New Voices of Modern Arab Literature

A series of residencies for emerging Arab writers, coordinated by the Alliance of Artists Communities and in partnership with Beirut39 | Hay Festival.

2010 - 2013

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The Alliance of Artists Communities believes that collaboration and exchange that cross traditional boundaries furthers our culture’s progress. In a spirit of support for a new generation of Arab writers, the Alliance of Artists Communities developed “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” – a series of residencies throughout the United States and abroad for the winners of the Beirut39 prize, a project of the Hay Festival in Wales. The Beirut39 writers – 39 Arab authors under the age of 39 – were selected from a pool of over 500 nominated from throughout the Arab world.

The Alliance sought residency hosts in 2010 and one of the first partners was the La Napoule Art Foundation, a US-based organization operating a residency at the Clews Center for the Arts in France. La Napoule hosted the first residencies and enabled us to pilot this project, which ultimately resulted in 30 residencies for 18 writers at 18 different residency programs, from 2010 to 2013. The writers hail from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen and were hosted by residencies in unique communities across the US – from Santa Fe to Santa Monica, from an island off Puget Sound to a historic house on a Midwestern prairie – as well as programs in Turkey, Italy, Morocco, France, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition to providing residencies, many of the host organizations also programmed activities connecting the writers with a wider public.

The residencies began before the Arab Spring surprised the world, and continued after it, at times allowing writers a retreat to reflect on rapidly-unfolding history before being plunged back into it. In addition to being afforded time to work in solitude, these writers also engaged in the company of other artists-in-residence, which is often the richest opportunity offered by a residency. It is frequently the fellowship around the table that provides the strength required to return to the studio and unlock the creative beauty within. As Hyam Yared writes in her reflections on her time at The Bogliasco Foundation’s Liguria Study Center and the “worrying serenity” of her hours there, “There is nothing more worrying than beauty. A worry that is rooted in the fear of losing even an instant of revealed beauty. Like a lost phrase that will never again return home to its text. Like the stroke of a brush lost forever. It is this astonishment that we are offered.”

We are deeply grateful to all the residency programs that hosted these writers with great generosity and flexibility, accommodating visa delays, scheduling changes, and other surprises. We thank the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art and the National Endowment for the Arts, whose generous support made it possible for us to cover travel expenses, public engagement activities in local communities, documentation of these residencies, and management of this project.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Cristina Fuentes LaRoche, Director of the Americas and Middle East for the Hay Festival, and Hay Festival Project Coordinator Izara García Rodríguez. Since we first approached the Hay Festival and proposed this residency series nearly three years ago, we enjoyed their gracious and good-humored collaboration. We would also like to thank Anita Husen, whose ongoing translation of selected correspondence over two years helped us guide many of the writers through the visa process and into the harbor of their residencies, and for some of the translations in this final report; Mark Pettigrew, for his invaluable translation and editing assistance on this document; and Aicha Alami in Fes.

We hope that the tremendously positive experiences of these writers will attract more artists from the Arab world to participate in artist residency programs. Our programs welcome them. We hope the word will spread.

Lori Wood
*Project Manager, “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature”*
*Founder and Director, Fes Medina*

Caitlin Strokosch
*Executive Director*
*Alliance of Artists Communities*

June 2013
As one of the leading literature festivals in the world, Hay Festival has always been interested in highlighting new talent and has collaborated with the UNESCO “World Book Capital” project so far in Bogotá and Beirut. This title is awarded to a different city every year in recognition of the quality and variety of its programmes to promote books, readership, and the editorial industry.

The 39 Project consists of the selection of 39 writers under the age of 39 who have the potential and the talent to define the trends that will mark the future development of literature in a certain language or region. The 39 Project materialized for the first time in Bogotá (2007) and for the second time in Beirut (2010), giving way in both cases to four days of literature, conversation, and the love of books.

Hay Festival is very grateful for the wonderful opportunities granted by the Alliance of Artists Communities to the writers selected as part of the Beirut39 project.

Eighteen writers have benefited from the programme of residencies, having the chance to write and develop their work in a peaceful and welcoming environment. In the case of the Beirut39 writers, the opportunity to enjoy a residency also meant the chance to travel and meet other international writers from outside the Middle East. What the Alliance and its member organizations does is extremely valuable, allowing writers to work on what they do best.

Cristina Fuentes La Roche
Director of the Americas and Middle East
Hay Festival
www.hayfestival.org

“What does a writer from a remote country like Yemen have to offer that is new to literature?” I never raised this question to myself with such urgency in my own country, but my stay in America shocked me to awareness, and I realized that good writing is writing characterized by authenticity, that is, by the writer’s return to his roots and native environment, and his ability to find inspiration in them.

— Wajdi Al-Ahdal

ABOUT BEIRUT39

How far has Arab literature evolved, how far has it traveled? What messages are the new generation of storytellers giving us? Beirut39 inspires a fresh look at modern Arab literature. A collaboration between the Hay Festival and Beirut World Capital of the Book, the Beirut39 project brings together 39 of the most interesting writers of Arab heritage under 39 years of age, from over 500 worldwide submissions. All Beirut39 writers have published at least one book. These authors were presented in over 50 literary conversations in the Beirut39 Festival in April 2010 in Beirut, and continue to appear in Hay Festival events worldwide. In April 2010, a Beirut39 anthology was published by Bloomsbury in the US, Europe, and the Arab world. For some of these writers, this represented the first time their work has appeared in English. Beirut39 represents an international effort to bring a new generation of Arab voices to a wider readership and to expand opportunities for them within the international community. Although important new literary awards have increased the profile of Arabic literature in the Arab world and worldwide, the writers that have benefited generally have a long writing career behind them. The Beirut39 competition set out to identify and honor writers who are at the start of their careers and who are often struggling to find a wider audience. The 39 writers selected are some of the most exciting new voices of Arab literature today. More information about the project and the authors can be found at www.beirut39.com.
Chairman’s Preface

Artists and the arts help us see the world in two ways: First, you have to see it as it is. But if you believe art can change lives, then you can also see it as it could be. Artists open our eyes and our ears to new sights and new sounds – to new thoughts. As such, cultural exchange and international residency programs can never be adequately measured in monetary terms. Their value can only be appreciated and felt by those who have experienced the differences between people. This publication for “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” gives us all an opportunity share in those experiences.

Despite the differences among cultures, many values unite us as global citizens. Creativity and the arts can help facilitate genuine human connection, and artists can push the engine of mutual understanding that connects the world and empowers societies. By working toward a shared, valued human experience we can search for the best in people and their cultures. And yet the vastness of cultures in our world is astounding. What one society celebrates, another overlooks. What one group rejects, another embraces. It is the cultures and values sustaining a society that make it unique, bringing people together with a shared sense of community and belonging despite their differences.

Our artist residency partners around the world offer a rare opportunity for artists from near and far to engage in this critical work, by offering a time to journey toward heightened discovery and creativity. Creating a shared and valued human experience in an international residency can present a special challenge, however, with strangers thrust into a temporary community in an intimate setting poised between solitude and solidarity. I believe those residency programs chronicled in this publication met that special challenge. Even more so, I know this project helped people recognize the best in one another and, as a result, achieved remarkable success in bridging territorial divides.

I am not sure we knew “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” would be as complex and consuming as this project turned out to be when the Alliance of Artists Communities first entered into conversations to expand on the work of the Hay Festival’s “Beirut39.” The 39 Arab authors under the age of 39 – selected by a prestigious jury from a pool of over 500 nominated from throughout the Arab world – were all offered residencies at programs throughout the United States and in Europe and North Africa. Those who accepted the invitation found themselves on a journey, both literal and metaphorical, and their stories are included in this publication.

Many thanks to Caitlin Strokosch, our director at the Alliance of Artists Communities; Lori Wood, Project Manager for “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” as well as founder and director of Fes Medina; and to the many, many residency directors and their staffs who made this project a great success. And special gratitude as well to the National Endowment for the Arts and Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art for their financial support. This publication is a wonderful example of why artist residency programs are so important to the support of individual artists from around the world.

On behalf of the entire board of the Alliance of Artists Communities, please enjoy this publication.

Wayne P. Lawson, PhD
Chairman, Alliance of Artists Communities
Director Emeritus, Ohio Arts Council
Professor, Arts Administration, Education and Policy, The Ohio State University

ABOUT THE ALLIANCE OF ARTISTS COMMUNITIES

The Alliance of Artists Communities is an association of artist communities, artist colonies, and artist residency programs – representing a field of 500 organizations in the US and more than 1,500 worldwide that provide artists of any discipline with dedicated time and space to create new work. Believing that the cultivation of new art and ideas is essential to human progress, the mission of the Alliance is to advocate for and support artist communities, to advance the endeavors of artists.
Reflections from the writer

My residency at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica was more than beneficial and amazing. The center gave me the opportunity to write a second edition of my new poetry collection. It also allowed me to read my poetry at a public reading. And it allowed me the opportunity to relax and think about many things in a peaceful environment. The thing that pleased me the most at the arts center was the wonderful relationship between the staff and artists. The residency was a new attempt to discover worlds that I did not know before.

— Basim al Ansar (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

18th Street Arts Center is grateful to the organizers of the “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” residencies and the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art for their support of the residency of Baghdad-born, Copenhagen-based poet Basim Alansar in April 2013. During his residency, Basim lived in housing on our 1.5-acre campus in Santa Monica, CA, and participated in a series of activities intended to engage the writer with the diverse public in Los Angeles. Following the annual theme taking aim against presumptions of cultural homogeneity, the program we organized situated Basim as a writer first, and sought intersections within our community that are not only relevant to the content of the author’s work and his country of origin, but with the literary and artistic community as a whole, allowing for engagement and exchange as it would occur naturally for any artist.

Basim was welcomed to our community at 18th Street Arts Center with a potluck lunch during his first week of arrival. There he met Los Angeles-based residents of our center and our entire staff, as well as visual artist Hitman Gurung, visiting our program from Kathmandu, Nepal. Hitman and Basim became friendly and spent time together exploring the city throughout the month. Basim participated in our public programs during his time here, joining in on a lecture on April 9th by acclaimed theorist Stephen Wright and mingling with over 60 attendees of the evening’s event.

To present his work publicly, we organized a reading for Basim on April 12th at the contemporary arts space Public Fiction, a site for experimentation and exchange that frequently involves collaborations by writers, graphic designers,
and artists. Basim read his work in Arabic and was followed with the English translation of his works spoken by acclaimed Los Angeles poet Peter Harris. Two other poets read during the event, Travis Dielh and Diana Arterian. Approximately 40 people attended the event, many of who participate in the poetry scene in Los Angeles.

The gallery exhibition by artist Alexandra Grant on display during Basim’s residency also became a place for him to connect. Alexandra’s project Forêt Intérieure/Interior Forest is based on the literary works of Algerian-born, French author Hélène Cixous, wherein the artist developed a collaborative drawing onsite illustrating the author’s texts. Basim drew/wrote a poetic text in Arabic as part of the installation and will be credited in the making of the work and its catalog. Basim engaged Alexandra during her drawing sessions and discussed her project as well as his own work. During his last weekend at 18th Street, Basim read some of his works within the installation. Furthering the conversation between his work and Alexandra’s work, we are producing a foldout newsprint publication that will include one of Basim’s poems and drawings by Alexandra to be produced for and distributed during the opening of Forêt Intérieure/Interior Forest on June 1, 2013. This piece serves as a small collaboration between the two and documents their concurrent residencies.

18th Street Arts Center engaged new partners through Basim’s residency. As we are a program primarily geared towards visual artists, “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” allowed us the opportunity to cross over to new literary audiences and organizations and to forge new dialogs between artists, writers, scholars, curators, and the general public.
Reflections from the writer

How can one not be enchanted by Italy, with all its hidden recesses? How can one not be enchanted by the beauty of this village clinging to the Ligurian coast, like a jewel carved in the rock? How can one not be enchanted and revitalized by the beauty of this site that imposes itself with worrying serenity? Yes, worrying. Because there is nothing more worrying than beauty. A worry that is rooted in the fear of losing even an instant of revealed beauty. Like a lost phrase that will never again return home to its text. Like the stroke of a brush lost forever. This is exactly the astonishment that the Bogliasco site offers us, regardless of the angle from which we perceive it. At Bogliasco, a myriad of beauties is displayed before the artist coming to seek inspiration in these locales. While the scenery in itself is a haven of peace, the Bogliasco Foundation residency offered to participants was conceived so as to afford the ideal atmosphere for creativity to bloom. Around lovely, cordial meals gathered writers and artists from various disciplines, enriching the exchange and dialogue, and providing comfort in those moments of doubt inherent to creativity. A mere look at the seemingly endless scene of pines, of the serrated Ligurian coast, and the immense sea spreading before the windows of the residency, persuades you that writing is achievable here and nowhere else. This beauty calls forth Prince Mychkine in Dostoyevsky’s The Idiot, where this character reveals that beauty will save the world. One thing is certain: the beauty that I encountered at this site elevates creativity to ideal and almost ecstatic realms of tranquility and well-being. Bogliasco was a privileged instant of writing, bathed in softness, but also of genuine culinary achievements. Rarely in a writing residency do we find this plethora of flavors and delicacies. Of the Bogliasco residency, I hold vivid recollections!!!

— Hyam Yared (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

The Bogliasco Foundation was delighted to participate in this partnership with the 2011 residency of the extraordinary young Lebanese writer Hyam Yared.

The Bogliasco Foundation is committed to creating a haven of creativity for a highly qualified, eclectic blend of residents, who will inspire excellence and challenge one another to think beyond the conventions of their respective disciplines and subjects of interest. In order to encourage stimulating international exchange, the 8-10 Fellows in each residency group are chosen to represent the greatest possible diversity in terms of discipline, nationality, language, age, and experience. Because of this commitment to diversity, we were particularly interested in including a young Arab writer in our program, thus expanding the experience base of our Fellows.

Ms. Yared’s co-residents included a young choreographer from Hong Kong, a Portuguese playwright, and an American philosopher; while Ms. Yared continued working on a fiction work about Lebanese religious politics and their effect on personal lives, other residents worked on projects that included a historical film animation about the first female professional balloonist, a “pocket opera” based on King Lear, and a scholarly investigation into ideals of female beauty in Ancient Greece.

We are grateful for the opportunity to host Ms. Yared, to get to know her, and to be inspired by her work.
Reflections from the writer

A gorgeous building located in the center of Istanbul, close to the creative heart of Galata, Caravansarai provided me with one month of uninterrupted time to write and explore this old, literary city. The rooftop of the building had a view of the Golden Horn, and of the blue mosque, and I would spend my mornings and evenings working there on my laptop. In the afternoons, the city provided countless inspiring spaces, not limited to the art galleries and bookstores nearby. Simply a breathtaking experience.

— Randa Jarrar

Reflections from the residency host

The year 2010 was a pivotal one for Caravansarai. It was the first year that we hosted residents in our new building and we were thrilled to be included in the “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” project. One of our intentions in the creation of the space was to be a meeting point for artists and creators from all parts of the globe. We felt we were positioned perfectly to host writers from the Arab countries, and when we were invited to participate in this project we saw it as the perfect opportunity to kick things off.

As the majority of the other residencies involved in this project are located in the United States and we are in Turkey, we realized that our location may not be an Arab writer’s first choice. Fortunately, Randa Jarrar – an American writer of Palestinian/Greek/Egyptian descent – saw in Turkey a departure from her daily life and she joined us in Istanbul for the swelteringly hot month of July.

Our community consists mostly of other local and international artists and educated English-speaking Turks. The immediate area around our building is an industrial hardware-selling neighborhood, away from residential homes. With few opportunity for public involvement, our community engagement took the form of a dinner party of intellectuals and friends who came together to hear Randa Jarrar read new work written while in residence at Caravansarai.
Reflections from the writer

Civitella Ranieri was a lush dream come true: from the private lodging overlooking an expanse of Italian countryside dotted with hay bales; to the grounds of the castle itself, a 15th-century marvel; to the staff, who made every accommodation seamless; and to my writing room itself, a haven in which I wrote over 80 new pages. This is the kind of residency every writer needs, with field trips organized by the staff, so that I never felt like I had to plan anything. These trips to the many nearby towns, as well as one to Florence and one to Rome, were filled with literary events as well as once-in-a-lifetime viewings of art. I got to see, for example, many works by Pierro della Francesca, most important of which was the Madonna del Parto (The Pregnant Madonna), which the director of Civitella – the elegant and fabulous Dana Prescott – drove us to herself in nearby Tuscany, and which very much informed my work.

— Randa Jarrar

Reflections from the residency host

The Civitella Ranieri Foundation hosts a residency program committed to international collaborations, so we were thrilled to participate in the Alliance’s “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature,” as we have had few previous fellows from the Arab world. We knew it would lead us to a high quality writer with connections to that region, and we were not disappointed. Randa Jarrar was a spectacular addition to our group of Fellows. She is everything you could want in a guest: honest, funny, talented, willing to share, self-aware, curious about others, enthusiastic, intelligent, and articulate.

Many a late night gathering occurred when Randa was with us. She joined a supportive and particularly dedicated group of Fellows that session who basked in debates on language, fiction and fact, belly dancing demonstrations, music, and food. Randa’s public lecture and reading were well attended and we included Villa La Pietra (NYU) students in the mix. After we gathered at the reception in the castle courtyard, we went up to the atrium library, packed with attendees, and celebrated in her brilliant reading and her willingness to answer questions from the group.

Relationships are difficult to describe or to measure, but I can’t think of anyone who didn’t feel lucky to have Randa at the table. Our only disappointment is not having this connection annually. It was a great affiliation.
Reflections from the writer

The Djerassi residency provided an expansive rural space that allowed me to focus on my writing. There I wrote many short poems (about sixty poems) that constitute a large portion of my new poetry collection (which will soon be released in Egypt). The isolation and relative distance from the city allowed me to intensify my reading and writing. The residency’s beauty and outstanding staff are two reasons that Djerassi will always be present in my heart and mind.

— Abderrahim Elkhassar (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

The night Abderrahim shared his work with us – first in Arabic, then in English – was mesmerizing. Fellow resident composer Zachary James Watkins said it best: “Abderrahim has a gentle smile that often becomes the most rich laughter one could imagine. You feel honored to be in his presence sharing ideas and moments. We often took walks sharing stories of home, the foods we love as well as entertaining the idea of collaboration, so I invited Abderrahim to record his poems in my composer’s studio. Though I do not understand Arabic, listening to Abderrahim recite his poetry in person is a transcendent experience. Abderrahim’s voice alone is engaging, involving dynamic inflections and modulations, complex rhythms and breath. I am fortunate to have met Abderrahim Elkhassar via the unbelievable Djerassi Residency and I look forward to continuing our collaboration!”
Fes Medina | Old City of Fes (MOROCCO)

ADANIA SHIBLI (b. PALESTINE, 1974)
FEBRUARY 2011

HYAM YARED (b. LEBANON, 1975)
FEBRUARY 2011

YAHYA AMQASSIM (b. SAUDI ARABIA, 1971)
FEBRUARY 2011

Reflections from the writers

The residency in Fes contributed to my concentration on my artistic book – Dispositions – that was published in 2012.
— Adania Shibli (translated)

Once in Fes, time stood still. Within the labyrinth of its alleys, edged with shops and display cases of vegetables and meat, now and then you encounter a grocery shop out of a tale of A Thousand and One Nights, offering products sometimes of modernity, other times not. Faced with the odors ensuing from the displays of meat circled by insects of all sorts, my heart all but stopped, and my reason inquired whether it was not safer to become a vegetarian after all, and turn on my heels. But I moved on, as when one drives toward disorientation, seeking to write even better. To risk the shift, this is the very essence of writing. From time to time, a voice sprung up behind me, in the midst of claps of hooves. I hardly had time to turn my head to see the donkey groaning under a burden of gas bottles, and threading its way through the tightening, labyrinthine alleys of the ancient Medina of Fes. This magnificent city. Never had I thought before that such a place as the city of Fes existed on earth, with that power to transport one into another dimension. Even my imagination had never been able to wrest me from reality as did this city, bearing in itself more than a thousand years of history, a city that seemed frozen within a clock face from which, from this point forward, Fes alone can read the time. What better place for an author than this, never mind the warm welcome we were offered, worthy of Moroccan hospitality. That cultural and sincere hospitality that the Fassis reserve for their guests was marvelously reproduced by the team that directed this residency. For it was in keeping with the expression “heart in hand” that we were received. Everything was made available to the writers accommodated in magnificent riads in the heart of the city, with all the required comforts, so that the act of writing could flourish, freed of any worries about logistics. All this shrouded in scents, fragrances and smells of spices, and achieved thanks to a warm welcome, keen on making Fes and its sites a shelter for literature. Writing in Fes was a real ease to the senses thanks to this residency…and a unique journey through time…
— Hyam Yared (translated)
This residency provided me with a palpable sense of connection with a deep-rooted history and with monuments that bear witness to a civilization that has passed away.... I refer to the extension of the Arab Islamic cultural tradition in the Andalus and North Africa. The city of Fes has preserved its architectural character and its commitment to its heritage. This milieu stimulated me to write aesthetically and historically, and to conjure up new characters emanating from my interest in tracing the origins of communal values, studying the architecture of life and its social-economic formation throughout history.

Before my visit to the historic city of Fes in February 2011, I had already started writing an historical novel that focuses on a nomadic group in the southwest Arabian Peninsula. My residency in Fes helped me reconstruct various aspects of life in the past two centuries, and provided a basis for understanding the cultural contact between groups in the Arab Maghreb and those of the Arabian Peninsula, especially those of the Hijaz. I came to appreciate the significant interaction between the two regions in terms of social and historical formation (and we know that the Hijaz and the southern Arabian Peninsula embraced tribes returning from the Maghreb to their place of origin). This is why this residency proved to be a great opportunity to make progress on my writing project. Unfortunately, I do not yet have an English excerpt (though one will appear soon, God willing) with which to extol my residency in Fes, made possible by the Alliance of Artists Communities, which has, through the Beirut39 residencies, provided so many writers with outstanding residencies in cities around the world.

— Yahya Amqassim (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

In February 2011, in the early weeks of the Arab Spring, Fes Medina hosted Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, Saudi novelist Yahya Amqassim, and Lebanese novelist and poet Hyam Yared for residencies in the medieval medina or Old City of Fes, Morocco. This residency celebrated the many stories and routes of transmission within the Arabic-speaking world, as well as Fes’ ancient heritage as a convener of the best voices and minds from throughout the Arab world. Each writer was housed in a traditional house in the medina that was donated by their owners as a gift of time to these writers.

It was an exciting time to be in the Maghreb. Travel was disrupted and some of the writers’ flights were rerouted as they tried to make their way to Fes. As thousands of protesters crowded Cairo’s Tahrir Square, protests reached Tripoli, and Qaddafi hectored the world on Al Jazeera for hours at a stretch. The writers worked in solitude in their quiet houses in the medina during the days, then came together for occasional artist dinners at night. Meanwhile, demonstrations were beginning in other Arab countries, and cafes in Fes were packed as incredulous Fassis watched events unfold on television screens. Morocco’s own demonstrations were planned for February 21, and the shops of the medina were shut up tight and the medina empty that morning as people waited in their homes to see what would happen in Fes. Fassis got a taste that day of how difficult it is for the residents of a city to get accurate news of unfolding events. As some Fes Medina staff were at home trying to get news to the writers of what was happening in their neighborhoods, the writers themselves were out experiencing the demonstrations personally.

In an extension of Fes’ literary month in February 2011, Fes Medina also acted as the local host for a Literature Across Frontiers Poetry in Translation workshop, “Poetry Connections Morocco.” Five Arab and five European poets came to Fes for an intensive, week-long workshop. The 10 poets worked intensively together in the peaceful courtyard of the ALIF Riad to exchange their views on poetry and to translate each other’s work, often using a bridge language. Two community dinners brought together the three Beirut3 poets with these 10 poets, as well as local poets from Fes and members of the community. A public reading was held at the new ALIF Bookstore, and later at the Casablanca Book Fair. “Poetry Connections Morocco” was sponsored locally by the American Language Center and Arabic Language Institute in Fes (ALIF).

Special thanks to the following individuals for the generous donation of their houses during February 2011: To Siham Benchekroun and Nicolas Guillem for the donation of Dar Jad, to Hafid el Amrani for the donation of Dar Jnane, to David Amster for the donation of Dar Bennis, and to Tom Jenkins for the donation of Dar Ben Safi for community dinners. Special thanks also to ALIF, Dar Fes Medina, Mostafa Bakkali, Mounia Chebl, Malika Chebl, and Fatima Boughraka, and to Aicha Alami and Hafid el Amrani for their gracious coordination of the project.

From early in its history, Fes has been both a refuge and a convener of artistic and intellectual talent. We were delighted to extend this ancient tradition of welcome in Fes to a new generation of Arab writers, and beyond.
**Reflections from the writer**

*My second residency experience was at Hedgebrook in Seattle, Washington, which was quite different from my first residency at Montalvo in California. The main difference is that the group at Montalvo was men and women, while at Hedgebrook the group consisted only of women writers. At Hedgebrook we met at dinner to exchange ideas, which often turned into deep discussions about our creative projects. We also took cultural excursions, especially to the city of Seattle. Many participants shared common interests like walking and yoga. For me, Hedgebook was a very important cultural and creative experience.*

— Nagat Ali (translated)
International Writing Program | Iowa City, Iowa (USA)

ABDULLAH THABIT (b. SAUDI ARABIA, 1973)
AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2012

Reflections from the writer

The International Writing Program in the state of Iowa in the United States was absolutely wonderful. I met writers from different parts of the world. We had several discussions on culture, literature, writing and reading. And we all listened to each other. What I liked the most during the residency was understanding with depth and detail new things about the writers’ cultures and countries. I definitely progressed in my writing, as each new experience means a new perspective and new ideas.

— Abdullah Thabit (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

Like the Alliance of Artists Communities, the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program believes that creativity and connection move the world forward, and partnering with the Alliance to host a Beirut39 author was a natural extension of the IWP’s nearly half-century commitment to supporting writers, sharing literatures, and forging long-term bonds with the global writing community. We were particularly impressed with Beirut39, which, by supplementing a traditional festival with an anthology of writings and placement of artists at residencies, has offered a new model for raising awareness of a region’s contemporary literature.

The Saudi novelist Abdullah Thabit, who was selected to come to the IWP’s 2012 Fall Residency, had the opportunity to deepen his understanding of America and to familiarize himself with the cultures and literary scenes of his three dozen fellow participants. The residency’s slate of activities included, in part, scores of public events in bookstores, libraries, schools, and universities; classroom visits; virtual outreach activities; collaborations in theatre, translation, and dance; and ten days of professional-development travel to various cities in the US — all of which were balanced with the most important element, the time and space to pursue writing and research projects.
Reflections from the writer

The period of my residency in Dubai (as part of the Writer in Residence program hosted by the Jumeirah International Hotel Group’s Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management) stands out as one of the most fruitful periods for me in recent years, both in terms of daily writing, and daily reading and study as well. The period of my residency afforded me all the conveniences necessary for me to devote myself entirely to the goal of completing an artistic-literary text in the period of one full month, without having to worry about anything besides narrative production. (That freedom had previously eluded me, due to the demands of daily life.) The residency also inspired me with many positive ideas as a result of my contact with new people of various nationalities who, although they differed widely in their relationship with literature and art, were all united by a refined human sentiment.

Thanks to coordination on the part of Beirut39, I also had an opportunity to participate in the Emirates Airlines Festival of Literature – one of the largest international literary festivals in the Arab world. At the festival, I met and interacted with writers and had moving experiences that supplied me with fresh ideas and inspired ideas for new projects, both on the level of individual literary production and on the level of general cultural activity.

The experience of being a Writer in Residence at Jumeirah in Dubai helped me finish a novel that had taken me a long time, Ashbah Faransawi (“French Ghosts”), and set me on the way to preparing another novel, on which I am still working, Akhir al-Salatin (“The Last Sultan”). It was a lovely time during which I was treated well and attentively by both the hostess (Jumeirah) and the nursemaid (Beirut39). I will be thankful to them both forever.

— Mansour El Souwaim

Reflections from the residency host

As part of Jumeirah’s Culturally Connected platform, Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management hosted Beirut39 writer Mansour El Souwaim in March 2012. In order to offer the most enriching, culturally connected experience, Mansour’s residency was timed to coincide with the Emirates Airlines Festival of Literature, where he participated in a Jumeirah-supported panel.

Beirut39 is a historic partnership that brings together key arts organizations and cultural festivals from around the world. Jumeirah is the only hotel group that has been invited to participate in the Alliance of Artists Communities’ “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” project and to host a Beirut39 writer.
The Kansas City Artists Coalition was a wonderful place. Not only did I finish a book I had been working on for three years, but I also began working on a play – an idea I have had for five years but I was not able to set my mind to until I arrived at this place full of creativity, artists, and an atmosphere rich with cultural life.

— Adania Shibli (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

The Alliance of Artists Communities’ “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” residency series was a great opportunity for the Kansas City International Residency at the Artists Coalition. Our residency is primarily for visual artists but we wanted to explore what we could offer and gain from working with writers. I am glad we did.

Adania Shibli is the writer who chose our residency. Meeting her and working with her was a wonderful experience. Adania’s disciplined work schedule allowed her to meet her goals for her work and engage with interested people in the community.

Community engagement is one of the goals for our residency program. While here, Adania gave a radio interview on our local public radio station, presented at the Alliance of Artists Communities conference, and gave a reading in both Arabic and English. Informally she met with local writers, visual artists, and musicians, and visited many of the city’s jazz venues. She was very well received and embraced by everyone who met her.

The Artists Coalition believes that working with artists from around the world allows for the exchange of ideas and possibility of friendships. We hope that our community and resident artists can learn from each other and have experiences that encourage understanding and personal growth.
La Napoule Art Foundation | Mandelieu-La Napoule (FRANCE)

ADANIA SHIBLI (b. PALESTINE, 1974)
OCTOBER 2010

HAMDY EL GAZZAR (b. EGYPT, 1970)
OCTOBER 2010

HYAM YARED (b. LEBANON, 1975)
OCTOBER 2010

YASSIN ADNAN (b. MOROCCO, 1970)
MARCH 2011

YOUSSEF RAKHA (b. EGYPT, 1976)
MARCH 2011

La Napoule was an ideal place to which to retreat and to return to work on my novel that I had taken a break from for five years.
— Adania Shibli

In October 2010 I was in literary residence at the La Napoule Art Foundation, dividing my time between the chateau, the sea, and Villa Marguerite. It was the first time I had visited France. I remember the unique location of the chateau. The first dinner was held at the chateau jutting into the sea, by candlelight, in the pleasant company of the director, Alexis, his wife, Hélène, and the wonderful Lise. We dined with the sound of the sea for background music, the soft light illuminating friendly faces.

That first night at Villa Marguerite, I was the only person sleeping there – I was completely alone. I went out onto the balcony of my room. The sea before me was a limpid blue, breathing gently and deeply; the promontories around it were green, and the sky above me was strewn with thousands of twinkling stars. I felt close to nature, a part of everything around me. I felt as if I would grow ever closer to it in that intimate stillness.

I had intended to work on my new novel about “the women of Cairo.” I wrote several chapters, but something else happened. At Villa Marguerite, I tried writing poetry for the first time. I did not succeed, exactly, but it was the beginning of a deep relationship with nature, silence, and poetry.

Two years after my residency, I published my first poetic work, Kitab al-sutur al-arba’a (“The Book of Four Lines”).
— Hamdy El Gazzar (translated)
An ideal site for peacefulness and writing. The managing team, present on site, takes care of all practical details, providing the conditions of comfort necessary and vital for any writer who desires to devote herself to writing. Every effort was made for writers to be free of any worries whatsoever. The meals provided were pleasurable. All this without forgetting the magical site of La Napoule Castle, where the journey through time becomes inevitable for the visitor, from the very moment he or she steps inside. The journey is not only made through time. Beyond the 14th-century walls, the site releases a mystery imprinted with the spirits of its latest owners, the American couple Henry and Marie Clews. Passionate about art, endowed with a sense of beauty, in architecture as well as in the art of living, they succeeded in redesigning the castle in their own image, preserving its history and rendering it into a little world of art. And writers feel this atmosphere, and their writing can’t help but be inspired. An unforgettable experience.

— Hyam Yared (translated)

During my residency at La Napoule, I benefited by working on my book of poetry (A Traveler’s Notebook) that was published in 2012 and which, to my luck, was received well on the Arabic poetic scene. Because it is a book about cities and places and capitols, I included passages about this tower and about the Lazourdi coast. In this particular residence I started to write my first novel, which I am still working on. The residency was comfortable, the services were good, and I enjoyed the great meetings. Also, La Napoule’s proximity to cities like Cannes, Nice, and Monaco allow the residents to enjoy wonderful opportunities for evening entertainment after a day’s work.

— Yassin Adnan (translated)

My residency at that wonderful, flowery house by the beach was the ideal opportunity to reconsider the Egyptian Revolution of January 25, 2011, which directly preceded my stay at La Napoule, and about which I wrote while I was there. (I finished the texts of a complete book, available online for free under the title La yujad samak fi-l-bahr – “There Are No Fish in the Sea” – at http://issuu.com/youssefrakha; I am now preparing to supplement these essays in a new book cowritten with the poet Muhab Nasr.) The surrounding environment of the Riviera – the rocks on the beach, the colors of the sky, the miniature forest around the house – represented the “objective correlative” to the charged atmosphere of Tahrir Square, to which it seemed diametrically opposed…. I discovered, during my first literary residency, that isolation and tranquility do not necessarily encourage literary production, but they do give the writer the necessary spaces and gaps to roll ideas around in his head, to view his subject from a distance.

— Youssef Rakha (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

When Marie Clews founded La Napoule Art Foundation in 1953, she dreamed of creating an international arts center in southern France that would bring together artists from around the world for cultural exchange. As an American living in France, Marie had witnessed two world wars. She had watched as the Château she had lovingly restored with her husband Henry was occupied by foreign troops. But Marie believed that the unique communicative powers of art could bring about understanding and lasting peace.

La Napoule was thrilled to partner with the Alliance of Artists Communities and Beirut39 to help offer a window into the multifaceted modern Arabic culture unfamiliar to so many throughout the rest of the world. Six writers received residencies at La Napoule. LNAF organized an international video seminar between one resident, Youssef Rakha, and students at the University of New Hampshire. Rakha had been a participant in and witness to the Egyptian revolution; through a series of readings and candid answers to the students’ questions, Youssef offered an in-depth perspective of the events.

Marie would have been both proud and astounded to witness this technological feat – an Egyptian writer sitting in southern France, speaking to a group of New Hampshire college students about his culture.
Reflections from the writers

My literary residency experience at Montalvo, located near San Francisco, California, was very exciting and stimulating, especially as it was my first experience outside of Egypt. The residency grant I received provided me with a unique opportunity to devote myself to writing and reading, far from the uproar of Cairo. I left for Montalvo Arts Center just months after the outbreak of the January 25th revolution, which I had taken part in from the beginning, and the residency gave me the time I needed to complete my book about the Egyptian revolution, Diary of a Woman Writer.

For me this residency was a wonderful opportunity to learn about American culture firsthand, especially given that San Francisco is among the most beautiful cities in the world and filled with important cultural landmarks.

It was my good luck that the residency at Montalvo was very comfortable. Those in charge spared no efforts to provide us with everything we needed. Moreover, it was a place where writers and artists from all directions of life gathered, giving me the chance to be in close contact with a community of artists. The constant conversation and discussions between us, especially those held after dinner, helped me further develop my ideas about literature and life.

While at Montalvo I also wrote a number of poems, inspired by the enchanting natural beauty that serves as a source of inspiration for any poet or artist who visits.

— Nagat Ali (translated)

Montalvo is an enchanted place, amongst the most beautiful residencies, artist and otherwise, that I have been to in my life. The forest environment was gorgeous, while the accommodations were expansive and elegant in structure and form. The benefits I received were excellent. At Montalvo I completed my book of poetry, A Traveler’s Notebook. Of course, I added important poetic passages about San Francisco. At Montalvo I also continued working on my first novel, one that I am still belaboring now. I met amazing artists, and we had wonderful, intimate dinners and creative cultural exchange and wonderful visits to the beach in Santa Cruz and the amazing city of San Francisco. Montalvo is a beautiful dream, where I spent mere days, perhaps the most beautiful days of my life.

— Yassin Adnan (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

Participating in the “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” partnership was an important opportunity for the Lucas Artists Residency Program at Montalvo Arts Center. Nagat Ali and Yassin Adnan were the Beirut39 Literary Fellows in the Lucas Program during the summer of 2011 following the Arab Spring. The optimism and enthusiasm for the future these artists brought to the residency was palpable. Ali, a poet, communicated primarily in Arabic through an interpreter, sharing endless stories of her winter spent on the front lines of the revolution and what this social/political change meant to her and her peers living in Egypt and working as artists. Adnan shared stories of the cultural life of Morocco and the Arab world, enlightening the global consciousness of our artist community.

The other California residents during this time were delighted to share the greater Bay Area with Ali and Adnan. This afforded them an opportunity to see the area with fresh eyes as they introduced the artists to the surrounding cultural communities. The artists were all so pleased to have an extended period of time together to exchange stories, ideas, and creative works. The US artists proved to have an insatiable appetite for stories about the Middle East, the revolution, and life and art in Morocco and Egypt; that same appetite was reciprocated by our Beirut39 artists. To celebrate the “New Voices” residencies and share the work of Adnan and Ali’s work with the greater Montalvo community, the Final Friday events of August were dedicated to the Beirut39 partnership, with time for the artists to read their current works and reflect on the significance of this time for them personally and professionally.

The Alliance’s “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” residencies offered an opportunity for the Lucas Artists Program to expand the reach of our international literary arts community. As a residency program that seeks nominations for artists, this expansion of our nominator’s pool is an invaluable gift to our program. We appreciate the support of the funders who made this program possible and look forward to having many Arab writers included in our program in the future. We believe strongly in the value of our residency’s international focus to foster a rich cultural exchange between artists, supporting a variety of perspectives we in turn share with our local community in an effort to encourage deep understanding of our global community.
Reflections from the writers

My experience at Ragdale was absolutely amazing. I met many nice people, and I progressed in my writing. It afforded me two opportunities: First, to write in a calm, beautiful, and different space with a professional work team. I remember the first day there when my computer was having technical issues, how they very quickly responded and fixed the issue. The food was also good at Ragdale, and the hospitality was excellent. And second, the opportunity to be near the gigantic, beautiful city of Chicago. I am a writer of places, especially, and I always yearn to see many places. For this reason, I took this residency as an opportunity to live, meet people and gain experience.

The night of readings at Ragdale was truly amazing – one of the most important moments of my life. Thank you, Ragdale.

— Abdelaziz Errachidi (translated)

At Ragdale, the proximity to a cosmopolitan city like Chicago was an important factor. It provided a sense of urgency to write cosmopolitan literature that reflects the city. I used to dream about writing literature as high as the Sears Tower that we visited and from which we viewed the entire city from above. The residency staff treated us with warmth and generosity. Ragdale’s dense trees and calm weather allowed us to write and particularly to think about writing and the desire to develop it. While there, I continued working on a very large poetry project that is still in the process of completion.

— Abderrahim Elhassar (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

Ragdale has been welcoming international residents throughout the history of the residency program, and it was fitting to welcome the Beirut39 writers to Lake Forest. One of the most important aspects of having international writers in the group of residents is to create a greater scope of creativity within our artistic world. Many times residency programs will draw a unique group of individuals who share such similar lifestyles: they teach at institutions, they follow the same circle of colleagues, they share the same political agenda, etc., and when they come to the table for dinner they generally know the type of peer group they will encounter. Having international residents present offers unexpected scenarios, which may ultimately lend new perspectives to the work being created.

Ragdale’s Board president, Phoebe Turner, sponsored one of Ragdale’s first Cross Cultural Fellowships, which funded Aziz and Rahim’s residency. She hosted a “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” reception in the Ragdale house where Board members and guests, staff, and other residents listened to a reading by the two writers. Christine Piper – a resident from Sydney, Australia, who was also Ragdale’s Alice Hayes Fellowship recipient – read some of Aziz’s and Rahim’s work in English. Other parts of the reading were in French, by members from the Alliance Française de Chicago visiting for the event.

Aziz and Rahim were able to visit nearby Chicago as well, venturing out on their own to explore the city together and getting a personal tour of some of Chicago’s culturally-rich neighborhoods from Ragdale’s residency director, Regin Igloria, on the last day of their stay at Ragdale.
Reflections from the writer

This residency has given me the chance to meet up-close with Native Americans, including some of their poets and intellectuals. I also had the chance to get closer to Mexico and its people, with whom I feel solidarity. This land, known these days as “New Mexico,” used to have nations, languages, and culture which were all exterminated. I am in strong solidarity with this culture and I always try to learn more about it.

On the personal level, I enjoyed seeing the Arab influence on the city, especially the Adobe building style that was brought by the Spaniards from Andalusia. Meditating on the desert landscape in Santa Fe has altered my perception of what a desert is and helped me free the word from its false negative connotations in my mind. After the residency in Santa Fe, I can now grasp the superficiality of any use of the word “desert” to express the opposite of civilization or fertility. Nature is our first teacher of plurality and diversity. The desert is wealthy in its own way and has its own charm.

This residency also allowed me to get in touch with part of the artistic and writing community of Santa Fe, as I met several artists, writers and poets. I also attended some Lannan Foundation events and came back home with many friendships. I was lucky to be a neighbor of a lovely group of artists and writers at Santa Fe Art Institute with its lovely and efficient team.

— Najwan Darwish (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

Founded in 1985, the Santa Fe Art Institute is a community-based arts center whose mission is to promote and present art as a positive social force, supporting and enlivening local discourse on issues of social justice, cultural freedom, and environmental responsibility. The Santa Fe Art Institute’s residency program began in 2001 as a New York City Emergency Relief Residency initiative, providing a means for artists of Lower Manhattan to escape the incredible tension and devastation after the events of September 11, 2001. Since 2002, the SFAI has operated with time and space as the central focus of the residency program, offering a beautiful place to live and work among the vibrant and active arts communities of Santa Fe to artists from around the globe.

As part of the “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” project, Palestinian poet Najwan Darwish spent one month in residence at the SFAI amongst a diverse group of international artists-in-residence. During his residency, he shared his work during public readings, on the local airwaves, and at SFAI’s monthly Open Studios and Readings. He participated in SFAI-related programming which included exhibition openings, lectures, and a special event honoring late architect Ricardo Legorreta, as well as attended the Lannan Foundation “In Pursuit of Cultural Freedom” Series event featuring Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman and the Lannan Literary Series event featuring Nathalie Handal. Not only did Najwan have time and space to focus on his work, but he brought a unique voice to Santa Fe and was an active member of the SFAI-community, where a platform for sharing cultural, social, and creative dialogue is supported.
Reflections from the writer

In the late nineties, my great friend – Egyptian painter Mohamed Abla – was a resident at Vermont Studio Center for three months, after which Abla had a large exhibition in Cairo entitled “Vermont.” This was my first exposure to this area, and I loved it. During my residency at Vermont Studio Center, I was finishing a collection of about 60 short poems. I began another ambitious project there as well – a mixture of prose poems and free verse with a focus on nature. I have never before had a closer relationship with nature because I have always lived in cities. I wanted to take this opportunity to connect with nature in Vermont, with everything: the river, trees, insects….

The best thing for me was meeting many interesting people – artists, writers and creators…. It was an unforgettable experience that I will remember all my life. I am very grateful to Vermont Studio Center for that unique opportunity.

It was very interesting also to practice several languages, including English, Spanish, Italian, and even Arabic, speaking with American poet Marilyn Hacker, who lives in Paris – we found we have many mutual friends.

— Ahmad Yamani (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

Ahmad Yamani was in residence at the Vermont Studio Center for 8 weeks through a fellowship for Middle Eastern writers funded by the Educational Foundation of America. These fellowships are part of a greater effort to develop and sustain a vibrant, diverse international creative community at the Vermont Studio Center. Ahmad Yamani’s residency coincided with VSC’s 3rd annual Literature in Translation (LiT) Forum, a bilingual celebration of literary and cultural translation, featuring Emmanuel Moses (Moroccan born Israeli/French poet and translator of Hebrew and German) and Marilyn Hacker (American poet and French translator). The 4th Annual LiT Forum (in October 2013) focuses on Hebrew and Arabic writing, with poet and translator Peter Cole and writer Adina Hoffman. Through the success of the Middle Eastern Artists & Writers Fellowship Program and partnerships such as the Alliance’s “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” program, VSC continues to expand its offerings for writers and visual artists in the Middle East through fellowships for Arabic and Hebrew writers, as well as US translators of contemporary Hebrew and Arabic literature, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.
Reflections from the writers

It was a wonderful experience living at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. It was my first time in America, so I took many pictures, and after a while the character of these photos changed. I met very nice, decent, clever people who love to discover the “other.” At this center, I lived in serenity and I had sufficient time to work and to escape my routine (aka, my work and home routine). This experience reaffirmed my certainty that the best way to write is to focus far away from our personal lives. At VCCA I was determined to complete my novel, The Kitchen of Love, and I felt great joy when I sent it to the publishers. Thank you to this amazing institution VCCA, for this beautiful opportunity. And thank you to the Alliance of Artists Communities in America.

— Abdelaziz Errachidi (translated)

At Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the benefits were clear. I met colleagues of many nationalities: American, German, Cuban, etc. And my poetic texts were translated into English. The expansive natural surroundings allowed me to write with great focus. The nature of the place inspired me this time to write text in free verse and not just poetry, but prose and poetry together. The staff administering the residency was very close to me and treated us in a positive and distinguished way.

— Abderrahim Elkhassar (translated)

What really touched me and what I felt was greatly beneficial for me during my stay at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts were the many American writers, poets, and artists that I met there. During our almost daily literary readings and our discussions during breakfast and dinner, I felt that my understanding of American life and experience increased tremendously. On top of that, I got the chance to discover several literary talents in the field of literature. Everyone shared a sense of respect and the entire environment was peaceful and pleasant. This enabled me to work for hours on end. I was able to finish three whole chapters of a novel I am still working on about the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s. I can with full confidence say that my stay at VCCA was very useful and left me with many pleasant impressions. Finally, I would like to point out that thanks to VCCA, I am still in touch with many of the writers and artists that I met during my residency.

— Samuel Shimon (translated)
Reflections from the residency host

VCCA hosted three writers for the “New Voices of Modern Arab Literature” project – Abderrahim Elkhassar and Abdelaziz Errachidi, both from Morocco, and Samuel Shimon, from Iraq. Aziz and Rahim were in residence together in late 2011 and Samuel came in 2012. The VCCA was very happy to have the opportunity to extend our international reach. Our flagship international program is in France and our five international exchanges are also European, so we are eager to bring artists from other parts of the world.

The residency of the two Moroccan writers also offered us the opportunity to have a rare public event at our Mt. San Angelo facility in Virginia. We invited writers from all around the area to a dinner and reading of the works of Aziz and Rahim. The reading included poems read in both Arabic and in translation as well as much discussion in both English and French. The reading was wonderful and was a great coming-together of the community.
Reflections from the writers

During my residency at Vitosha I wrote whatever the places and people I saw brought to mind. I discovered within myself a talent for capturing images and signs with extraordinary ease, never exerting myself when writing about places, but rather contenting myself with the natural flow of ideas. Perhaps that is just the special way I look at things and places.

Michigan, with its vast and different space and its university city, Ann Arbor, was an important location for capturing images. I spent happy moments at Vitosha with the writers Wajdi al-Ahdal and Samuel Shimon. Those were memorable moments, in which we engaged in deep conversation, connected in a positive way, and discussed texts.

— Abdelaziz Errachidi (translated)

During my time at Vitosha I spent memorable times in the city of Ann Arbor. Immediately after breakfast, I would go to Forest Hill cemetery. I would wander among the graves, reading the names of the people who had passed away, and at the same time, my mind was busy writing the next chapter of my novel. About two hours later, I would return to my room and sit behind the computer. In Forest Hill Cemetery in Ann Arbor, I found the rhythm that I had been searching for to write my novel.

And I must say that, away from the daily writing at Vitosha, I enjoyed the company of wonderful writers, the Yemeni Wajdi Al-Ahdal, and the Moroccan Abdelaziz Errachidi, who were also Beirut39 writers. Despite the demands of our daily work, we used to meet together and go out downtown. I took many pictures of these two friends. At Vitosha we organized a beautiful evening of poetry by Wajdi and Abdelaziz. The American-Libyan poet and translator Khalid
Matawwa introduced the poetry evening and the American poet Edward Morin participated by reading Wajdi’s text in English. The Syrian-American academic Yasser Tabbaa read the English translation of Abdelaziz’s text. I will never forget the surprise prepared for me by Khalid Matawwa on the occasion of my birthday, which happened to fall during my stay at Vitosha. Abdelaziz, Wajdi, and I will also not forget the afternoon we spent in the company of the Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail, who picked us up and took us to her home in Detroit to drink Iraqi tea exactly as it is served in Iraq. She then invited us to lunch at a restaurant run by an Iraqi family of Chaldean origins, and gave us a tour of Detroit. She was so kind and generous that she was willing to take us to the other bank of the Detroit River on the Canadian side.

— Samuel Shimon (translated)

What delighted me most about my residency was the warm hospitality of Kei Constantinov, owner of Vitosha Guest Haus, who showed great concern for our comfort and provided for our needs. I also enjoyed the peaceful city of Ann Arbor and its beautiful green lawns. The people there seemed very friendly and pleasant as well.

I left for my residency without anything specific in mind. After some days of residence at Vitosha, an idea came to me for a book of stories based on folktales handed down from my ancestors. I wrote seven short stories in Ann Arbor, and the book continues to grow. The main themes that I set down there have generated others, providing seeds for a similar number of stories. I have learned something new: to write interconnected stories, with events set in the same geographic space and in a particular historical period, so that each story appears as part of a bigger picture.

My creative residency in the USA inspired me to return to the tales and legends of my heritage, to use them as material for my stories. When I find myself in the West or in other developed countries, I ask myself: “What does a writer from a remote country like Yemen have to offer that is new to literature?” I never raised this question to myself with such urgency in my own country, but my stay in America shocked me to awareness, and I realized that good writing is writing characterized by authenticity, that is, by the writer’s return to his roots and native environment, and his ability to find inspiration in them.

— Wajdi Al-Ahdal (translated)

Reflections from the residency host

In the summer of 2012, Beirut39 prize-winners Abdelaziz Errachidi and Wajdi Al-Ahdal, and writer and editor of the Beirut39 anthology Samuel Shimon were in residence at Vitosha Guest Haus. A public reading was presented in the Pinocchio Theatre, hosted by University of Michigan poet and professor Khaled Mattawa. The artists read short excerpts of their work in English and Arabic, followed by readings by Yasser Tabbaa and Edward Morin. It was an honor to offer residencies to these three writers and to share their work with our community.
ALLIANCE OF ARTISTS COMMUNITIES

New Voices of Modern Arab Literature
a collaboration with Beirut39 | Hay Festival

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