

“Living Between Two Worlds”: Dr. Rosemary Suliman Visits LERC, Gives Lecture

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In a time when large numbers of people must move across the world for work, education, or opportunity, the issue of how migration impacts culture becomes increasingly relevant to our everyday lives. We must make choices when confronted with a life in a new society, language, and culture. How do we adapt to life abroad? Does migration present us with a multicultural opportunity or a potential identity crisis? And most importantly, how does migration impact the second generation, young people born abroad who find mainstream and ethnic cultures competing for their affection? On October 28, Dr. Rosemary Suliman came to NDU to discuss these issues in her lecture “Living Between Two Worlds: Children of Migrant Families in Australia”. The lecture was arranged by the Lebanese Emigration Research Center, in cooperation with the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities. Dr. Jamil Douaihi (Assistant Professor, Social and Behavioral Sciences) presided over the discussion.



Dr. R. Suliman (Oct 2011).

Dr. Suliman is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Western Sydney, where she specializes in Arabic Language and Education. Born in Khartoum, Sudan, of Egyptian parents, Dr. Suliman moved to Sydney in 1972, and has devoted her professional life to alleviating the obstacles that

immigrant children face in Australia's education system. She is also a major player in developing Arabic language education for Australian universities, developing course syllabi, textbooks, and teaching Arabic. Her talk focused on the cultural predicaments that young Lebanese face in Australia. Born in the gap between two cultures and facing unsettled questions about group identity, ethnicity, and belonging, Lebanese children in Sydney must resolve their dual marginalization in order to succeed in school.



Dr. J. Douaihi (right) introduces Dr. R. Suliman to the audience (Oct 2011).

Australia has long been a major destination for Lebanese emigrants seeking employment, education, and opportunities for success. The Lebanese in Sydney, for example, established the country's first textile industry, and Arabic remains the most common foreign language spoken in this city (it is the fourth most common foreign language in all of Australia). In a number of ways, Australia is worthy of its multicultural image; 21.5 % of all residents speak a language other than English, and the country benefits immensely from the skills these immigrants bring.

However, immigrant children face tough decisions regarding individual and group identity. In Australia, fluency in English remains a prerequisite for success, but the politics of language pull immigrant youths in opposite directions. On one hand, their Lebanese parents hope to see their children retain the culture of home, especially by teaching them Arabic. "These parents get a reputation for being very strict," says Dr. Suliman, "and often they are maintaining cultural traditions not from today's Lebanon, but from the Lebanon of thirty or forty years ago." On the other hand, Lebanese children face mainstream Australian culture in school and society, and a gap felt between home life and public life makes them feel pressure to "choose" one culture over another. Some reject their parent's culture, while others move in the opposite direction rejecting mainstream culture and asserting an oppositional ethnic culture. But either of these creates real problems, creating stress and influencing whether immigrant children succeed

at school. And this choice, between being Australian or Lebanese, is a false one. Instead of creating cultural boundaries, Dr. Suliman concludes, with help these young people can cultivate a culture of living as Lebanese “in” Australia, not “out” of it.



A section of the audience: (from left to right) Dr. J. Yacoub, Ms. G. Hourani, Dr. S. Karam, Dr. I. Hourani, Dr. E. Sensenig-Dabbous, Mr. M. Suliman (Oct 2011).

Dr. Suliman continues that while Sydney's new Lebanese immigrants have been successful in economic terms, settlement patterns still show a general “clustering” around other Lebanese groups. Migration patterns account for this clustering; new arrivals counted on more established friends or family for help building a new life in Australia. But this can have negative impacts on children, who find themselves physically living in Australia, but isolated from their Australian peers. Dr. Suliman proposes working with these youths to build a third cultural space, one which allows them to move between Australian and Lebanese cultures effectively, and promote ongoing success in education. Effecting this change is a challenge. Lebanese-Australian youths will have to work against the tide of negative ethnic stereotypes. This requires young immigrants to break down their oppositional ethnic culture and seek a cosmopolitan, situation-oriented group identity. Most importantly, parents must be involved and supportive. Dr. Suliman is optimistic, though, that this shift in group identity can be achieved through public education, and her ongoing work with the young testifies to that. Emphasizing bilingualism as a cultural strength, Dr. Suliman shows immigrant youth that identity politics need not be about alienation and rejection of their daily lived experience; a new hybrid identity will replace it, and encourage these children to strive for betterment on their own behalf.