avoidance or erasure of identity and history, but by rearticulating the narratives to include marginal realities, thereby producing more complex and ambiguous stories, ones without narrative closure.

In "Homosexuality (Un)veiled," Hayes exposes how sexuality is key to the "narrative economy" because sexual transgression is employed as an allegory for political resistance to the social order. Rachid Boujedra's 1969 novel, *La répudiation*, for example, "lays bare the mechanisms by which nationalism represses homosexuality to naturalize the Nation as heterosexual and homosocial." (p74) A decade later in *Les 1001 années de la nostalgie,* Hayes argues that Boujedra explicitly establishes "sexual liberation as a prerequisite for successful struggle against colonial and neocolonial oppression." Whereas in the latter work women's sexuality is seen as threatening to male power, in the former homosexuality plays the role.

In "Personalizing the Political" Hayes explores Assia Djebar's historical accounts in which ghosts are brought back "to haunt the present," in particular women's role in history "…their suffering and resistance…like the queer ghosts…(have) been hidden from history in colonial and nationalist historiographies."(p183) In Djebar's tales of national struggle, Hayes demonstrates, there is space for feminists. (p188) In "Skeletons in the Closet," he examines the work of Tahar Djaout who allegorically wrote about repression of historical secrets and drew parallels with Islamist efforts to control women in contemporary Algeria. In "Sex on Fire," Hayes dissects Algerian literature of the revolutionary period. In writing about Mohammed Dib's novel of the Algerian War, *Qui se souvient de la mer*, he argues that the protagonist Nafissa–wife, mother and revolutionary bomber and combatant–planted bombs not just in the city, but against the traditional family, and the modern, heterosexual, monogamous couple, challenging family forms built on gender dominance.

Throughout this very readable volume, voice and silence are central to Hayes's argument: the power of voice and the silencing of alternative masculinities, dissident women, and political opposition. Like the theoretical approaches he employs, Hayes acknowledges the emancipatory potential of breaking silence, speaking about and unveiling what is marginal, dissident or queer. Hayes has produced a very interesting work, one quite accessible to non-specialists in the Maghreb, and one which in keeping with his subjects' critiques, presents a vision of nationalism that is both feminist and queer.

Kathleen O'Mara
Professor, Africana & Latino Studies/History
SUNY Oneonta