Chapter 2
Music, Mobility, and Borderscapes in the Fiction of Jamal Mahjoub

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Introduction

This chapter will examine the ways in which the fiction of the contemporary black British/European writer Jamal Mahjoub uses borderscapes and music to address issues of belonging to place, community, culture, and nation in the context of border-crossing mobility. While critics such as Christin Hoene have addressed the role of music in postcolonial narratives as playing a central role in the formation of identity,¹ this chapter shows how Mahjoub’s fiction uses music as a part of cultural mobility. As I will show, the three novels under study contextualize music in diverse borderscapes where the relationship between the host and the migrant community, tradition and its postcolonial appropriation, is redefined. Recently several theorists have sought to develop the concept of borderscape and argued that the term refers to spaces of social and cultural interaction where intercultural processes take place, generating diverse encounters and transforming the identities of those entering the borderscape. I will argue that the borderscapes of Mahjoub’s novels are not only sites of interaction, relational and moving spaces, as Chiara Brambilla understands the characteristics of the concept,² but that they are at the same time transforming and transformative, hybrid and fluid, rather than stable and static. In the case of Mahjoub’s novels, such spaces are appropriated through fiction and organized through references to different forms of music.

In this chapter I will analyse diverse representations of music in Mahjoub’s novels to suggest that they contribute to the making of borderscapes where new identities come into existence. In so doing they negotiate the formation of migrant identities amidst hegemonic ideologies, as

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well as problematize and reconstruct ideas of belonging in politically and culturally contested spaces. My analysis of Mahjoub’s works looks at the diverse roles and locations of music in the texts. In so doing, I will address their representation of music in general as well as the significance attached to jazz (and jazz clubs) and non-western musics in particular. The focus of the chapter is on the ways in which three novels by Mahjoub, namely *Wings of Dust* (1994), *Travelling with Djinns* (2002), and *The Drift Latitudes* (2006), use music in the context of cultural encounters. I will suggest that as narratives of borderscapes, they are sites of increasing hybridity and transnational cultural relations, and that by foregrounding music and its role in spaces that extend beyond one single culture they underline its importance in various cultural encounters and border-crossings.

*Borderscape as a Site of Becoming*

While border studies in the past has tended to emphasize the role of borders as demarcation lines and seen them as separating communities, the current understanding suggests that they are processes and sites of both bordering and debordering – in other words, they are both obstacles but also sites that bring the two parts together. Border theorist David Newman has argued that borders are not mere lines but that they are processes and institutions generating different kinds of border phenomena that may include ways to manage and guard the border as well as generate experiences emphasizing the role of the border as a location of contact and transition. More recently, several scholars have explored the related idea of the borderscape and suggested that the term is apt to describe locations of social and cultural interaction in the proximity of the border but also further away. Borderscapes, as P. K. Rajaram and Carl Grundy–Warr contend, are “zones of varied and differentiated encounters.” It is in such locations of socio-cultural encounters where border-induced phenomena become visible and where various encounters and exposure to Otherness may transform the identities of those entering and inhabiting the borderscape.

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The function of borderscapes resembles the ways in which the Third Space, the location of cultural hybridity and in-betweenness as outlined by Homi K. Bhabha, operates and generates new meanings in a process that he sees as one of ambivalence.\(^5\) According to the border theorist Brambilla, borderscapes are spaces where borders emerge as sites of interaction, as relational and moving spaces.\(^6\) Borderscapes are changing social and cultural constructs as well as sites where new identities emerge as results of cultural encounters. The significance of this kind of an approach to borders is that the conceptual framework constructs borders as mobile and transforming rather than as fixed objects or mere geopolitical markers. To quote Brambilla, “borders are blurring; they move around and fold.”\(^7\) This means that borders are on the move as they follow various groups of migrants and other travellers from their places of origin to places of settlement. In this process major European (and other) metropolitan centres become examples of the extended borderscape, inhabited by diverse mobile groups and transforming into what Rajaram and Grundy–Warr find characteristic of borderscapes, that they are “fluid terrain[s] of a multitude of political negotiations, claims, and counterclaims.”\(^8\) In such locations it is possible to notice various ways of representing and living the borderscape, ways that may include both exclusionary ethnic enclaves\(^9\) and emergent locations of increased cultural mixing and conviviality such as parts of metropolitan London.\(^10\) That borders and borderscapes are linked to the maintenance and transformation of identity is evident in Brambilla’s work as she defines of borders and borderscapes as “paradoxical structures that are both markers of belonging and places of becoming.”\(^11\)


\(^{10}\) Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), ix.

\(^{11}\) Brambilla, “Exploring,” 24; emphasis original.
To understand belonging and becoming as characterizing the borderscape is central to my chapter since my focus is on the ways in which such locations are organized and represented through cultural texts. Borderlands and borderscapes provide conditions where identities are hybridized or in the process of becoming, and they are also sites where belonging is reconstructed, and often multiple rather than fixed, as theorists and critics such as Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Zygmunt Bauman have suggested in different ways.

In a similar vein, Roger Bromley has argued that positionality in spaces of in-betweenness, “at the boundaries of nations, cultures, ethnicities, sexualities and genders,” generates new ways to understand belonging as well as new belongings, “new affiliations,” more generally. As a result, borders and border-crossings question conventional ways of thinking about the role and maintenance of national borders and reveal the possibility to generate new border-crossing alliances at transnational or transcultural level. In this sense, as I will show, Jamal Mahjoub’s novels construct music as an example of cultural mobility: its travels and hybridization are ways for Mahjoub to address the routes of global mobility, as well as the resultant encounters in diverse borderscapes located in spaces that go beyond cultural and national borders. Such a conception of music as intertwined with migration and mobility is based on Paul Gilroy’s work on the formation of the Black Atlantic where it is recognized that “flows, exchanges, and in-between elements,” rather than essentialist Eurocentric and Afrocentric views, generate expressions of culture such as music. For Simon Featherstone, a particular contribution by Gilroy that needs to be underlined is his understanding that music is a “migrant and hybrid performance rather than [...] an expression of stable identities, national or personal.” As I will show, Mahjoub’s novels appear to present a somewhat similar understanding of music, but also attach it to the formation of black diasporic identity in Europe and neighbouring spaces.

Mahjoub’s Musical Sites of Hybridity

In approaching the representations of borderscapes in Mahjoub’s narratives, I will discuss their treatment of music as border-crossing mobility. In Mahjoub’s novels, such mobility is shown in the ways in which culture travels as a part of global mobility and is transformed through encounters that link individuals and formerly distant cultures with each other in unforeseeable ways. While Mahjoub’s works reference music on several occasions and in diverse ways, they give particular prominence to musical performances in jazz clubs, as both *Wings of Dust* and *The Drift Latitudes* centre such locations. What I will suggest is that these texts, as well as *Traveling with Djinns*, construct the borderscape as a location of cultural encounters that leads to hybridity and transnational alliances and generates new becoming and identities. In so doing they counter the maintenance of borders as exclusionary and promote an understanding of belonging as a transcultural phenomenon based on inclusion. In this process music is articulated with global mobility and seen as both transforming and transformative, promising new identifications and narratives of identity.

Wings of Dust: Intercultural Encounters at the Jazz Club

The idea of the jazz club as a space of intercultural encounters has been addressed by several critics. For instance, in Pekka Kilpeläinen’s analysis of James Baldwin’s *Just above My Head* the novel’s Paris club is defined both as “a contact zone” and “heterotopic space” allowing for utopian moments, new connections, and alternatives to racism and repression. As I will show, a somewhat similar view is frequently presented in the narratives of Jamal Mahjoub, most significantly in the novels *Wings of Dust* and *The Drift Latitudes* that address cultural hybridity and encounters through black music by constructing jazz clubs as spaces of borderscaping. In such locations, music has transformative powers.

*Wings of Dust* is a novel told by its aging exilic narrator Sharif, a former government official from Egypt who reflects on his life since his colonial 1920s childhood, through his Oxford years with other African students, and later cosmopolitan life in post-World War II Paris. In this novel jazz is

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clearly located in a transatlantic framework and seen as a part of black internationalism, as a part of the culture of the Black Atlantic diaspora as outlined by Gilroy, and its function is to link people of African origin with each other. While Sharif is not a musician himself, he has a long relationship with Ruby Booth, the Contessa, an African American singer, also known as “The Rose of Harlem.” Black music, the novel tells, is a marker of freedom and black culture that diasporic blacks can identify with. The following passage shows how Sharif’s introduction to jazz promises him a new space for identity, a borderscape constructed through travel and the black tradition, attaching Sharif with the cultural heritage of the black diaspora:

The soft mellow sound of the Big Band music would fill the hall as the young men and women gyrated awkwardly in the tight suits and economically cut skirts that were themselves a sign of the times. They heard in that music the shades of something much darker and more rebellious, a raw and vivid brand of jazz that had yet to filter across the Atlantic but which played away in my head like a constant distraction, a reminder that there were other worlds than that in which I found myself. It played in the gramophone records that Shibshib and I had brought back from our trip. (WD 22)

The view that black music is performed in liminal and marginal sites capable of offering a sense of belonging for the diasporans is evident in the novel’s use of the jazz club as a site of intercultural encounters. The club that the novel repeatedly returns to is The Silver Moon Club in Liverpool visited by Sharif and his friends regularly. Run by Djage, “an old merchant sailor who had landed ashore here one day and decided to stay”, (WD 49) this club is a “legendary” place offering musical entertainment as well as opportunities for sexual satisfaction as it doubles as a brothel – it is here that Sharif loses his virginity with a prostitute named Alice.

The emphasis in the novel shows that the club is not racially exclusive but brings migrants from different backgrounds together; rather than restricted for promoting a black experience, it contributes to diasporas more generally. The customers of The Silver Moon tend to represent “the merchant marine profession. Sailors from all parts of the world – Africans, Chinese, Malay, with one or two white faces dotted around – Poles drinking energetically and laughing out loud” (WD 52). As is to be expected

16 Jamal Mahjoub, Wings of Dust (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994), 76. Further references to the novel are given parenthetically, preceded by WD.
from a club catering for marginalized customers, its musical offerings do not provide mere moments of flow and pleasure. The description emphasize the liminal and marginal character of musicians represented as disabled, nearly non-human characters:

A small band comprising a bass player with a wooden leg, a blind drummer and trombone player with his flies open were struggling through a Louis Armstrong number. The bass player doubled on piano, setting down the bass and then shuffling his stool across the space to the upright with a practised crab-like movement. (WD 49–50)

By emphasizing the link between black music and identity, the novel shows that the utopian glimpse offered by Europe for African American musicians is temporary. Rather than providing full belonging, it accepts them only temporarily, and primarily because they are musicians. The discourse of race dominates the continent in the same way it locates the black subjects in the United States at the time. To quote the novel:

People like Chune and Tyrone who played with the Contessa found a freedom here which they did not have at home in the United States. Here they had respect and were constantly in demand for their skills as musicians. People speak of equality and freedom as though they were qualities of the mind that once attained would never be lost. Yet history has shown that the raised consciousness that allows them is not the result of aspiration or evolution, but rather a spirit that has less to do with the development of the mind than with the generosity of the times, an allowance made by the coincidence of history and place. (WD 81)

In sum, while music offers the possibility of becoming and attaining a new identity, the process remains a contingent one, suggesting of the power of the forces of history that border and regulate the locations of individuals and groups.

**Travelling with Djinns: Musical Border Crossings**

While the role of sound and music is more limited in Mahjoub’s *Travelling with Djinns*, a road novel telling of its protagonist Yasin’s travels through Europe with his son, the novel constructs music as a border-crossing phenomenon that moves across cultural and other borders. In addition to providing several references to popular music, the role of music is particularly emphasized on two occasions, one dealing with the protagonist’s musings
over the signature music of BBC World Service where he works, the other reflecting on the ways in which diverse forms of music travel. While both passages imagine sonic borderscapes by showing how music and sound travel across borders, they approach the ideas of belonging and becoming differently, as I will show next.

The first episode dealing with the narrator’s childhood memories of listening to the signature tune, “military march,” and the tolling of the Big Ben opening each World Service broadcast is partially nostalgic, partially critical, and supports the narrator’s general identification as a person inhabiting the borderlands. He is both British and non-British, European and non-European, marked by racialization and an object of Othering. The explicit link with Englishness as an identity is represented in the narrative through Yasin’s mother living in the Sudan, whose position is in contrast with the narrator’s own position described as “belong[ing] to that nomad tribe, the great unwashed, those people born in the joins between continental shelves.”17 For her mother, however, the ritualistic sound and music signify belonging, which the narrator finds uneasy as a mixed-raced person in contemporary Europe where his presence is frequently questioned. He reflects nostalgically onto his mother’s habit:

Could there be anything more English than that voice assuring us in the same sombre tones as one might announce the death of a beloved statesman or the imminence of nuclear apocalypse that “This … is London? […] There it was. All was well with the world, London was in its place. The flag was flying over the Houses of Parliament and there was that old bell chiming. Whitehall was intact on yet another glorious morning. (TD 250)

Here the border-crossing sound of the short-wave radio transmission is associated with stability and the British Empire, and it supports the narrator’s mother’s status as a member of the British diaspora in the Sudan. In so doing, the passage shows how sound and music, as well as the BBC news, are sonic elements that reveal the presence of the homeland in Yasin’s mother’s everyday life. As the novel puts it, it is through “the robust old Grundig that my mother used to lug around the house with her in the morning, from bedroom to bathroom to kitchen to living room, clinging to the old world for a precious fifteen minutes a day” (TD 249) that she has access to past and its values as well as with her memories of

17 Jamal Mahjoub, *Travelling with Djinns* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), 4. Further references to the novel are given parenthetically, preceded by TD.
the homeland and its safe ritual. Such belonging, however, is inaccessible in the present of the novel where Yasin is estranged from his siblings and his ex-wife as well as the values of European nation-states.

What is significant in the novel is the way in which it constructs music as a mobile form of culture, capable of crossing borders and generating new identities, which is seen on various occasions and in various settings. These include the following examples: the narrator’s Anglophile Arab father’s musical favourite is Paul Robeson’s “Old Man River,” one of his two LPs, the other LP being The Immortal Speeches of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. (TD 103), the self-identification of a Moroccan prostitute with the Swiss/Canadian popular singer Celine Dion (TD 121), and the two street Paris street musicians in the metro who first “play a very fast version of ‘Those Were the Days’” and then “go straight into something that sounds like gypsy music, even faster, trying to finish before the doors open in the next station” (TD 107). In the last example in particular, the link between music and global mobility is approached at the grassroots level, signifying not only the commodification and appropriation of popular tunes under the conditions of global capitalism but also showing how music is present in migration-induced cultural encounters in contemporary Europe.

A further passage reflecting on music in global contexts concerns the novel’s representation of the West African string instrument kora whose sounds the protagonist listens to while visiting friends in the South of France: “A gentle ripple of strings, trickling up and down the scales, filters out through the window to the terrace” (TD 265). His ex-lover’s partner, Lucien, has set up a system of loudspeakers whose location in the different parts of his house comes to resemble the way in which music travels, this is, how it enters different cultures and reaches different audiences, often unexpectedly. Lucien, a nomadic artist with a history of travel, is described as someone who – like the process of globalization – puts the process “in motion” and generates surprising cultural encounters as seen in Yasin’s response where music is likened to souvenirs and objects from other cultures:

sets the music in motion from some undisclosed location, inside his studio, or upstairs in their bedroom perhaps, and the house, digitally wired, comes alive. Some days it is Stravinsky, others Verdi’s Aïda, gnawa music, Indonesian gamelan or the Rolling Stones’ Exile on Main Street album. This kora is the music he brought back with him from his last trip. The house is filled with curious objects, mementoes from his travels. (TD 265)
In this passage, the idea of travel and mobility as characterizing the contemporary global condition is addressed through intertextual references. The composers and styles referred to support the novel’s idea of music being formed out of the mobility of cultures as they are linked with different experiences of global mobility. First, they deal with exile as seen in the references to Igor Stravinsky’s Swiss period and the Rolling Stones album title, and second, they address colonialism and cultural contacts as Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Aïda* (1871) was set in Egypt and commissioned by the Khedive of Egypt. Third, the references foreground cultural hybridity: while Islamic gnawa music is a travelling music as it combines Nigerian *hauwa* music with Arab sounds and is currently performed in Morocco by displaced black West Africans, Indonesian gamelan, however, has a more local history but one that is not without signs of cross-cultural interaction since Dutch march music has been played by gamelan instruments since the eighteenth century, and experiments with fusing gamelan and western music styles have been conducted in recent decades. Similarly, the history of the *kora* is a transnational and hybrid one: while the instrument is today associated with the Mandingo griots in West Africa, it has been common throughout the Sudanic belt, a linguistic-cultural area that extends from the West to Ethiopia.

The novel takes its border-crossings further, showing their presence in contemporary Europe where travelling music forms the soundscape of the narrator’s stay with his friends, at one level linking him with his roots and, at another transforming the French house into a sonic borderscape where different musics come together and generate moments of becoming. In other words, references to music in the novel underline the fact that music travels and transforms cultures, constructing both moments of belonging and becoming, and in so doing shows how the border between cultures and nations is not fixed but fluid and changing. In this sense Mahjoub’s understanding of music as a migrant and border-crossing form of culture...
follows the view presented by Gilroy, suggesting that identities are similarly produced in spaces in-between cultures.

The Drift Latitudes and the Sonic Borderscape

In his later novel *The Drift Latitudes* Mahjoub addresses the role of music further by developing the idea the (jazz) club in the context of cultural encounters. It shows that the club is a borderscape, a site of cultural transformations, becomings, that extend beyond the construction of blackness and black identity.\(^{22}\) Set partially in Liverpool, the novel presents the city as a multicultural urban space where people of different origins have come together: “There were Irish names, English, Jewish, West Indian, African, Caribbean, Hindus, Bengalis, Sikhs. People spoke of ‘back home’ as though it were accepted that part of everyone belonged elsewhere.”\(^{23}\) This characterization of Liverpool as a form of diaspora space is developed by representing it as a sonic borderscape – a borderscape where music is a central identity-constructing element – through the story of aging Miranda, the mother of the novel’s mixed-race protagonist Jade, an architect, whose mission becomes to excavate the silenced history of her migrant family. Upon clearing her mother’s attic, Jade enters the musical past of her family as well as that of the black diaspora:

Inside was a handful of large black discs inserted within sleeves of waxed brown paper. Sliding one of these out onto the palm of her hand a ray of light strafed the shiny grooved surface. Old 78s. On the label she read the title: “I thought I heard Buddy Bolden Say” – Sidney Bechet, His Master’s Voice, 1940. The familiar little logo of the dog looking into the phonograph horn. She slid it carefully back into place and picked out another. A red label this time: Charlie Parker. Other records were by Duke Ellington, The Hot Sevens, Benny Goodman. Jade slid the fastenings into place. Maya and her mother were calling her to come in for lunch. As she turned to leave, she hesitated a mo-
ment and the pushed the case over to the door with her foot, ready to take with her. (DL 64)

Through this decision to enter the black music tradition, signified in her picking up the case and carrying it away with her, Jade enters the sonic borderscape that leaves to her identity reconstruction. The role of music in identity transformations, or becomings, is more general in the novel and shown through several other characters. Not only did Jade’s German father Ernst Frager learn of jazz in Weimar Germany, but when the Nubian club owner Ismail Bilal is reported to hear jazz in New York for the first time he enters the culture of the black diaspora and feels the music in his body: “His heart beat in his throat. Men like him playing. Africans, and this was their music” (DL 142).

Music is also at the core of Jade’s mother’s, Miranda’s, life. Ever since starting to sing in Ismail Bilal’s Liverpool jazz club The Blue Nile at the age of 16 in the late 1950s, Miranda has entered a music-induced space where different musical trends are present and meet with each other. The collision of cultures exemplifies the work of the sonic borderscape and is described as “a form of bewitchment, a kind of spell […], it was a confluence of dreams” (DL 80), a phrase resembling the uncanny and uncanny moment that Bhabha has associated with the process of hybridization.24 As Mahjoub writes, the musical styles and groups construct a transnational borderscape on the Liverpool waterfront:

The music of a cacophony of places and styles from every corner of the plane. Most of the time it was just plain old Dixieland waterfront jazz. Out-of-tune four-piece combos of machine fitters and stevedores, off-duty tug pilots who could manage a passable imitation of New Orleans syncopation. Those were the regulars. On other nights there was a steady stream of musicians passing through, bringing with them mournful songs from other ports. One night it might be Portuguese fado, the next night it would be a tango trio from Buenos Aires, or a bouzouki troupe from Piraeus; an Icelandic ragtime pianist; a nineteen-piece orchestra complete with tuba, all the way from Turku; Brazilian crooners nobody could understand until they started moving their hips; once even a trio of mournful zither players from the Black Sea. (DL 81)

24 Bhabha, Location, 9–10.
In this sonic borderscape black music, and jazz in particular, plays a significant role as it “stops the universe from whirling apart, is what pushes the stars into pretty shapes in the sky. It makes all the notes hang together, hooks them in and sets them jangling in harmony” (DL 137). Music, in other words, plays a role in cultural encounters, organizing and reconstructing identity, and as in the previous novel Wings of Dust, it brings people of different cultural backgrounds to shared spaces and crosses cultural and racial borders.

The novel also voices another concern peculiar to the borderscape that deals with cultural transformation as a result of the interaction in this space. The cultural and musical border crossings, described as a “profusion of musical innovations” (DL 81), construct sonic spaces that combine unexpected elements and styles with each other: “Django Reinhardt meets Trini Lopez. Cajun crosses Texas honkytonk. Jamaican ska cut up by a soaring Ornette Coleman aspirant playing a kettle like a muted trumpet” (DL 81). The passage underlines how in this club space, a “zone [...] of varied and differentiated encounters,”25 conventional musical and other borders are dissolved, and new configurations emerge. What this means that the club takes on the role of a borderscape where intercultural encounters lead to the formation of new mixed identities that problematize the fixed narratives telling of the purity of national cultures. The borderscape, as Brambilla has suggested, is “[a] place [...] of becoming.”26 Through the narrative of the sonic borderscape and its effects on those who have entered it, the novel emphasizes the transformation where the liminal is centred and the marginalized is empowered: “The music was the magic that dispelled cobwebs, chipped classes, burn marks in the linoleum – in here everyone looked good. Once the music began to flow you could be anything or anyone you wanted to be” (DL 82). In other words, this is both a space of belonging where everyone is accepted, and a space of becoming that transforms all participants as well as mixes musical genres from various cultures. The process of debordering is clearly present in several ways.

**Conclusion: The Potential of the Sonic Borderscapes**

The readings of the role of music in the three novels by Mahjoub show that their sonic borderscapes are capable of critiquing the dominant and

26 Brambilla, “Exploring,” 24; emphasis original.
producing new and hybrid musical practices and forms, as well as of resist-
ing fixed identities by insisting on the mobile and travelling nature of mu-
sic. This is shown slightly differently in each novel. First, *Wings of Dust*
foregrounds the jazz club as a site of generating a distinct black identity
through music, in a space that is located in the marginalized extended bord-
erscape, a process that is also explored in *The Drift Latitudes* and its repre-
sentation of the Liverpool jazz club. *Travelling with Djinns*, however, uses
an explicitly Gilroyan strategy as it directly understands music as a mobile
and hybrid cultural product that crosses borders and gains new meanings
through such encounters. Such an understanding is also present in *The
Drift Latitudes* where the port of Liverpool emerges as a borderscape, as a
site of becoming, where new musics and hybridities emerge, together with
new identities.

By using music and musical encounters as a narrative strategy, Mahjoub
shows how much cultures are formed by each other, both historically and
today, and that national and cultural borders are unable to prevent the
border-crossing mobility of music.

**Bibliography**


