

5. Reading Anglophone Arab Enunciations Across Genres: Narrative Display, Performative Evidence, and the Parafiction of Theory

In the following, I will discuss selected Anglophone Arab enunciations that deal with the complex nexus of blocked and forced visibility, discrepant concepts of (non-)belonging and identity, competing representational modes of alterity, mutually excluding archives, and the limits of enunciability. Although the present discussion begins with an auto-fictional text, a popular narrative, and a fictocritical-theoretical discourse which either arise from the Arab ethnic situation of the US or were produced by intellectuals who strictly do not identify themselves with Arab Americans, the cultural sphere that my readings explore is a culture of transnational relations rather than one of ethnic identifications. Whereas I consider local conditions, such as the Palestinian situation in relation to the Anglophone Palestinian discourse, seriously, I pay particular attention to strategies and effects of critical revisions and artistic or literary re-significations under the condition of global migrations and cross-cultural encounters.

The Anglophone Arab articulations selected for this chapter have a particularly decentering and sometimes disorienting quality. Although their genesis is often tied to the experience of belonging to a stigmatized diasporic and/or otherwise marginalized group, they cannot be grasped simply as acts of translation between different cultures. These works transgress both the dominant image-repertoire of the Western archives and the leading representational modes of local Arab culture. They represent the recursive blurring effects of continuous crossovers. These effects have direct consequences for our understanding of taxonomic boundaries. By choosing the audiovisual arts, traveling literatures, and the sphere of theory as the subject matter of my cross-cultural analysis, the following readings are intended to go beyond the current predominant focus on Anglophone Arab literature. At the same time, my choices underline the continuing topical and structural overlaps across genre divides. In fact, the strict differentiation between works of literature and art, on the one hand, and the spheres of research and theory, on the other, is decisively questioned by some of the works which I discuss here. The overlap

of the abstract formal and the socio-political, epistemic ideological in the artistic, literary, and cultural productions that I interpret here partly results from the importance of the hegemonic gaze of the anticipated Western reader, watcher, or listener. However, the genesis, functioning, and effects of narrative modes, artistic forms, or visual images cannot be grasped as sheer counter-discursive reactions. These works' critical inquiries and heterodox provocations do not just counter what passes for representation by Westerners but also challenge Occidentalist sureties. Their relational agency, in other words, is as self-questioning as it is self-determining.

While it is true that the literary and artistic works discussed here are more preoccupied with the seductiveness of critical practices and the effectiveness of their political poetics than with the creation of new aesthetic forms, the impetus of countering dominant lies can also lead to the innovative transgression of learned aesthetics. Although these works form themselves by reverting to dominant conventions of expression, they regularly express what has not yet been expressed. As social phenomena, they are produced at concrete historical moments, and as such, they speak to the worldly realities of their own conditionality. However, as works of art, they also chart new directions of aesthetic display. To explain Anglophone Arab representations as imaginaries of critical correlations, I demonstrate that these works do not simply counter Western representations by telling non-Western truths.

In my view, the spheres of concept and performance art sometimes offer more critical insight than works of literature or theory. If we understand works of concept and performance art as acts of artistic research, then these acts not only produce new narratives and images but also contribute to the exploration of alternative epistemologies and theories in transnational art, literatures, and comparative cultural criticism. They test out alternative ways of seeing, hearing, reading, narrating, and thinking and sometimes enable the remaking of the many worlds from which they derive, simultaneously within and against each other. Maybe more directly than works of other creative genres, they invite us to grasp Anglophone Arab representations as socio-cultural articulations shaped by but also requiring the representational norms that they anticipate. They do so by performing and thus illustrating that cultural signifiers do not necessarily relate to a stable signified; instead, they are by definition contested in cross-cultural correlations.

Whether I am dealing with literary narratives, artistic documents and audiovisual imageries, or works of theory and criticism, I approach Anglophone Arab representations both as scraps of historical evidence and as representations that (willingly or not) make visible the performative production of their own source materials and truth claims. I believe that the works I have chosen for this chapter explicitly admit to being shaped by the representational norms which they anticipate and that they openly perform the mechanisms of their own adjustment of

meaning. Many of the works discussed represent what might be described as a particular parafictional strand of Anglophone Arab representations. They can be considered as examples of a representational practice that relies on the multiplicity of deception and the seriousness of doubt. Such doubts are directed at both the truth claims of hegemonic statements and the reliability of their own messages. Nevertheless, they do not end up in a celebration of skepticism. If these representations question their own performative reliability, they do so first and foremost with a view to their operational capability. They worry about their agency of enunciation rather than their moral integrity. It is on the basis of such extra-moral self-positioning that Anglophone Arab representations can transgress one-sided truth claims. And it is from here that they can imagine lies that tell other truths.

5.1 The Horrors of Assimilation, Uncanny Transferences, and the End of the Roots-Talk

“I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.”¹

When the late Clifford Geertz critically reviewed several newly published, highly reductionist, crash-course-style books designed to explain Islam and the Arabs to the English-speaking world in June 2003, the anthropologist illustrated the long history of America’s “casual mixture of ignorance and indifference”² by referring to a 1938 cartoon by Peter Arno. “Which way to Mecca?”—the title of Geertz’s two-part review essay—quotes directly from Arno’s short caption. The original drawing shows a pith-hatted tourist leaning out of his car to ask a turbaned man praying by the side of the road for the way to the holy city of Islam. Geertz demonstrates that post-9/11 attempts to produce and circulate a “public-square image of ‘Islam’”³ while being caught up in the know-your-enemy excitement of the present war on terror regularly draw on a long-established Orientalist tradition of standard accounts, ideological assumptions, and xenophobic symbolizations. One of the key examples of such new-old, cultural-essentialist, us-versus-them narratives is the controversial Middle East historian, Bernard Lewis. Lewis’s public exposure reached new heights in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. Although much of the

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- 1 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 3.
 - 2 Clifford Geertz, “Which Way to Mecca?,” *Life Among Anthros and Other Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz, ed. Fred Inglis (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010) 135; the two-part review essay was first published in *The New York Review of Books* 50.10 (12 June 2003) and 50.11 (3 July 2003).
 - 3 Geertz, “Which Way to Mecca?” 135.

book deals with the history of the late Ottoman Empire, his 2002 study *What Went Wrong?*⁴ immediately acquired enormous popularity within and beyond the circles of academics and policymakers. In order to explain why the commercially successful decision to publish this book soon after the terror attacks went right for Lewis, one might look at the revised subtitle of the Weidenfeld & Nicolson edition of *the same year: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*.⁵ The Huntingtonian evocation of a clash between modern Western culture and Islamic tradition cannot be missed here. According to Lewis, the central intrinsic problem of Islamic religious and political thinking is its totalitarian character: hence, the conflict with the democratic West.

What is unprecedented in the American post-9/11 experience according to Geertz is that the construction of Arab-Muslim alterity as “an alien phenomenon, obscure and worrisome”⁶ for the first time openly enters the American homeland’s mainstream discourse. He argues that Americans can newly directly see the process of re-presenting the Arab-Muslim Other instead of just subcutaneously feeling or pop-culturally experiencing the uncanny results of that very process. If one believes Geertz’s retrospective assertion, then the inner-worldly nexus of stereotypical representation and discriminating practices was not directly observable with regard to Arabs and Muslims before 9/11. One does not have to agree with the anthropologist’s general argument regarding the newness of the situation to evaluate the experiences of the early 21st century as a further occasion for rethinking and critically revisiting the substantial “line between writing and the world.”⁷ That is what I intend to do in this sub-chapter.

Placing particular emphasis on the discourse of assimilation, I will selectively re-read the writings of two Americans whose works have little in common and whose relevance for and positionality within and outside of the Anglophone Arab discourse is quite controversial. By reading the novelist and screenplay writer, William Peter Blatty, side by side with the literary theoretician, Ihab Hassan, in a study like this one, I do not assume any shared Arab origin of the two writers; nor do I claim to trace a hidden exchange between their respective texts. I rather use, and perhaps misuse, selected writings by the two men to ask what went wrong in the process of cross-cultural exchange and mutual assimilation between the West and the Arab world. Instead of drawing on academic experts of the Middle East, like Lewis, or ideological prophets of Arabs’ failed integration into the Westernized

4 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

5 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

6 Geertz, “Which Way to Mecca?” 138.

7 Geertz, “Which Way to Mecca?” 156.

world order, like Samuel Huntington,⁸ my interpretive search for meaning starts from the literary afterlife of Arno's cartoon, published on the eve of World War II.

5.1.1 The Laughter and Slaughter of Subjection

A woman with a stylish pillbox hat is a passenger in an American convertible racing through a landscape marked as Middle Eastern by a village with a minaret and a dome (fig. 15). The driver, her pith-helmet husband, barks at the praying man dressed in Muslim clothes and racially tagged as a hook-nosed Arab. The drawing depicts a haughty drive-through rather than a self-deprecating stopover. Without really breaking and waiting for the local's answer, the driver speeds on in a direction that he does not know. As we understand today, he drives into a Middle Eastern future that would soon be invaded by other American vehicles, with drivers wearing helmets of steel.⁹

In 1958, twenty years after this cartoon's first appearance in *The New Yorker*, the second generation Arab American immigrant writer, William Peter Blatty, best known for his 1971 bestseller, *The Exorcist*,¹⁰ entitled his first auto-fictional narrative *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*¹¹ Whereas neither the famous horror novel depicting the demonic possession of an 11-year-old, all-American girl nor its successful 1973 filmic adaptation is considered a work of Anglophone Arab representation, the 1958 book is also rarely included in serious discussions of Anglophone Arab writing. If it receives critical attention at all, it is usually instrumentalized as proof of the quiescence, stagnation, or even degeneration of Arab-American literature during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. This period has been described by scholars of Arab-American history and Arab ethnic literature as one of heavily assimilationist pressures.¹² The 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act had drastically limited numbers of new Arab immigrants. Those who made their way to the US found themselves forced to quickly assimilate into mainstream society. As Lisa Suhair Majaj puts it, Arab Americans were "in danger of assimilating themselves out of existence [...]"¹³ According to Majaj, writers of this generation regarded their Arab background as something to either disavow or ironically distance themselves from.

8 Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993): 22-50.

9 On this cartoon, see also Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the present* 267-68.

10 William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (1971; New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1994).

11 William Peter Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1958; New York: Bernard Geis Assoc./Random, 1960).

12 See Naff, *Becoming American. The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, and Al Maleh, "Anglophone Arab Literature: An Overview," 6.

13 Majaj, "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments," 63.

Figure 15: Cartoon by Peter Arno, published in *The New Yorker*, April 9, 1938.



Which Way to Mecca, Jack? is predominantly read as a paradigmatic product of such self-distancing dynamics. According to literary critic Evelyn Shakir, Blatty's narrative turns the pain of discrimination and exclusion into an almost "burlesque"¹⁴ mocking of himself and his Arab family background. Reading the text as an autobiography instead of looking closely at the fictional ways in which the supposedly humoristic writing deals with the painful experience of racist discrimination and the conflicts of West-Eastern image repertoires, Shakir sees

14 Evelyn Shakir, "Arab Mothers, American Sons: Woman in Arab-American Autobiographies," *MELUS* 17.3 (1991-92): 9.

the author's individual experience of humiliation as the central motive for writing a self-denigrating piece of slap-stick humor. Although Nicole Waller follows Shakir's generic location, she correctly argues that the "self-mocking parody" at work in *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* does not simply affirm the vagrant American stereotypes of Arabs and the Arab world but instead "sends both his Arab and his American characters into an endless loop of distorted looks."¹⁵ Whereas Waller sets particular focus on the narrative's capacity to address the historical pretexts leading into contemporary cross-cultural conflicts, I am more interested in the text's auto-fictional engagement in the psychology of impossible assimilation and its narrative strategies of resisting the assimilationist paradigm of identification:

My mother is an Arab, which would make me half Arab, except that my father was an Arab too. But already I digress. What I actually meant to say was that my parents were born in Lebanon, but I was born within sight of American Legion Post #804 in Manhattan and that's your, cue, Dr. Freud—I'm all yours.¹⁶

The auto-narrator pretends to tell the life story of the second-generation Arab immigrant, William Blatty. Abandoned by his father at the age of seven, he grows up alone with his brothers and his Lebanese mother in the extremely discriminatory and assimilationist surroundings of Manhattan's Lower East Side and Brooklyn. Born to become a "Sheik" one day, according to his oedipal mother's plans, "Will-yam[s]" earliest attempts at "*rapprochement* with the pale-faced children in that neighborhood" end in what he calls "Arab exile."¹⁷ His mother's rigorous termination of his short affair with the colored girl, Frankie, *of course* "had nothing to do with race"¹⁸ and further deepens his feeling of isolation. As a victim of daily racist humiliation, the Arab American boy's desire to be seen as belonging to the American mainstream grows constantly. The ambivalent identification with whiteness expresses itself in his recurrent dream "of waking up some morning and finding myself an Irishman."¹⁹ What seems to be a clear desire to assimilate into the dominant discourse of racial whiteness could also be seen as the subconscious psychic transference of the wish to become white discursively—the way the earlier immigrant group of black Celts succeeded in being perceived as white in the US. The fact that, indeed, William later marries the Irish Peggy and learns of a "rare racial theory, the general drift of which was that the Irish were descendants of the Arabs,"²⁰ further complicates the interpretation of the boy's dream.

15 Nicole Waller, "Arabs Looking Back: William Peter Blatty's Autobiographical Writing," *Transnational American Memories*, ed. Udo J. Hebel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009) 131.

16 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 13.

17 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 21.

18 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 21.

19 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 29.

20 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 211.

William's everyday "boyhood nightmares"²¹ of being the target of discrimination as non-White in white America do not resolve at all as he becomes increasingly more Americanized. While his older brothers enter the Army or the Navy, his brother Mike copies Hamlet's "feigned insanity" to escape from reality. Before he becomes a Shakespearean actor and fully escapes from the immigrant family, Mike writes adaptations of Shakespeare's plays "for dogs."²² Following his brother's example, William tries to engage in the prep school's extracurricular acting class to perform with a sword that was mightier than his "sense of being an 'Arab alone."²³ On stage, he is discriminated against for the shape of his nose. Finding himself excluded from his classmates' community once again, he is then cast by his mother "in her own production of 'Only in Arabia."²⁴ This quasi-racial recasting is later reciprocated when William is rejected by Hollywood agents on the grounds of either not being "The Type!"²⁵ wanted in American mainstream cinema or because his blue eyes collide with the demands for minor roles in Biblical films. This is how William grows up, and this is how he becomes the adult "Arab expert"²⁶ drafted by the United States Information Service (USIS) after college.

After a short "brainwashing" training at the USIS's Washington overseas headquarters, William is assigned to Lebanon. There he quickly finds out that he is not at all the Arab expert he thought: "There was trouble ahead. Big trouble."²⁷ Whereas William seeks to prove his "worthiness as an American by being an Arab [informant],"²⁸ his new surroundings hardly see him as anything other than a non-Arab foreigner. Feeling like an "outcast among Americans *and* Arabs," he imagines himself registering for the "Tibetan Secret Service. Or maybe Conrad Hilton ..."²⁹ Since William's man in the Washington headquarters is "dissatisfied with the lack of sex"³⁰ in his agent's reports and insists on being informed "on every aspect of Arab mores that might radically differ"³¹ from American values, William starts searching for what could be considered exotic by Americans. Since neither the reality of Lebanese youth leisure time entertainment nor the Beirut red light district have anything particularly exotic to offer, he invents "a night club act featuring a 'thousand and one nights tableau,' in which two live camels participated"³² in one of

21 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 32.

22 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 37.

23 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 38.

24 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 39.

25 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 55.

26 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 39.

27 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 82.

28 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 87.

29 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 129.

30 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 154.

31 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 154-55.

32 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 162.

his next reports. The Washington reader of the fake memorandum slightly misunderstands the image of a show involving a camel population and comes to Beirut to see what he imagines to be a “Camel copulation!”³³ With the help of a petty criminal trickster and a former student of the American University of Beirut disenchanted by his personal Arab-American dream, William brings the Agency officer to the “Club Yimken”³⁴ without explaining to him that the Arabic term *yimken* means “could be.” The arranged night club turns out to be a small tent somewhere in a non-existent desert close to Beirut. It is filled with actors from “Hajji Hasheesh’s Jidda Jazzcats”³⁵ who are paid to perform in Oriental-style costumes. At this nocturnal location, the Washington man is systematically intoxicated with Arak, a potent local liquor. When what is explained to him as a quasi-religious Muslim ritual is supposed to start, the lights are switched off and the American falls asleep. The club guest misses a performance that never happens. Instead of presenting the *sodomia islamis*-show the American longed for in his dreams, the Jazzcats perform a variation of “When the Saints Come Marchin’ In,”³⁶ and the semi-comatose man is taken back to his tourist hotel.

The narrative only indirectly places the Arab American encounter into the wider political context of neo-imperialism and capitalist expansion. And it rarely offers correctives to the dominant American perception of the Middle East. The many lies of William’s reports and his bi-directional split-performance create a double mirror that lays bare those imagined identities denied to him by Arabs and Americans alike. His designated role of an Arab-American interlocutor further alienates him from his earlier visions of a fully assimilated Arab American.

Critical strategies of returning the Orientalist-racist gaze are evoked rather than inscribed on the narrative level. The depiction of a cocktail party organized by William and his wife for the American Embassy staff in Beirut is a rare moment of such counter-discursive quality: The party’s host furnishes his guests with binoculars so that they can look into the windows of the Lebanese residents in the buildings around them. Spying on Arab lives is described as the favorite pastime of expat-Americans in Beirut. This practice symbolically reciprocates USIS activities in the region, but it is also associated with the much older Orientalist fantasy of uncovering the veiled Muslim’s body. Consequently, Blatty recommends that his American guests peek through the windows at a Saudi Arabian man who is said to live with four wives. However, something unexpected disrupts the party guests’ pleasures of hierarchical observation. Suddenly, one of them claims to have made a troubling discovery in another window: “He handed over the binoculars and I

33 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 163.

34 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 169.

35 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 173.

36 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca*, Jack? 173.

squinted at where he was pointing. I saw nothing but the old Arab in the night-shirt on the sixth floor, which wasn't too unusual at all, except that he was training a pair of binoculars on us!"³⁷ The switched positions of those gazing and those gazed upon cause reactions of anxiety and aggression: "See what happens when you educate the beggars?" one of the Americans shouts. Meanwhile, the Arab man and his friends enjoy the uproar their act of looking back has created: "With my naked eye, I could see the old man in the nightshirt jumping up and down on his balcony, and the men who usually played Boardless Monopoly soon joined him and were passing the binoculars back and forth."³⁸

Refuting his own double position as a potential spy and un-loyal Arab, the narrator's staging of Arabs returning the gaze neither asserts Orientalist stereotypes nor replaces them with a more truthful version of Arab private lives. Arab-American relations in Lebanon are just one more foil on which the narrator projects his own instable positionality between competing claims of Arabness and Americanness.

After his return from Beirut, William is examined by a psychiatrist to make sure that he does not suffer from a "cultural shock" related to his two-year overseas stay. He easily convinces the psychiatrist that he has lost his mind among the Arabs and cannot resume his service in the USIS. William instead goes to Los Angeles for a second time to cure himself of his old complex of not being "the Type." To this end, he becomes his own "Favorite Prince."³⁹ The ridiculous revenge on Hollywood is presented as an act of performative pseudo-catharsis through cultural travesty. Re-inaugurating himself to America as the Saudi Arabian prince "Khairallah el Aswad al Xeer,"⁴⁰ he finally gains access to those film studios formerly barred to the blue-eyed Arab American with a talent for acting.

Which Way to Mecca, Jack? was written in the late 1950s, a time dominated by the social pressures and false promises of gradual assimilation. Instead of affirming this ideology, the narrative's endless loops of mimicry and mockery are directed at both American self-images and American perceptions of Arabness. Somewhere in-between these loops, one can discern a hidden man who is deeply hurt from the multiple discriminations he has suffered. With biting irony, this man is tumbling in search of a position and an agency that has more to offer than the painful laughter of mocking revenge. The narrator's regular allusions to the long history of conflictual encounters between the West and the Arab world can only adumbrate the violence involved in that tumbling. I believe it is this invisible violence resulting from the horrors of discriminatory assimilation that can function as a missing link between *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* and the 1971 novel, *The Exorcist*, on

37 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 213.

38 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 213.

39 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 240.

40 Blatty, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* 242.

which Blatty's success as an American mainstream writer is based. I argue that this novelistic representation can also be related to the history of Arab-American immigration, anti-Arab discrimination, and assimilation. One finds indeed several intra- and extra-textual hints that suggest reading it as an allegorical expression, not only of the paranoid nationalist desire to cleanse the American nation from an internal threat but also of a much more horrific and ambivalent intra-psychic struggle related to the assimilationist pressure to exorcise the Arab within oneself.

The Exorcist is best known for its 1973 filmic adaptation of the same title.⁴¹ Directed by William Friedkin, the screenplay was written by Blatty himself. The film became one of the most controversial and most successful horror films of all time, and it has significant influence on the popular genre to this day. While early critics searching for *The Exorcist's* true meaning repeatedly noted that the film's overriding theme of good versus evil, depending on the applied interpretive approach, allows for various theological, psychological, or sociopolitical specifications of the demonic evil's source and identity, they strangely shied away from identifying the invading demon as an ethnic Other, especially a Middle Eastern or Arab one.⁴²

For those who have watched the movie, this reluctance must come as a surprise. The filmic prologue's Iraqi setting puzzles a perplexed audience, which expects a story exclusively set in America's suburbia: The movie opens with a close shot of an archaeologist leading a project in the deserts of Northern Iraq. The man (played by Max von Sydow), who becomes an exorcist upon his return to the US, is brought to a nearby digging site where a small stone head personifying the ancient Assyrian demigod, Pazuzu, has been found. He then visits the ruins of an ancient temple watched over by a man-sized Pazuzu statue. When a strong wind begins to blow, the statue, with raptor-like wings and a massive phallus, suddenly rises from its lithic sleep (fig. 16).

A close-up shows Merrin trying to avert his gaze before a cut inaugurates a two-shot of savage desert dogs fighting in the swirling wind. After another short cut to an ominous Bedouin guard observing the scene, Merrin returns his gaze to Pazuzu. As the sand storm intensifies, the statue is increasingly obscured by red dust. Sonically accompanied by a Muslim muezzin's call to prayer, the following crossfade transposes the audience from the blood-red Iraqi sunset to a fresh, blue sunrise over Georgetown in Washington, D.C. Slowly zooming down on the city, the camera leads us into Chris MacNeil's suburban house. Chris enters her 11-year-old daughter Regan's bedroom and opens the window. A soft breeze ruffles the curtains. The camera's pan goes from the window to Regan. The Oriental demon has

41 *The Exorcist*, dir. William Friedkin, screenplay William Peter Blatty, perf. Linda Blair, Ellen Burstyn, Jason Miller, and Max von Sydow, Warner Bros, 1973.

42 See, for instance, Janice Schuetz, "The Exorcist: Images of Good and Evil," *Western Speech Communication* 39.2 (1975): 92-101.

Figure 16: Merrin facing Pazuzu in Iraq. Film still from the prologue's cross(-cultural) fade; *The Exorcist*, 1973.



already invaded the girl, and the distant horror gradually enters the filmic home-setting.

The Iraqi prologue and the following cross-cultural fade are not reciprocated on the main plot's visual level. The only reference to the opening image and its ultimate connotation to the evil spirit of the Arab Orient is the repeated, symbolic use of blowing wind. In this regard, Timothy Pittides's movie poster, (fig. 17) designed for a three-year-anniversary screening in San Antonio, Texas, is a rare exception. It not only directly illustrates the prologue's setting of the Iraqi digging site but also imagines the perspective of the Oriental demon, Pazuzu, hidden in a cave. The fact that the cave of the pre-Islamic demigod is vested with a broken, Aladdin-style wander lamp is quite telling regarding the designer's cultural associations. The decorative use of seemingly randomly arranged Arabic characters does not even add up to any meaning.

As the movie's first sequence sets the tone and subconscious frame for the rest of the filmic narrative, the novel's prologue also ends with an unnamed old man in khaki clothes who "hastened toward Mosul and his train, his heart encased in the icy conviction that soon he would be hunted by an ancient enemy."⁴³ In North Iraq, this man has met the limestone statue of the demon Pazuzu and maybe other demons. We learn that the demon "is the personification of the southwest wind"

43 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 8.

Figure 17: Movie poster by Timothy Pittides, 1976. Designed for the three-year-anniversary screening of William Friedkin's filmic adaptation of *The Exorcist*.



and that “its dominion was sickness and disease.”⁴⁴ The local Arab characters placed in a surrounding blazed by an inexorable sun seem to be the living embodiments of Pazuzu’s execration. They are represented as an “ancient debt.”⁴⁵ Grinning with their “damply bleached”⁴⁶ eyes, “rotted teeth,” and “sagging cheeks,” they make the “chawaga [the Western foreigner]” feel “strangely alone.”⁴⁷ But even as he “fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chick-pea nestled in a corner of the Arab’s mouth,”⁴⁸ the American is interested in something “totally other.”⁴⁹ What he is looking for is “that Other who ravaged his dreams.”⁵⁰ The demon which possesses the American girl Regan and which Merrin tries to exorcise is precisely that Other.

The images of contamination and disease used to describe Regan’s corrupted body are directly linked to the original Arab sickness that Merrin first faced in Iraq. The girl’s “desire for repugnant foods” and her “foul breath,”⁵¹ diagnosed as symptoms of possession, are reminiscent features of those remains of local cuisine witnessed by Merrin in Arab mouths. Even the Arabic language, the meaning of which the American could not grasp, and the “yappings of savage dog packs”⁵² of the Iraqi desert seem to return in the mysterious “gibberish” of “meaningless syllables” and “guttural tones”⁵³ muttered by the possessed girl. The supposedly

44 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 6.

45 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 4.

46 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 4.

47 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 5.

48 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 7.

49 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 4.

50 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 8.

51 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 249.

52 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 8.

53 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 123.

“foreign language”⁵⁴ turns out to be English spoken backwards, just like Arabic is read from right to left. The voice speaking through Regan’s body announces itself as “Nowonmai” (I am no won/one) and claims to come from “dog” (god).⁵⁵ The agent of possession is signified as foreign, non-Western, and Arab.

It is intriguing to see that, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, white American literary and cultural critics, in particular, under the impression of the ongoing war against terror abroad and at home, began re-reading *The Exorcist* as both a timeless and at the same time very timely piece of narrative fiction. For Larrie Dudenhoefter, the book and its filmic adaptation are “more relevant than ever since the collapse of the World Trade Center.”⁵⁶ Taking up a contemporary American mainstream perspective on homeland security and foreign military, Regan’s struggle with the Arab demon can be compared to the US’s fight against Islamic terrorism.⁵⁷ Others, like Philip L. Simpson or Tim Jon Semmerling, take a slightly more critical stance. While Semmerling is first and foremost interested in the racialized threat to American family and community values which the Arab demon symbolically represents,⁵⁸ Simpson not only reads the novel as the anticipation of “geopolitical hostilities to come”⁵⁹ but, in addition, interprets it as “an enduring supernatural melodrama of the impossibility of assimilation.”⁶⁰ In this view, *The Exorcist* demonstrates “the deep-seated American fear of the invasive Middle Eastern Other.”⁶¹ Although his is the most elaborated reading with regard to the question of assimilation, Simpson’s allegorical reference to the events and aftermath of 9/11 runs the risk of reducing the novel’s binary structure of good versus evil to an anticipation of the post-9/11 politics of alterity. The critical impetus of his interpretation repeatedly results in seeing Blatty’s novel as “a caricature conforming to [...] Orientalist stereotypes”⁶² or in stating the immediate need of bridging cultural differences. When the scholar of horror studies argues that the novel demonstrates America’s vulnerability to “attacks from within by a Middle Eastern force that tran-

54 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 141.

55 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 141.

56 Larrie Dudenhoefter, “Evil against Evil!: The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist*,” *Horror Studies* 1.1 (2010): 74.

57 Dudenhoefter, “Evil against Evil!: The Parabolic Structure and Thematics of William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist*,” 85-86.

58 Tim Jon Semmerling, “*Evil! Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2006) 30-50.

59 Philip L. Simpson, “Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in *The Exorcist*,” *American Exorcist: Critical Essays on William Peter Blatty*, ed. Benjamin Szumskyj (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2008) 29.

60 Simpson, “Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in *The Exorcist*,” 42.

61 Simpson, “Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in *The Exorcist*,” 26.

62 Simpson, “Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in *The Exorcist*,” 27.

sends the cultural and national boundaries of its place of origin,"⁶³ he implicitly affirms the very juxtaposition of West versus East of which he disapproves at other points. According to such a reading, the novel and its filmic adaptation basically exploit a paranoid anxiety about cultural assimilation held by the mainstream audience in order to enjoy larger reception. The *Exorcist*, then, is little more than a piece of horror thriller cum Orientalist pulp fiction. I believe that this is principally true and probably one of the reasons for its international success. However, against the background of my reading of *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*, I want to add an alternative interpretive perspective. Taking up the position of an imagined Arab reader and drawing on the image of the "ocean liner"⁶⁴ introduced by Father Karras, Merrin's co-exorcist, as a psychoanalytical metaphor of the self, I delve into this ocean liner's "crew [...] down below decks."⁶⁵

If one imagines Merrin and Pazuzu as alter egos, as competing parts of the same disputed self under the condition of racist discrimination and forced assimilation, the narrative isn't simply about foreign elements in the American self that must be exorcized without bargaining and without negotiation. *The Exorcist* also carries the unsettling suggestion that the act of exorcism is directed at those who must be assimilated: at the Arab within oneself. In such a reading, Regan would be the object of an affective transference. The concept of transference (*Übertragung*), as introduced in its psychoanalytical sense in 1893 by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud,⁶⁶ is tinged with numerous connotations. Many of the implications in the original German are insufficiently transposed by the English term. They range from translocation, translation, and metaphoric transfer to the transmission of a disease.⁶⁷ All of these meanings are of relevance when designating the various processes involved on the different psycho-symbolic levels of the horror narrative. The connotations of physical translocation and disease transmission seem particularly important when re-reading *The Exorcist* as a reaction to the horrors of racist discrimination and assimilationist repression.

The object of my investigation here is the printed book, *The Exorcist*, and not its author, William Blatty. However, if one—let's say in a gesture of radical deconstruction—undoes the structuralist binary distinction between literary text and

63 Simpson, "Fear of the Assimilation of the Foreign Other in *The Exorcist*," 38.

64 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 239.

65 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 240.

66 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication [1893]," *Studies on Hysteria*, by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, ed. and trans. James Strachey, in collab. with Anna Freud (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 3-17.

67 Gerhard Fichtner, "Übertragung: Zur Archäologie eines Freudschen Begriffs," *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse: Beiträge zur Theorie, Praxis und Geschichte*, eds. Claudia Frank, Ludger M. Hermanns, and Helmut Hinz, 53 (2006): 93-116.

lived text for a moment, one can begin to read the 1971 novel as the violent repetition or redirection of feelings and desires unconsciously retained from the William of *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* It is my hypothesis that the object upon which the repressed traumatic experiences of assimilation were directed becomes the subject of a new novelistic text with *The Exorcist*. The demon itself accuses Merrin of abusing Regan for divesting his internal struggle between devotion and self-assertion:

“Hypocrite! You care nothing at all for the pig. You care *nothing!* You have made her a contest between us!”

“. . . I humbly . . .”

“Liar! Lying bastard! Tell us, where is your humility, Merrin? In the desert? In the ruins? [...]”⁶⁸

In my view, this can be read as an instance of self-accusation. The words evoke the derogatory suspicion of a dubious Arab origin in the narrative’s symbolic self. At another point, it becomes obvious that Merrin sees himself as the demon’s real target. The words that he uses to describe the horrific (self-)devaluating effects of the demon’s presence almost amount to a catalogue of the worst dehumanizing effects of the racist-assimilationist discourse. At the same time, they are reminiscent of the internalized, racist self-denigration and sense of unworthiness of the autofictional character, William, in *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*:

And yet I think the demon’s target is not the possessed; it is us ... the observers ... every person in this house. And I think—I think the point is to make us despair; to reject our own humanity, Damien: to see ourselves as ultimately bestial, vile and putrescent; without dignity, ugly, unworthy.⁶⁹

At this point, two possible objections regarding my interpretive use of the concept of transference need to be considered. The critic should be aware that her or his own act of criticism is not taking place outside the dynamics of psychic redirection or counter transference. It is impossible to strictly separate what comes into my reading from my part and what comes into it from the investigated text. Moreover, such reading always risks treating the Anglophone Arab text as a hysterical, hence pathological, symptom. However, I do believe that no interpretive approach can fully escape from the psychodynamics of narcissism and transference.

Hence, let me further elaborate on my reading of *The Exorcist* as an Anglophone Arab Gothic allegory of the horrors of Arab experiences of assimilation in the West. To this end, Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, as introduced in her seminal 1980

68 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 347.

69 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 351.

essay, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*,⁷⁰ can function as an additional foundation for speculatively grasping the novel's quasi-affective, pre- or post-discursive, almost bodily expressions of less palpable and more insidious forms of racist discrimination. The enunciations of the institutionalized violence of the assimilationist structures of oppression appear underneath the level of the main narrative discourse. Kristeva's concept of abjection combines Lacanian psychoanalysis with semiotics, and literary theory to explain the psychic dialectics of internalized and externalized alterity. Selectively drawing on her arguments, I understand the Western discourse of assimilation as one that forces those defined as in need of assimilation to identify a realm of disgust regarding their own otherness inside themselves. Constructed as subjects overtaken by the very abject that they are to others, their discourse of selfing is therefore motivated by fear. The horror resulting from such quasi-self-repellent otherness cannot be easily directed at the realm outside the self onto an imagined other because any potential foil of projection functions at the same time as the representation of a normative self. In other words, the very realm of the abject is almost object-less. In order to overcome the fear of never-ending racist abjection, an even more violent act of self-expulsion is evoked. Thus, the psychic procedure of assimilation can take the form of self-exorcism. *The Exorcist* can be read as a representation of such self-exorcism.

Focusing on the psychic density and eruptive quality of the novel's hidden subtext, one might gain a better understanding of the exorcising dynamics of subjection under the conditions of anti-Arab discrimination and the racist pressures of assimilation. Although the novel's main narrative body does not employ the axioms of race, racism, discrimination, and assimilation in its first place, there is more than a simple assimilationist sentiment at work in *The Exorcist*. I argue that the racist discourse of assimilation understood as a discourse over the production of a socially reformed subject through the destruction of this future subject's object status frames the novelistic text in an equally uncanny and powerful way. The imaginary of an exorcist's laboratory in an affluent neighborhood of Washington D.C. is only on its surface about the regeneration of Regan. Its deeper allegorical meaning relates to the assimilationist concept of subject-constitution as an exorcising act. The process of becoming American is presented as a violent identitarian engineering that first abjects every Arab origin and then forces the body to spit out the Arab portions of the self. The newly created (assimilated) subject is symbolically cleansed of its previous monstrous-exotic Arabness. The Arab is humanized (i.e. Westernized) by the ultimate act of integrative violence.

It is important to remind ourselves that the horror story ends with the deaths of both Pazuzu and Merrin. In terms of the narrative's inner psychic logic, the Arab as the future self's demonic part is killed so that the Americanized remains

70 Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1980).

can live on. However, read through a Kristevan lens, *The Exorcist* also symbolically represents the reverse convolutions of those who, in racist transference, have been perceived as void by the self-proclaimed homelander. Accordingly, the novel can be interpreted as a particular Anglophone Arab variety of a general literary meta-theme “where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist, or barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.”⁷¹ Using the power of the literary trope of the demonic and the evil, the novel unveils the horrors of Arab-American being: that is, being under constant assimilationist supervision. I suggest re-reading *The Exorcist* as a subconsciously self-exorcising reaction to the dominant discourse of assimilation by a narrative sub-voice which is possessed by racist abjection.⁷²

The horrors of assimilation are an almost impossible object of direct representation. They are either expressed in the dominant group's repressive integrationist legal framework and their fantasies of desire and denial, or they are at work in the self-annihilating nightmares as well as in the resistive visions and actions of those who are expected to assimilate themselves. In these situations, the boundaries between the ego and its negation, between beauty and horror or life and death, can easily be turned inside out. To hesitate between staying outside as Other or getting inside through the negation of one's otherness is a difficult and regularly criminalized undertaking.⁷³ In such moments, the dominant moral and legal codes purify repression. Blatty's *The Exorcist*, however, indicates that none of us (Arabs and non-Arabs alike!) can fully escape from the return of the repressed horrors of assimilation. I believe the imaginary of such an inevitable return is constitutive of many Anglophone Arab representations. These representations' reifying or queering of identity across cultures remains a fragile undertaking. Without necessarily representing themselves as abjects, most Anglophone Arab writers and artists know very well that they are subject to the braided horrors of abjection, and they incorporate this knowledge into their representational strategies.

An allegorical reading of *The Exorcist* as a post-colonial Gothic narrative does not necessarily link it to early imperial Gothic writings or even explore its nocturnal traces. Although the occult narrative of an innocent American girl invaded (hence penetrated) by an Oriental demon who turns the peaceful American home into a scene of horror clearly draws on the fears of reverse colonization and miscegenation, both common motives of the imperial Gothic,⁷⁴ the bloodthirsty story's

71 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* 207.

72 Derek Hook, “Racism as Abjection: A Psychoanalytic Conceptualisation for a Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *South African Journal of Psychology*, 34.4 (2004): 672-703.

73 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* 155.

74 Andrew Smith and William Hughes, eds., *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

symbolic synonymizing of racial, cultural, and national identity/alterity works perfectly without any prior knowledge of inter-texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Thus, the novel's epilogue might include a post-Gothic hint through a statement made by Chris MacNeil's new partner, Dyer. Invited for the screening of a filmic adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—the story of the assimilation procedure of the dark-skinned adoptee, Heathcliff, which comes to a tragic end—Dyer refuses without an expression on his face: "I have seen it."⁷⁵

Sure, one cannot read *The Exorcist* without remembering that the discourses of racism and imperialism are part of the general cultural text of the 19th and 20th centuries. But the way the novel reproduces the discursive axioms of imperialism is not neatly framed by meanings of text and intertext. My allegorical reading tries to reveal a fear beyond the level of the narrator and the narration, beyond the text itself. The horrors of assimilation and self-exorcism perhaps even step outside the text and enter the reader's (non-)assimilated worldliness and psychic states. Opening the violent fractures of the assimilationist discourse, my reading of *The Exorcist* wishes to extend the novel's meaning outside the tradition of the Gothic novel or the popular horror genre and to negotiate a critique that resists the terror of assimilation in past and present.

5.1.2 Being Non-Arab and the Anxiety of Re-Filiation

I read Blatty's 1971 novel as an Anglophone Arab text. By doing so, I might have acted against the author's intention. One might even argue that I participate in the commodification and writing of Anglophone Arab identities instead of allowing these identities to articulate themselves. I have no excuses. My reading simply relates this piece of narrative fiction to a discourse that, in my opinion, is haunted and continues to haunt Arab lives in the Anglophone West. It is not my intention to turn the individual author, William Blatty, into a representative of Arab victimhood. The same is true for my following reading.

At least since the late 1960s, Arab writers in the West have grappled with their quest for anti-assimilationist self-identification. Poets, in particular, such as Sam Hazo, Sam Hamod, Jack Marshall, or Naomi Shihab Nye, began to recover creatively what was supposed to have been lost during generations of assimilation and anti-Arab self-exorcism: names, memories, heritages, histories, identities. Many Anglophone Arab writers and activist-scholars also engaged in strong critiques of Western foreign policies and the sociopolitical conditions within the Arab world. Such bidirectional, cross-cultural critique based on varying forms of ethnic identification with one's culture of origin or one's Arab diasporic community forms an

75 Blatty, *The Exorcist* 385.

important element in contemporary Anglophone Arab discourse to this day. There was probably no other intellectual of Arab descent writing in English who refuted ethnic identification so rigorously and self-consciously than the late Ihab Hassan. Born in Cairo in 1925, he arrived in the United States in 1946 on an Egyptian government fellowship to study electrical engineering. Instead, he earned a PhD in English and American literature and never returned to his native Egypt. Hassan died in 2015. Over the final four decades of his life, he not only advanced to a leading figure of postmodern literary theory but, at the same time, became one of the most provocative (Arab) critics of postcolonial identity politics. I want to revisit this theoretical farewell to the Anglophone Arab roots-talk from a relational Arab studies perspective. In doing so, I am not reclaiming Hassan's theoretical work for the corpus of Anglophone Arab studies. Nevertheless, I find it at least intriguing to ask for the (perhaps hidden) Arab contiguities of postmodernism.

Hassan's list of publications is too long and the spectrum of topics, ranging from postwar American fiction to the literature of travel, too wide to be discussed exhaustively within the framework of this chapter. His oeuvre includes 16 books and an almost unmanageable amount of essays. Among his theoretical contributions are such seminal studies as *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*,⁷⁶ *Paracriticisms*,⁷⁷ *The Postmodern Turn*,⁷⁸ and *Rumors of Change*.⁷⁹ To seriously grasp his literary criticism and theory production of fifty years, one would indeed need, as he puts it, "a library of books, written and burned."⁸⁰ A key notion in most of Hassan's writings is that of *indeterminance*. First coined in a 1977/78 essay entitled "Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age,"⁸¹ the term is a combination of indeterminacy and immanence. In Hassan's view, both stand for two disparate yet central tendencies within literary and extra-literary postmodernism. Directly related to the material conditionality of technological immanence and capitalist individuation, the two non-dialectical trends form the quasi-ethos and post-moral episteme of our postmodern present without being resolved into

76 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971; Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1982).

77 Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975).

78 Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987).

79 Ihab Hassan, *Rumors of Change: Essays of Five Decades* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1995).

80 Ihab Hassan, "Postmodernism, etc.: An Interview with Frank L. Cioffi," *Postmodernism and Other Distractions: Situations and Directions for Critical Theory*, ed. David Gorman, *Style* 33.3 (1999): 361. On Hassan's work, see also Klaus Stierstorfer, ed. *Return to Postmodernism: Theory—Travel Writing—Autobiography: Festschrift in Honour of Ihab Hassan* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2005).

81 Ihab Hassan, "Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age," reprinted in Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987) 46-83.

a higher synthesis. The decisively anti-Marxist notion of the human mind forming its own reality, dependent and at the same time independent of its material being, suggests that we are witnessing a radical transformation of man who has the capacity to generalize his mind for the first time in history. Hassan knows the ironies and identitarian insecurities resulting from the indeterminacies of such postmodern processes of selving. But instead of lamenting the assumingly empty subject or warning of the risk of total absorption (assimilation), he insists on the liberating power of individual human beings and art to make reality. Whereas, according to Hassan, traditional notions of *selves* are consequently *at risk*,⁸² the literary and artistic techniques of play, parody, and pastiche can help us to “empty ourselves out of self-concern.”⁸³ There is a thoroughly positive notion of self-marginalization at work in such an engagement with identity that comes close to a kind of liberal-optimist nihilism in its ignorance of questions about subalternity, identity politics, or political agency in the broadest sense. Although he acknowledges that the socio-historical discourses of class, race, and gender participate in the construction of differences, he insists on man’s fundamental capacity for self-creation. Hassan’s reluctance to reduce human beings to their specific material and political conditionality likewise applies to questions of ethnicity and cultural descent. The self-marginalized and yet fully assimilated loner represents himself neither as a hyphenated American nor as an Arab.

Given this chapter’s main concern with the question of assimilation, I am particularly interested in Hassan’s writings at the intersection of fiction and theory. These are writings that exhibit his poetics and ethics of self-concern perhaps more than others. Such a cross-generic quality by definition applies to most of his academic work as a postmodern theoretician. Yet, in his *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography*,⁸⁴ this quality advances to the text’s distinctive constitutive feature. Hassan’s auto-fictional I presented here differs significantly from the William of *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*, who is sent back to the Arab world and Arab identification against his will. The first-person narrator cannot be compared to the remembering I in Edward Said’s memoir *Out of Place* (1999), which re-(af)iliates with the non-Edward part of a divided self, formed during his Egyptian-Palestinian-Lebanese childhood, or to André Aciman, who recollects his own and his Jewish family’s memories of living in and their exodus from Alexandria in *Out of Egypt*⁸⁵ (1994). Hassan’s auto-fictional self seems instead to represent an identitarian coun-

82 Ihab Hassan, *Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1990).

83 Hassan, “Postmodernism, etc.: An Interview with Frank L. Cioffi,” 364.

84 Ihab Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986).

85 André Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

terpoint to the invisible self that exorcises the Arab parts of itself in Blatty's *The Exorcist*.

Ihab Hassan left Egypt behind, never to return and barely looking back again. The both autobiographical and metafictional telling of his escape-journey out of the country of his birth appeared in 1986, ten years before Aciman's memoir of the same title was published. Hassan's *Out of Egypt* is a uniquely radical—some would say contradictory—auto-narrative by an Anglophone writer of outstripped Arab background on precisely that background. The auto-narrator, "I.H.," at no point claims to be Ihab Hassan. Interviewed in many interludes by an anonymous "Autobiographer," he presents his life story fundamentally as a self-made story. From the beginning, the notion of origin and ancestral predetermination is decidedly rejected: "Roots, everyone speaks of roots. I have cared for none".⁸⁶ Already before he left what is depicted as the claustrophobic place of his early life to find success in the academia of the free world, Hassan shows a talent for inventing the self that he wants to be. But his self-emplotment comes full circle only by drawing on the classic narrative pattern of the American immigrant track record.

The scholar of American literature pretends to follow "the country's autobiographers" who "have told us usually optimistic stories, in which they praised the power of the individual."⁸⁷ Placing his private *texture* firmly into this overall storyline, the narrative act is released in the form of an almost mythical reenactment of earlier immigrants' life stories. Instead of embracing his country of birth retrospectively, I.H. embraces the place where he arrived to find himself. The relevant source for the formation of this self is America, not Egypt: "I am in the American grain, a tradition of men and women who crossed an ocean to reinvent themselves."⁸⁸ The identitarian self-location's reference to William Carlos Williams's equally selective and Eurocentric historical account of famous American immigrants, *In the American Grain*,⁸⁹ is significant for I.H.'s project. First published in 1925, ironically the year of Hassan's birth, it begins with Columbus's *discovery* of the West Indies and moves on through Cotton Mather, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin to Edgar Allan Poe and Abraham Lincoln. Williams's collection of micro-histories poetically reconstructs American lives to reveal a national strain of human endeavor and human tragedy.⁹⁰ Although failure is as much a part of this strain as is success, the belief in the capacity of the individual dominates. I.H.'s hint stresses his own confidence in the autonomy of man's individual creativity. Similarly to Williams's insistence

86 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 4.

87 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 12.

88 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 251.

89 William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956).

90 See also Alan Holder, "In the American Grain: William Carlos Williams on the American Past," *American Quarterly* 19.3 (1967): 499-515.

upon his artistic insight that individual lives cannot be explained by “mere accidents of geography and climate,”⁹¹ the auto-narrator of *Out of Egypt* rejects the idea that his life and identity are forcibly reduced to external determinants. He is not possessed by his Arab history but possesses the only country he is willing to call home. I.H.’s almost fetishistic assertion of chosen Americanness triggers his son Geoffrey’s skeptical questions regarding the true reasons for re-writing a childhood that apparently does not matter. Why dig up something he has rigorously left behind? I.H. self-critically re-poses the question to himself without providing an answer: “Is autobiography my own warrant for American self-exile?”⁹²

Instead, he explains his escape from Egypt as an escape from a dysfunctional family, both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. “Self-recreation,” he explains to himself, his son, the autobiographer, and the readers, “helped me slip through my birthrights: language and the clutching blood.”⁹³ However, the slippery use of the trivializing verbal form “to slip” apparently cannot denote the remembered pain felt before the liberating outcome: “Slip? We tear ourselves free. We learn murder in the family, as the ancient Greeks knew, and rehearse the pride of Oedipus before the Sphinx.”⁹⁴ The image of Oedipus encountering the Sphinx does not only evoke the oedipal experience of violence. I.H. comes from a background of landowners and ministers. He received an education in English and French. His relatively privileged childhood, however, is confused by the suffocating constrictions of his direct social environment. I.H.’s hint at the antique myth and its everyday rehearsal within the family also carries the notions of a more fundamental liminality of intellectual autonomy and the risk of human hubris. In ancient mythology, the Sphinx figure marks the binaries of human/animal, masculine/feminine, and Egyptian (Oriental-Arab/Greek-Occidental). The constellation of Oedipus standing before the Sphinx “is a figuration of unparalleled indeterminacy and ambiguity” from Sophocles’s early version to Freud.⁹⁵ I.H.’s identification with Oedipus shares this ambiguity of the threshold. The tragic auto-fictional hero faces an Other who could be his double but decides against any mirroring identification. The Oedipus-Sphinx passage finds its symbolic analogue in the veritable armory of guns, swords, and knives that supplies many of the family incidents of I.H.’s memory. Cutting himself off from a violent family and repressive surroundings that seem resistant to change, he searches for “scope, an openness of time, a more viable history. I also looked for

91 Williams, *In the American Grain* 188.

92 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 106.

93 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 6.

94 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 6.

95 Almut-Barbara Renger, *Oedipus and the Sphinx: The Threshold Myth from Sophocles through Freud to Cocteau*, trans. Duncan Smart, John T Hamilton, and David G Rice (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2013) 44.

some private space wherein to change, grow; for I had not liked what I foresaw of my life in Eternal Egypt.”⁹⁶

I.H. does not evoke any diasporic feeling of loss. He does not suffer from being separated from his Egyptian family, his place of origin, or from Arab culture and language, for that matter. Instead, he is haunted by the anxiety of re-filiation and return:

For a long time after leaving Egypt, I had a bad, recurrent dream. I dreamt that I was compelled to go back, complete some trivial task—close a door left ajar, feed a canary, whisper a message. There was terror in the banal dream, terror and necessity, and also the sense, within the dream itself, that I had dreamt it before, and within that a feeling that each time I dreamt the dream, something would work out: I would no longer need to go back.⁹⁷

His repeated compulsion to close the door might conceal or “whisper” a subconscious message regarding the psychic inconsistency of rigorous indeterminacy and total dissociation from his Arab past. In this view, the act of writing an autobiography would amount to just one more neurotic closing of the door. Although the auto-narrator openly expresses his discomfort with being pushed to relate himself to his Arab background, he reveals his uncertainties regarding the re-verse effects of his auto-writing at some points: “Do my words re-colonize the fellah, who will never read them, as do all these learned [Egyptologist] books I read?”⁹⁸ I.H.’s rejection of Egypt and his Egyptian past excludes self-wounding through the rigorous negation of any collective interdependence. He opts for emancipating his self from the claims of belonging, of roots, and of collective memory. He insists on his right to re-invent himself in the West, free from Anglo-Arab identity discourses. *Out of Egypt* is confidently devoid of nostalgic diasporic sentiments. It voices an unapologetic rejection of Egypt and declares I.H.’s, and maybe Hassan’s, disowning of any Arab heritage.

The absence of Arab group solidarity or at least of a strategic commitment to Arab identity politics can come as a provocation for diasporic Arab activist intellectuals who see themselves as fighting for their respective immigrant communities, for human rights and democracy in their countries of origin, or for just and peaceful relations between the West and the Middle East. The image of happy cultural orphans, cut off from any feeling of Arab belonging thanks to a one-way transatlantic escape, does not fit into the Anglophone Arab discourse of critical commitment. Although his auto-narrative shares a lot with other exilic and/or diasporic narratives of multiple, sometimes contradictory, and often shifting personal texts,

96 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 107.

97 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 108–09.

98 Hassan, *Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography* 48.

Hassan's insistence on indeterminance suspends the possibility of ethnic alliances based on shared national or cultural roots. The absence of any ethnic political "we" in Hassan's writing has direct implications for the ethics of postcolonial criticism. One might even argue that this absence goes as far as to question the allegation of an Arab "we" in my own readings of Blatty's *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* and *The Exorcist*. I believe that it is precisely these decentering effects of Hassan's farewell to the Arab ethnic roots-talk that make his work an important contribution to the relational diasporic study of Anglophone Arab representations and to postcolonial theory more generally.

Hassan's "Queries for Postcolonial Studies"⁹⁹ are posed in a 1998 essay of the same title. These queries are often arbitrary, sometimes cynical, and consistently polemical. But they are not at all pointless. Constantly reminding us that "we" is not a singular pronoun, he radically questions any moral authority that claims partisanship of shared political traits and emancipatory horizons while at the same time celebrating cultural difference. Hassan criticizes what he perceives as the field's inherent epistemo-ideological progressivism, which makes thorough self-criticism impossible and instead produces a self-congratulatory jargon. In his view, the emphasis on imperialist politics and economic exploitation in postcolonial studies selectively moralizes history and overlooks the "benefits [...] of cultural interaction."¹⁰⁰ According to Hassan, postcolonial critics tend to overhastily exclude the non-oppressive dynamics of sameness and to underestimate the individual's capacity to voluntarily choose "soft-universals."¹⁰¹ In turn, they totalize the image of an integral capitalist-imperialist West. Hassan advocates leaving behind what he sees as a "colonial complex," characterized by him as "a deep malady and sinister disease, mixing anger with self-contempt."¹⁰² The repetitive insistence on this demand has an openly exterminatory, almost exorcizing tone. In my view, it is not without ambivalence regarding his own denunciation of the ethnic roots talk: "Root it out, root out the colonial complex from the mind, the heart, the gut, and learn to look at the world with level gaze."¹⁰³ Instead of lamenting material injustice in the world, Hassan calls for the spiritual transcending of selves and cultures to involve what he coins "spiritual interculturalism."¹⁰⁴ Whereas this neo-transcendentalist and late romantic rather than postmodern project is not further specified, Hassan, the literary philosopher of the mind, repeats his disregard for the simple truths of postcolonial morality in a 2005 essay.

99 Ihab Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998): 329-30.

100 Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," 333.

101 Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," 336.

102 Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," 338.

103 Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," 339.

104 Hassan, "Queries for Postcolonial Studies," 341.

The essay is composed as an imagined dialogue between three competing voices. Its main topic is the changing perception of America by the world and by Hassan himself at the beginning of the 20th century. Partly affirming a national crisis of international legitimacy in the wake of the Iraq war, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, he strongly argues against what he interprets as Occidental anti-Americanism. Hassan sees no alternative to the American model of liberal democracy: “Thoughtful visitants to the planet would agree: America needs to do better, somehow, by itself and the world. The visitants do not specify how.”¹⁰⁵ In part, Hassan seems to identify postcolonial critics with these imagined extraterrestrial visitors who criticize without specifying alternatives. He particularly attacks the postcolonialists’ all too often raw (and in his view narcissistic) equation of truth with power. Directly drawing on Said’s notion of speaking truth to power, Hassan advises that postcolonial intellectuals attempt “the harder task, telling truth to themselves, or harder still, telling truth *against* themselves.”¹⁰⁶ There is a certain pre-postmodern mythic essentialism at work in this critique of the Saidian “rowdy counterpoint.”¹⁰⁷ Hassan apparently believes in the need for speaking “equably, mindful of truth in all its shades.”¹⁰⁸ But he is not willing to fully give up the idealist notion of truth. In his view, reducing truth to naïve, one-sided perception over-generalizes ambiguity and turns truth into something “simply pluralist and conflictual.” Against such an understanding, he brings forward the self-heedless and self-dispossessing approximation to truth in “human kenosis.”¹⁰⁹

In a paper presented during a 2013 conference on *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging*¹¹⁰ at Münster University, Hassan once more returned to his self-exilic conception of relinquishing identification. But at this time, the notion of a self-transcending human mind was supplemented with a very physical dimension: “the individual human body.”¹¹¹ The event was characterized by an uncanny ghostly atmosphere—not only because the keynote lecture was read out by the conference

105 Ihab Hassan, “The Eagle, the Olive Branch, and the Dream: Changing Perceptions of America in the World,” *Georgia Review* 59.2 (2005): 342.

106 Hassan, “The Eagle, the Olive Branch, and the Dream: Changing Perceptions of America in the World,” 328–29.

107 Hassan, “The Eagle, the Olive Branch, and the Dream: Changing Perceptions of America in the World,” 331.

108 Hassan, “The Eagle, the Olive Branch, and the Dream: Changing Perceptions of America in the World,” 332.

109 Hassan, “The Eagle, the Olive Branch, and the Dream: Changing Perceptions of America in the World,” 337.

110 Florian Kläger and Klaus Stierstorfer, eds., *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

111 Ihab Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging*, eds. Florian Kläger and Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) 22.

convener due to the absence of the seriously ill body-in-flesh of Hassan. The title of the ventriloquial talk, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground Under Your Feet,” did not really embody its content. Using Toni Morrison’s work as a point of departure, Hassan specified the body as the basis of our intimate, private, and socio-historical experiences, as man’s real and final home. Accordingly, it is not exilic sentiment or diasporic longing but our individual being in the world that shapes the process of identification.

Again, Hassan’s own partial memory of decisively not being in Egypt helps to illustrate his general theoretical argument. In addition, language functions a second, quasi-extraterritorial¹¹² home sphere. Since, in the case of Hassan, this language is clearly English, a phone call by an Arabic-speaking Egyptian General Consul after the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 led to a temporary identitarian dislocation and disorientation. The short non-conversation (imagined and/or remembered) marks the beginning of the kernel of the talk. Hassan is suddenly haunted by his Arab roots. When he who cared for none is informed about the fact that the Egyptian state considered him dead, he not only promptly hung up the phone and rejected Egypt as always but suddenly discovered his anger at Egypt’s rejection of him.

From this symbolic encounter with his Arab past, Hassan moved to his personal “disappointment at the consequences of Tahrir Square.”¹¹³ The *Midan at-Tahrir* was the Egyptian democracy movement’s public and symbolic center, located in downtown Cairo. For Hassan, the Arab Spring merely marked a brief interlude “heralding yet another ice age.”¹¹⁴ To lighten his deep “frustration with his native culture,”¹¹⁵ he imagines a dialogue with a person “more firmly embedded in the Arab world” than Hassan himself and who, unlike himself, identifies as Arab. The queries are obviously his own. He confronts his imagined interlocutor about the lack of democracy and intellectual responsibility in Arab countries, addresses issues of corruption, patriarchy, and sexism, and brings forward the question of violence, anti-Semitism, Arab-Israeli relations, and Islamic terrorism. The answers are basically presented as self-apologetic, nativist justifications of the current state of things and sometimes as ironic excuses. His generalizing description of the Middle East as a “serpents’ nest of irredentist passion”¹¹⁶ subsumes and thus discriminates diverse contemporary local, national, and regional struggles as one coherent backward-oriented reclaiming of a long lost past. Hassan’s reductionist matrix of Arab culture is characterized exclusively by attributes of negative indication. They include “misogyny,

112 Here Hassan draws on George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

113 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 27.

114 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 27.

115 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 30.

116 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 31.

poverty, illiteracy, irresponsible elites, a taste for inflated rhetoric” as well as a “lack of critical spirit, a tendency to see the world without nuances, and a postcolonial mood.”¹¹⁷ In typical ironic manner, Hassan shows himself to be fully aware of his harsh critique of a “people whose ‘blood’—so to speak—runs in my veins.”¹¹⁸ Whereas he does not explain on what grounds (under his feet) and on which worldly experiences he judges more than 400 million individuals living in what he imagines as the Arab world, Hassan does not simply leave the distant audience puzzled by the open enunciation of his willingly politically incorrect anti-Arab polemics. Explaining the direction of his Orientalist-racist generalizations with his learned “distrust in so-called ‘roots’,” he provocatively insists on his right to lay bare and thus to cultivate his self-constitutive anti-Arab stereotypes: “In any case, I never promised to extirpate, only to sublimate, my prejudices.”¹¹⁹

I have decided to abstain from a psychoanalytical interpretation at this point. Although Hassan claims to place his identity within the ongoing challenges of unfinished arrivals rather than in sorrows of loss, his repeated use of tropes of extirpation and extermination for the rhetorical defense of his Arab non-self seems to indicate a reverse-rootedness. The fact that he at the same time brings in the notion of sublimation lets one question what a poetics of prejudices might look like. What is, however, evident is that Hassan’s ethics, in so far as we can speak of such a normative moral system, do not harmonize with the dominant strands of Anglophone Arab discourse.

Against this background, it is all the more significant (or should I say worrying?) that, five years after the failed revolution of 2011, a new generation of Egyptians who read and write English turn to Hassan’s *Out of Egypt* in order to engage with their own crisis of Egyptianness. Living in an extremely repressive and dangerous atmosphere of religious-cum-nationalist authoritarianism, many writers, including Tarek Ghanem, feel the desperate need to rethink “what it means to be Egyptian and how to deal with psychological or physical exile.”¹²⁰ Due to either lack of hope and fear of prosecution, numerous activists of the January 25, 2011 generation have long left or decided to leave the country. Those who stayed sense that they no longer have anything left to lose and often find themselves strangers in their own land. In his recent review of Hassan’s *Out of Egypt* for the independent counter-journalist net-magazine, *Mada Masr*, Ghanem describes the current situation as follows:

117 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 31.

118 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 32.

119 Hassan, “Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground under Your Feet,” 32.

120 Tarek Ghanem, “Literary Gems: On Being Egyptian and Ihab Hassan’s *Out of Egypt*,” *Mada Masr* 19 Feb. 2016, 3 Mar. 2016, <<https://madamasr.com/en/2016/02/19/feature/culture/literary-gems-%E2%80%8Bon-being-egyptian-and-ihab-hassans-out-of-egypt-%E2%80%8B/>>.

For many, in the past five years being Egyptian has become more of a psychological syndrome than an identity. The social suffering, the fantastically Orwellian news, the difficulties of the most mundane interactions, the continuous clamping down on freedoms and critical thought, and the rise of xenophobic and fascistic public sentiments are all alienating. Those who believed in change have become cultural orphans, cut off from true feelings of belonging.¹²¹

In this situation, the young activist blogger and literary reviewer, Ghanem, recommends reading *Out of Egypt* side by side with the latest prison writings by the Egyptian blogger, Alaa Abd El Fattah. His essay written on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the January 25 uprisings is particularly telling. Abd El Fattah, who served a five-year prison sentence for his political commitment, articulates in the English language what is painfully obvious for many of those aspiring to self-realization with their feet on Egyptian ground: “I have nothing to say: no hopes, no dreams, no fears, no warnings, no insights, nothing, absolutely nothing.”¹²² Correlational readings of Anglophone Arab representations can lead to strange encounters, unexpected side-by-side-readings, and shattering insights.

5.2 Blurred Archives and Queered (Hi-)Stories: Literary Writing and Art Work in Transmigration

“Yes, our story is tragic, yes, it is sordid, but you have to remember that it is first and foremost a story.”¹²³

Anglophone Arab imaginaries can travel. When Arab narratives and images travel overseas and back again or when Western representations migrate to the Middle East, the individual cultural sign can change in ways that are more insidious than the literary critics, the curators, or even the writers and artists themselves could have predicted. Sometimes, this process leads to a radical questioning of the act of narrating or representing itself. In such moments, it is not only the act of literary and audio-visual representation that is explored and re-conceptualized. The

121 Ghanem, “Literary Gems: On Being Egyptian and Ihab Hassan’s *Out of Egypt*.” *Mada Masr* is a Cairo-based news website that attempts to provide a platform for dislocated counter-journalist practices. The website started publishing on June 30, 2013 in the midst of popular protests and increasing censorship.

122 Alaa Abd El Fattah, “Jan 25, 5 years on: The only words I can write are about losing my words,” *Mada Masr* 24 Jan. 2016, 3 Mar. 2016 <<https://madamasr.com/en/2016/01/24/opinion/u/jan-25-5-years-on-the-only-words-i-can-write-are-about-losing-my-words/>>.

123 *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*, Tape #17, dir. Souheil Bachar, The Atlas Group in collab. with c-hundred film corp., 2000, 2:33-2:45 min. DVD.

re-vision of representational procedures themselves can be turned into an object of critical imagination by writers and artists. If this happens, the boundaries between fiction, metafiction, and parafiction become blurred. Narratologies are fictionalized alongside histories, and facts are approached not only in their crude facticity but also with a view toward the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy. This chapter focuses on such equally fictocritical and performative dynamics in the contemporary production of Anglophone Arab evidence.

The Anglophone Arab cultural sphere explored selectively in the present discussion is a culture of decisively transnational and transmigrant identifications rather than a hyphenated immigrant culture. Contrary to received ideal types of international migration, such as immigration, re-migration, and diasporic migration, the transmigration approach shall be used as in transnational migration studies—to interpret cultural representations that travel discursively across multiple national and cultural borders. The concept of transmigration was first employed in the mid-1990s by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc as an analytical point of entry into the examination of key processes in a world that is increasingly restructured by economic globalization and transnational migration.¹²⁴ In social anthropology, transmigrants are usually seen as individuals whose continuing migratory movements transcend the boundaries of nation-states and whose complex socio-economic relationships challenge the traditional isomorphism of people, territory, and belonging. The dominant focus in transmigration research on the social and economic dimensions of the globalization of capital often fails to grasp its effects on the reformulation or transformation of cultural articulation.

My discussion here is concerned with the literary and artistic practices of transmigrants. It adapts the paradigm of transmigration as an open explanatory model without screening out the material clashes between specific and frequently polarized mono-localities. Using the literary writings of Rabih Alameddine and the concept and performance art of Walid Raad as examples, I address the representations of two Anglophone Arab intellectuals who, although both are based in the US, are not at all afraid of regularly returning to their place of upbringing. However, I do not aim at tracing a clear nexus between the individual cultural producers' transmigrant lives and their respective creative work. In other words, I am less interested in the intellectuals' physical crossovers than in the effects of these crossovers on their specific representational poetics and aesthetics. Reading contemporary Anglophone poetics across the boundaries of what we are used to imagine as stable morality, factual history, and sexual normativity, my discussion hopes to shed light on the sordid details and anger of tragic memories as well as the fragile beauty and wisdom of unstable truths and contested love:

124 Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68.1 (1995): 48-63.

“I can’t think straight anymore. I should not have said that. I try never saying the word *straight*. Let’s say I can’t concentrate.”¹²⁵ This is Mohammad speaking, the main narrator among many narrative voices in Rabih Alameddine’s 1998 debut novel, *Koolaid’s: The Art of War*. He refuses to straighten his thoughts, to arrange his narrative in a straight order. Alameddine grew up in Lebanon, attended secondary school in England, and has academic degrees from UCLA and the University of San Francisco. Today, he divides his time between San Francisco and Beirut. His debut novel was quite successful in the US and became a bestseller in Beirut in 2001, as well. However, the publication of the Arabic translation fell victim to Lebanese censorship. Therefore, his novel represents both an Anglophone Arab transmigrant’s work and a traveling text. Nevertheless, it is first and foremost a transgressive narrative.

While dying from AIDS in San Francisco, the main narrator of *Koolaid’s*, Mohammad, remembers his and other people’s lives: stories related to the AIDS epidemic in the US, the so-called civil war in Beirut, stories set in the 1980s and 1990s, stories about death, sex, and the meaning of love and anger between worlds. Mohammad’s refusal to think straight is expressed after a short apocalyptic hallucination on the novel’s first page. We also learn that the man suffering and lying in a hospital bed cannot think in English anymore, the language in which he felt at home for the longest time. What is presented to us is an Anglophone narrative that refuses a stable mode of emplotment in order to transpose a loose collection of Arabic thoughts, memories, and dreams. Competing first-person narrators provide a polyphonic mosaic of diary entries, memories, and hallucinations, news reports, abortive book projects, and hilarious short plays. While the literary figures in *Koolaid’s* fit in America without belonging there, they conversely belong in Lebanon without fitting into Lebanese society. This uneasy fact of always being somehow out of place constantly forces the protagonists to situate their own displaced subjectivities in relation to dominant fixations of history, identity, and culture, thus questioning habitual representations of the Arab world and the West in both the US and Lebanon.

Mohammad is an artist who clearly locates himself outside ethnic and national unities of belonging and filiation. Distancing himself from “naïve and dumb” Americans as well as from “arrogant” Lebanese who are “too busy judging everybody else’s life to live their own,”¹²⁶ he cannot escape being perceived by others through the straight parameters of mutually excluding cultures. This man apparently struggled for the longest part of his life with getting rid of those reductive stereotypes that recognize him as someone he is not or does not want to be:

125 Alameddine, *Koolaid’s: The Art of War* 1.

126 Alameddine, *Koolaid’s: The Art of War* 243.

The happiest day in my life was when I got my American citizenship and was able to tear up my Lebanese passport. That was great. Then I got to hate Americans. And I really do. [...] I tried so hard to rid myself of anything Lebanese. [...] The harder I tried, the more it showed up in the unlikeliest places. [...] Would people think of me as a painter or a Lebanese painter?¹²⁷

The many narrative fragments and voices of the novel are intertwined. The multiple narrators do not substitute the narrative claims of the respective other voices, but rather complement and correct singular claims of narrative authority. They do not form a higher unit. Associating competing representations of living and dying in the Lebanese war and living with and dying from AIDS in the US, *Kooloids* relates situational settings of physical deterioration to graphic depictions of bodily love and juxtaposes public mediations with private musings: Gunfire erupts in moments of deflowering; the Pope's solidarity with the Christian victims of the Lebanese war is related to Cervantes's musings on historical truths; the Beatle song, "Revolution," is playing on a record player while a Syrian shell kills the father of a boy who, in turn, blames Yoko Ono; Lebanese reports on the killing of civilians are moved to the newspapers' back pages while Western media forgets those dying of AIDS; Tom Cruise assures his fans that he is not homosexual, while the mystic Krishnamurti and the writer Julio Cortázar lay bare the impossibility of expressing the unity of an individual life.

If I had to confess my true, spontaneous aesthetic experience and inter-medial association when reading Alameddine's queer-fictional work in terms of its narrative strategies, I would have to go beyond the primary topical framework of Arab-American encounters in the sphere of literature to stress this work's secret alliance with Pedro Almodóvar's camp-cinematic art of telling (other) stories. But I am afraid a solid comparative grounding of this association is not possible within the scope of this chapter.¹²⁸ Therefore, let me return to my primary script.

Kooloids can be conceived of as a narrative about the drafting and re-drafting of a book "where all the characters died in the beginning"; a project that "never went beyond the incipit."¹²⁹ The Borgesian structure of draft and re-draft, of copy and re-copy, seems to dominate the novel's narrative direction. This technique will advance to the decisive structure for Alameddine's second novelistic project, *I, the Divine*.¹³⁰

127 Alameddine, *Kooloids. The Art of War* 244.

128 For a first starting out in the interpretive direction indicated here, see: Monica Lopez Lerma, "Law in High Heels: Performativity, Alterity, and Aesthetics," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 20.2 (2011): 289-324 and Stefanie Knauss, "Excess, Artifice, Sentimentality: Almodóvar's Camp Cinema as a Challenge for Theological Aesthetics," *Journal of Religion, Media & Digital Culture* 3.1 (2014): 31-55.

129 Alameddine, *Kooloids. The Art of War* 18.

130 Rabih Alameddine, *I, The Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

In the 2001 novel, the Lebanese Druze-American narrator, Sarah, starts and re-starts anew to tell her as well as her family's transnational life stories. Her endless attempts at inventing, revising, and re-inventing herself culminate in a willingly self-contradictory narrative conglomerate that forms *A Novel in First Chapters*.¹³¹

Among the many aborted projects collected in *Koolaid's* is a piece of pulp fiction, which turns out to be a slightly queered variation of already published books on ruthless Arabs kidnapping innocent Westerners:

I wanted to write a book [. . .]. A stunningly beautiful American woman with perky breasts is sold as a slave to an Arab prince. He, on the other hand, is an incredibly successful American corporate executive pretending to be an Arab prince, for what American would fantasize about being seduced by an Arab.¹³²

Koolaid's is regularly placed within the genre of (multi-)ethnic literature by scholars of Arab American literature and presented as an example of the experimental articulation of the predicament of cultural and national in-betweenness.¹³³ If critics see "a milestone in the modern Arab American literary tradition"¹³⁴ in this novel, as Steven Salaita does in his 2007 study, they stress its transgression of sexual taboos, especially in view of the way Alameddine's narrative treats Arab homosexuality. In my view, homosexuality is only on its surface a major theme of *Koolaid's*. In fact, the stories presented in this novel query the inherent stability of normative identifications, sexual and extra-sexual alike. These queries and queerings include gendered classifications of desire as well as racialized constructions of cultural or national belonging. They assert the narrative and performative create-ability of identities.¹³⁵ Although Mohammed basically represents himself as a gay character, he at one

131 On *I, the Divine*, see also Michelle Hartman, "Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*: A Druze Novel as World Literature?" *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, ed. Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013) 339-59 as well as Carol Fadda-Conrey, "Transnational Diaspora and the Search for Home in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*: A Novel in First Chapters," *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 163-85 and Cristina Garrigós, "The Dynamics of Intercultural Dislocation. Hybridity in Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine*," 187-201.

132 Alameddine, *Koolaid's. The Art of War* 117.

133 See, for instance, Susan Muaddi Darraj, "Arab American Novel," *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature: A-C*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2005) 179-82 and Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* 206-09.

134 Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 73.

135 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

point draws on the Kantian argument that “nothing entirely straight can be carved” to seriously ask whether “something entirely gay can be carved.”¹³⁶

The literary characters in *Koolaid*s are very fragile bodies with equally fragile social identities always in the process of becoming and losing themselves. Similarly, Mohammad’s concern with religious metanarratives appears heretic. He does not drink the Kool-Aid: he does not become a firm believer, and he does not commit suicide.¹³⁷ He questions the biblical and quranic narrative of Lot as a story of a patriarchal prophet who not only is “pimping his two virgin daughters”¹³⁸ in Sodom but later also is sleeping with them and who “doesn’t remember anything the next day. This is the common pattern among straight men. They always forget what happened the night before while they were drunk.”¹³⁹

The Revelation of John is turned into a symbolic matrix of the narrative “Queer A/theology.”¹⁴⁰ The dialogue of the four horsemen of the apocalypse¹⁴¹ is presented in four variations. The novel opens and ends with it. In the opening passage, the fourth rider (Jesus) refuses to take “a non-Christian homosexual” with knowledge of war, plague, and death with him: “You brought me all the way out here for a fucking fag, a heathen. I didn’t die for this dingbat’s sins.”¹⁴² In a later variation, the first, second, and third horsemen chant from the Quran instead of the biblical scripture. Their diversion from the Christian script triggers a severe identity crisis in the fourth horseman (Jesus): “Those are not my words. I never said that.”¹⁴³ The last encounter develops into a flirt with the vision of queer love across sexual, gendered, religious, racial, or cultural divides. Jesus finally says “I love you, Mohammad.”¹⁴⁴ The latter is led away by the rider of the white horse.

Shortly before his death, Mohammad remembers a skyjacking scene from the famous 1986 Hollywood action movie, *The Delta Force*.¹⁴⁵ The passage not only addresses the dominant Arab screen image of the hostage-taking terrorist¹⁴⁶ but at the same time criticizes the common (neo)colonial conceptualization of the Arab

136 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 112.

137 Dervla Shannahan, “Reading Queer A/theology into Rabih Alameddine’s *Koolaid*s,” *Feminist Theology* 19.2 (2011): 133.

138 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 63.

139 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 64.

140 Shannahan, “Reading Queer A/theology into Rabih Alameddine’s *Koolaid*s,” 129–42.

141 John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

142 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 1.

143 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 99.

144 Alameddine, *Koolaid*s. *The Art of War* 245.

145 *The Delta Force*, dir. Menahem Golan, screenplay James Bruner and Menahem Golan, perf. Chuck Norris, Lee Marvin et al., Cannon Films, 1986.

146 Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch P, 2001).

world as an extritorial playground and world-historical stage of Western civilization—a perception that reduces cities like Cairo and Beirut to mere copies, extensions, or appendices of the Western metropolis. In the early 20th century, the Egyptian metropole was described by Europeans as Paris on the Nile, while the Lebanese capital city was known as the Paris of the Middle East. Moreover, until the so-called civil war, Lebanon was represented in Western mass media as the Switzerland of the Arab world. Now Mohammad imagines this:

One of the hijackers in the movie tells the hostages that the *New Jersey* bombed Lebanon. The priest, one of the hostages, denies it. He says Americans never bombed Beirut. There is no rebuttal. When the hijacked plane lands in Beirut, one of the passengers said this used to be a wonderful city. You could do whatever you want. I couldn't believe what he said next. Beirut used to be the Las Vegas of the Middle East. Now that's fucking insulting.¹⁴⁷

Kooloids strongly erodes our cultural flight data. It queers the referential system by which we used to position ourselves against others. The narrative not only unsettles heteronormative convictions and one-sided, cross-cultural identifications but also questions our own geographic, historiographic, and epistemic self-locations. Alameddine's third novel, *The Hakawati* (2008), shares this radically disorienting strategy of crossing up dividing lines of belonging and non-belonging. But in this novel, the heretical narrative acts with an even stronger metanarrative emphasis.

"Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imagining. Let me tell you a story."¹⁴⁸ This opening address marks the beginning of a saga of four generations of a Lebanese family, at the heart of which is a hakawati (storyteller) of such dubious origins—a bastard Armenian whose father was an American missionary and who escaped the 1915 genocide in Turkey—that his employer and patron, a Lebanese nobleman, gives him the surname al-Kharrat (the liar). Within one generation, the storyteller's oral profession is subsequently replaced by mundane commerce, and a family empire is spawned. The only person to continue the patriarch's survival strategy of spinning tales within tales is the first-person narrator of the frame-story and main protagonist, the hakawati's grandson, Osama. He returns to his country from California for his own father's deathbed as a family outsider: "I was a tourist in a bizarre land. I was home."¹⁴⁹

The Hakawati is simultaneously a book about an American Lebanese's coming home, about the modern history of Beirut, and a metafiction about storytelling—a fictionalized narrative that reflects on the conditions for the (im)possibility of

147 Alameddine, *Kooloids: The Art of War* 244.

148 Rabih Alameddine, *The Hakawati* (New York: Knopf, 2008) 5.

149 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 7.

telling true stories. By adapting the narrating-against-death motive and polyphonic structure of *The Arabian Nights* side by side with the stereotypes of the Western Orientalist archive, it uses both the counter-narrative power and the hegemonic commodifications of the Shahrazadian trope. Reflecting these formerly separated and now interwoven representational modes in the broken mirror of our postcolonial present, the novel lays bare the complex narrative precedents of cross-cultural (mis-)understanding.

The main subject of *The Hakawati* is first announced in the American-Arab hybrid title. The reader learns that a hakawati is a professional storyteller. And in case one loses the novel's narratological focus, each of its four sub-books opens with a series of epigraphs testifying to the power of storytelling from sources as diverse as the Quran, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), or literary works by Fernando Pessoa and Emile Habibi. While the ever-shifting narrative does not allow the reader to form an immediate, strong attachment to any of the characters of the many subplots, each individual story sets its hook, giving her or him just enough of a deathbed scene, piece of family history, or fantastic tale to draw her/him further in: Thousands of Arabian desert miles are traveled in a sentence, historic battles are fought in a paragraph, and an encounter with jinns receives only a minimalist description. This illustrative bareness explores and thereby exposes the limits of what the (Western) reader needs to get hooked to the frame story. At the same time, the multiplying dissection of the Kharrat's family story provides a template for *The Hakawati's* larger experiment, namely, to question the ways in which we understand ourselves and our worlds. Mythic stories of the heroic Islamic Sultan, Baybars, who fights the European crusaders, are interposed with stories of Osama's personal history and the stories of his family. The reader learns about the mythical twinned lovers, Shams and Layla, against snippets from Osama's intoxicant undergraduate years in California or his grandfather's birth. In other sections, we find references to Western and Middle Eastern mass media. Each of the narrative fragments participates in building Osama's self, whether by illuminating his family's complex genealogy or his personal cross-cultural past. For this novelistic process of narrative identification, the story of how his grandparents first met is as important as the story of a jinn having sex with a human being.

The individual ego that the novel narrates is made up of many intertwined stories, canonized representations of pivotal historical moments, as well as fleeting personal experiences. As Osama's grandfather explains, each story's power comes not from any causal importance or intrinsic logic but from the fact that it is being told: "Events matter little, only stories of those events affect us."¹⁵⁰ It is this insight that guides the novel's narrative structure. Coherent historical events or linear biographical strands are as irrelevant as authentic authorship or narrative originality.

150 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 450.

Instead, *The Hakawati* focuses on the selective procedure of making meaning and listening. None of the many narrators has the authority of a historical chronicler: “Never trust the teller,’ [...] ‘Trust the tale.’”¹⁵¹ This phrase is reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence’s famous 1923 essay, “The Spirit of Place,” in which he warns his reader: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”¹⁵² Whereas Lawrence argues that the proper function of a literary critic “is to save the tale from the artist who created it,”¹⁵³ Alameddine’s novel seems to evoke more fundamental skepticism regarding the narrative capacity to represent factual truth. Most of Osama’s stories are about other people and told by other people. However, these are the stories that make up Osama’s self because they prefigure how other people perceive him. In cross-cultural perspective, the transmigrant Osama’s intimate reflection on his difficult personal relation to his dying father in the final section of the novel can be read as an allegorical comment on the mutual ignorance between the West and the Arab world. In such a reading, the relation between the two men symbolizes the collective history of Orientalist and Occidental (mis)representations: “what happens is of little significance compared with the stories we tell ourselves about what happens. [...] My father and I may have shared numerous experiences, but, as I was constantly finding out, we rarely shared their stories.”¹⁵⁴

The narrational relation between Osama and his father in many ways reciprocates the narrative frame situation of Elias Khoury’s anti-heroic epic, *Bab ash-Shams (Gate of the Sun)*. Whereas the Palestinian exile, Khaleel, talks to the dying freedom fighter, Yunis, to delay death and fight forgetfulness, Osama’s re-construction of memories seems to be strictly privately grounded, at least at first sight. Like his grandfather, he has remarkable skills of storytelling as an endless spiral of inaugurating further enframed narrative voices with even greater narrative skills. His quasi-nocturnal discourse, like Khaleel’s, uses narrative gaps and absences in dominant representations to open up a metafictional, almost metahistorical space for reflecting the archival limits of telling his own and his family’s (hi-)stories. But no final resolution or harmonizing reconciliation between the competing modalities of enunciation is offered.

The enduring dilemma of unresolved dissonances is metaphorically emplotted in a sub-story on a love-hate relationship between an Arabic ‘oud and a Western electric guitar. Osama learns and loves to play the traditional, pear-shaped Arabic stringed instrument at a young age. However, at a certain point, he decides to learn to play the e-guitar to attract the Beirut girls around him who prefer Western pop music. Many years later, as a student in Los Angeles, he tries to play a maqam,

151 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 206.

152 D. H. Lawrence, “The Spirit of Place,” *Studies in Classic American Literature*, by D. H. Lawrence, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 14.

153 D. H. Lawrence, “The Spirit of Place,” 14.

154 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 450.

a particular Arabic modality or genre related to scale and mood of music, for his roommates in his university's dormitory on his brand-new Gibson J-200. While his fingers still remember to play the Arabic way, the Western guitar frets' prefiguring of the instrument's fixed chordal tonality get in the way. He improvises and his roommates look dazed: "That was different'," one of them says. "You shouldn't play anything but that."¹⁵⁵ However, Osama himself feels that he cannot make the guitar produce the sounds he re-imagines. Finally, he knows what is wrong and what to do:

I walked out of the room and into the common kitchen. I unstrung my guitar and put it on the Formica counter. I searched the drawers for the right tool, but could come up with nothing better than a steak knife to defret my J200. The steak knife was too flimsy, so I tried a bread knife. Without its frets, my guitar would sound better, more me. The bread knife didn't work, either. I plugged in the carving knife, and the current jerked it into life. I went to work. The sound of the knife's tiny motor grew deafening, but I persisted. I went too deep with the first fret, not so much with the second. I'd figured out how to operate by the third and fourth, but I stopped at the fifth. I stared at the dying instrument before me and left it. I returned to my dorm room and lay down, my head buzzing.¹⁵⁶

There is no higher unity of polyphony or harmonic contrapuntality foreseen in this story. The sounds of the guitar and the 'oud establish dissonant cross-cultural counterpoints. Assumed consonance is deconstructed through a violent skip, and dissonance is metaphorically depicted as more than simply a transitory state to be overcome in dialogue. Aesthetic harmony gives way to the painful expression of conflicting voices. Nevertheless, some critics discovered in *The Hakawati* a potential "to transcend the mountain of polemic, historical inquiry, policy analysis and reportage that stands between the Western reader and the Arab soul."¹⁵⁷ So here it comes again: the Arab soul. No wonder Alameddine's next book project avoided easy Orientalizing connotations.

The 2013 novel, *An Unnecessary Woman*, presents an elderly heroine that resists all things exotic. The story of the solitary Beirut eccentric armed with a typing machine and a pistol who produces translations of Western books that nobody knows about at several points risks ending up in a metafictional contribution to the studies of translation and intertextuality. It definitely succeeds in preventing any evocation of ethnic or cultural representation. While the translator, Aliya, knows

155 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 342.

156 Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 342-43.

157 Lorraine Adams, "Once Upon Many Times," Rev. of *The Hakawati*, by Rabih Alameddine, *The New York Times*, *nytimes.com* 18 May 2008, 13 Feb. 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/books/review/Adams-t.html?_r=0>.

that we all “lie down with hope and wake up with lies,”¹⁵⁸ Alameddine apparently optimistically did not give up believing in his readers’ capacity for unprejudiced expectations: “If I am supposed to represent the Arabs, we’re in deep shit.”¹⁵⁹ Yet, the pessimistic or rather realistic quasi-dialogic anticipation of these very readers’ impertinent demands for ethnic authenticity and cultural representativity never ceased to inform his literary work.¹⁶⁰

The cross-cultural conflict between musical instruments imagined by Alameddine reminds us that the conflict between competing representational modes takes place not only on the level of text and narrative. Whereas *The Hakawati’s* sub-plot draws on musical (sonic) tropes, the broader cultural sphere with which I am concerned here involves textual narrative, performance, images, and sounds in equal measure. If one considers the complex nexus of invisibility and blocked visibility or forced visibility, of mutually excluding images/stereotypes, as well as the struggle of voicing these experiences, one cannot be surprised that Anglophone Arab intellectuals have increasingly turned to the sphere of audio-visual arts. Many diasporic transmigrant artists from the late 1990s onwards directly participated in the formation of independent projects, galleries, and festivals within the Middle East. The art scene in Cairo and Beirut, in particular, offered new platforms beyond the state-controlled cultural spaces of phobocratic censorship. At the same time, Anglophone Arab concept and performance artists are increasingly present(ed) at international art shows in Venice, Kassel, New York, or Abu Dhabi.¹⁶¹ At this point, I want to turn to these audio-visual and performative spheres of Anglophone Arab cultural production.

Contemporary Anglophone Arab concept and performance artists have a particularly intense interest in the archive, both in a literal and in a metaphorical sense. This archival impulse and documentary turn within Anglophone Arab representations raises several questions regarding the possibilities and impossibilities of telling individual Arab truths or providing collective testimony. These artists work through the archival materiality in order to rethink and transform the representational conditions of their own present positionalities. Their art is both an archival and a counter-archival art. It is at work in the archive, and it at the same time works against competing archives.

158 Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 44.

159 Dwyer Murphy, “This is also my world,” Interview with Rabih Alameddine, *Guernica* 3 Mar. 2014, 13 Feb. 2015 <<https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/this-is-also-my-world/>>.

160 This *pessoptimist* double anticipation is particularly true for his latest novel, which in many ways can be read as a sequel to *Koolaid’s*; see Rabih Alameddine, *The Angel of History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 2016).

161 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Off the Map: Contemporary Art in the Middle East,” *The Future of Tradition—The Tradition of Future*, ed. Chris Dercon, León Krempel, and Avinoam Shalem (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2010) 62-63.

A significant example of the artistic practice of calling into question stories and histories in Anglophone Arab representations is Walid Raad's brainchild, the Atlas Group project. Founded in 1999, the Atlas Group forms the constant basis for Raad's multimedia performances. The pseudo-scientific laboratory mimics and thereby exposes the mechanisms of the archive as a place where the production of historical knowledge happens.¹⁶² When the Atlas Group first appeared on the Lebanese art scene, it was immediately afforded a space in high-profile international venues such as Documenta, the Whitney Biennale, and the Venice Biennale. Today, artist and Cooper Union School of Arts teacher Raad is based between Brooklyn and Beirut. His work is particularly concerned with selections and representations of knowledge of the Middle East. His specific approach to the accumulation of documents related to Lebanon's recent history has all the trappings of the documentary genre. A typical Atlas Group production involves press photographs, news clippings, interview transcripts, video footage, graphics, elements of collage, and video art—all rolled up in the framework of the artist's talk or lecture. The most important bases for any production or publication are the documents collected and the ordered files of the Atlas Group Archives.

The use of the term *Atlas* is no accident. It refers to and re-claims one of the most important representational constituents of imperial power. At the same time, it alludes to a particular archival tradition of art history, cultural studies, and art practice ranging from Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* to Gerhard Richter's famous artistic collection of photographs, newspaper cuttings, and drawings.¹⁶³ The Atlas Group represents many things at the same time. It refers to the work of an individual artist, to his imaginary foundation established in 1976, or to a real foundation established in 1976 by someone called Maha Traboulsi. On various occasions and in various locations, Raad has stated that the Atlas Group is a nonprofit foundation established in Beirut in 1967, or in New York in 2000, or in Beirut in 2002. The information circulated depends on the artist's considerations with regard to the specific pre-knowledge of the audience.

Although Raad's performances, exhibitions, and publications explain that the Atlas Group documents are produced and that he attributed them to various imaginary individuals, the international audience long failed to grasp the imaginary nature of the Atlas Group, its archives, and its documents. This confirms the weighty associations of authority and authenticity that certain modes of address (the lecture, the conference) and display (the white walls of a museum or gallery, the picture frame, the museum catalogue) automatically carry. The performative adjustment of authority is particularly evident in the Atlas Group's lectures, which look

162 Sarah Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory: Walid Raad's The Atlas Project," *Parachute (Beirouth_Beirut)* 108 (2002): 68-79.

163 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas,'" *October* 88 (1999): 117-45.

and sound like a college lecture or an academic conference presentation. Raad sits behind a rectangular table facing the audience and shows slides and videotapes on a screen. He speaks into a microphone. A glass of water, a notebook, a pen, and a lamp lay on the table. He wears a light shirt and dark dress pants. The earliest manifestations of this kind of performance authority happened in the context of an academic conference in Beirut in 1999, and the second occurred in the context of an artist talk at the Ayloul Festival in Beirut shortly thereafter.¹⁶⁴

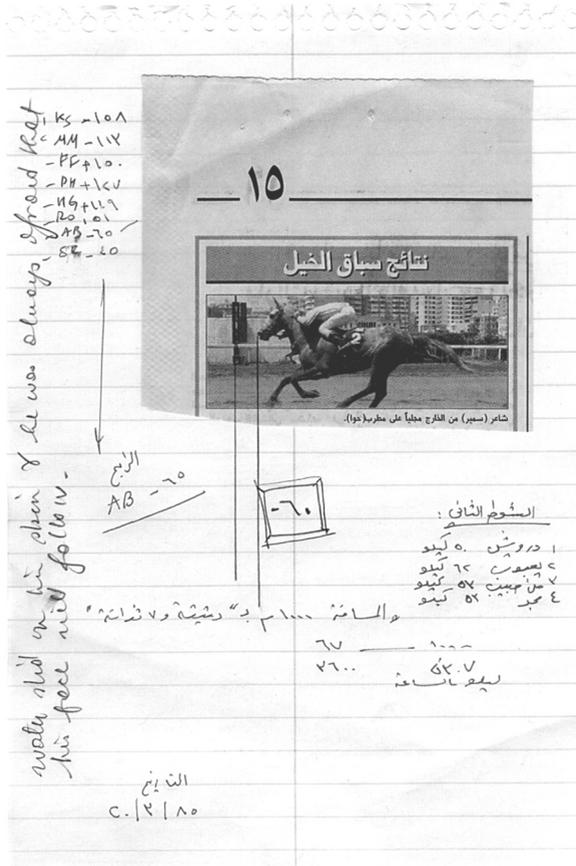
A file with the title “Missing Lebanese Wars” contains a richly illustrated notebook by Dr. Fadl Fakhouri (fig. 18). It is about historians who spend their wartime gambling at Beirut’s horse-race track. These historians, however, do not bet—as one might expect—on the winning horse but on the distance between the winning horse and the finish line that would be captured in the published photo-finish photograph. Against the background of competing versions of the so-called civil war and the roles or responsibilities along the lines of different sectarian and political groups, this work can be interpreted as a direct comment on the unresolved inner-Lebanese struggle over historical representation (for instance, in schoolbooks) and reconciliation. At the same time, it can be read as a translocal metaphor for the production and control of historical evidence through acts of deferment and extension of meaning. These acts or counter-acts of controlling the distance between a signified thing or event (here the winning horse’s running-in) and its signification (the published photo) are at the core of Walid Raad’s artistic practice.

The crucial implication of “Missing Lebanese Wars” is that it is impossible to coherently reconstruct a history of the civil war without an abstraction. Shedding light on some of the unexamined dimensions of the war, the Atlas Group does not speak of the Lebanese Civil War but sensitizes the audience for the plurality of wartime experiences as they are conditioned by manifold religious, class, ideological, and gender locations. Dr. Fadl Fakhouri’s notebook raises the troubling question of the possibilities and limits of writing any history of the wars in Lebanon. Only on the surface does the project recount the story of some Lebanese historians who were betting on photo-finish horse-race photographs. It also allegorically forces the audience to consider whether the violent events represented were actually experienced by those who lived them.

The cross-cultural implications of this radical questioning of archival truth become obvious when watching the so-called *Bachar Tapes*. The fifty-three videotapes form another file of the Atlas Group archives. Only two are available to a Western audience. They serve as a testimony to the experiences of Souheil Bachar, a Lebanese man claiming to be a sixth hostage held in captivity with five American men in Lebanon during the hostage crisis of the early 1980s (fig. 19 and 20).

164 Walid Ra’ad, Interview with Alan Gilbert, *BOMB Magazine* 81 (2002), 24 Nov. 2016 <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2504/walid-ra-ad>>.

Figure 18: Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars, 1999.



Whereas the captivity memoirs written by American ex-hostages, such as Terry A. Anderson's *Den of Lions* (1994)¹⁶⁵ or Tom Sutherland's *At Your Own Risk* (1996),¹⁶⁶ primarily represent the experience of captivity as a completely depoliticized individual phenomenon without prequel, Bachar insists on laying bare the concrete pretexts and contexts of the American presence in the Middle East as well as the motives of

165 Terry A. Anderson, *Den of Lions: Memoirs of Seven Years* (1993; New York: Ballantine, 1994).

166 Tom Sutherland, *At Your Own Risk: An American Chronicle of Crisis and Captivity in the Middle East* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1996).

the hostage-takers. He wants to demonstrate that geopolitical and regional backgrounds, such as the Reagan administration's military support of the Israeli army during its occupation of Lebanon, are displaced systematically in Western representations. Bachar explains his counter-discursive approach of using the gaps and blind spots of Western narratives as starting points to set off his own narrative as follows:

My interest today is how this kind of experience can be documented and represented. I am convinced that the Americans have failed miserably in this regard but that in their failure they have revealed much to us about the possibilities and limits of representing the experience of captivity.¹⁶⁷

At the same time, he wants to demonstrate that the human tragedy of captivity was first and foremost a Lebanese experience. The unnamed “pest” who is described by Anderson as “worth nothing as a bargaining chip” and at whom he reports to “have snapped several times”¹⁶⁸ or the fellow-hostage christened “the Arab”¹⁶⁹ in Sutherland’s account suddenly gets a face.

Although Bachar presents himself as a reliable ex-hostage, a Lebanese or Arab audience would immediately recognize him as the well-known Lebanese TV soap actor, Fadi Abi Samra. The casting of a prominent Arab actor stresses the perceptual divide between a Western and an Arab audience. Hence, one cannot be surprised that Bachar, despite aesthetic hints and explicit statements signaling fictionality, has often been taken as a factual historical person by the Western art audience. Inventing a man who insists to tell his true story, Raad reciprocates the scripted nature of the Western hostage narrative. The clearest trope of doubling or countering the representational authority of the Western archive happens through the excessive use of dubbing and subtitling. Bachar speaks Arabic but makes clear with his first words how the narrative should be edited. Echoing the biblical creation trope, his dictates are immediately set into practice. He controls the (mis-)translation of his text into English and insists on a neutral, CNN-style female voice. The Orientalist image of the Arab as a passive, feminized other who cannot speak for himself is affirmed and, at the same time, subverted. The Arab, equally abhorred and desired, speaks through his female voice-over (the voice of the paradigmatic other, if you’d like) to the Western audience and thus seems to confirm that audience’s perception. However, the American hostages who asserted their straight identity and moral superiority in their own narratives are represented here according to

167 Souheil Bachar [Walid Raad], “Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves,” Interview with The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, *Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations Beirut/Lebanon 1*, ed. Catherine David (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002) 136.

168 Anderson, *Den of Lions: Memoirs of Seven Years* 120.

169 Sutherland, *At Your Own Risk: An American Chronicle of Crisis and Captivity in the Middle East* 167.

Figure 19: Souheil Bachar, film still (7:11 min.) from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*, Tape #17, dir. Souheil Bachar, The Atlas Group in collab. with c-hundred film corp, 2000.



Bachar's script. Mistranslations are only evident to a bi-lingual Arabic-speaking audience. Only they can follow the reversal of symbolic power when, for instance, Bachar's Arabic voice reports to have penetrated Anderson while his English voice-over explains that Anderson aroused Bachar and then punched him. The disclosure of his editorial control not only displaces truth claims but also draws attention to the act of displacement. The performative reversal of translational power is repeatedly exhibited and underlined by Raad. Asked by the artist-researcher-archivist about the reliability of his translations and their obvious contradictions, Bachar defensively answers: "Yes, I do my own translations. I have nothing to say about the second part of your second question."¹⁷⁰

Raad's project does not approach facts in their crude facticity but through the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy. The Atlas Group

170 Bachar, "Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves," Interview with The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, 125.

Figure 20: Film still (06:27 min) from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*, Tape #17, dir. Souheil Bachar, The Atlas Group in collab. with c-hundred film corp, 2000.



produces and collects objects and stories that cannot be examined through the conventional binary of fiction and nonfiction. It demonstrates that the way we construct our cross-cultural imaginaries does not do justice to the complex experiences of those imagined. Furthermore, Raad urges us to see his documents not as based on any one person's actual memories but on "fantasies erected from the material of collective memories."¹⁷¹ These documents do not function as scraps of historical evidence. The faked documents are presented as *art-facts* rather than as artefacts. Functioning as artistic traces between what is known to be true and what has to be believed from a certain political, ideological, or cultural point of view, Raad's art exposes the performative genesis of (cross-cultural) meaning: "It is also important for us to note that the truth of the documents we research does not depend solely on their factual accuracy. We are concerned with facts, but we do not view facts as self-evident objects that are already present in the world."¹⁷²

In recent years, Walid Raad's art practice has expanded upon this research-based method of the Atlas Group. The project, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007–ongoing), or the more recent work, *Preface to the First Edition* (2013–ongoing), radically questions the current dominant mode of representation and perception of

171 Gilbert, Interview with Walid Ra'ad.

172 Gilbert, Interview with Walid Ra'ad.

art in and from the Arab world. These projects explore the relation between the ideological, economic, and political dimensions of the global art market phenomenon. They ask whether and how the recent hype around and commodification of Arab and Islamic art can really help to establish representational spaces that are defined by Arab or Muslim artists and not by Western consumers. As virtual micro-expositions, they imagine and thus function as model platforms for alternative future art shows. Such artistic-curatorial platforms are explained by Raad himself as “stage-sets from a forthcoming play.”¹⁷³ The artist Raad uses the conventions of display and the modes of address associated with an authoritative curatorial voice to destabilize and to challenge dominant Western modes of representing non-Western art. He leans on and at the same time plays with these modes.

Rabih Alameddine and Walid Raad share an interest in the narrative discourse of (hi)storytelling. Their narrations take the form of a tragedy, comedy, or farce and often combine other modes of telling stories. In the two transmigrants’ works, narration is not treated as a neutral discursive form. Far from being a medium in which events, whether imaginary or real, can be represented in transparency and reliability, the narrative or performative act is presented as an expression in discourse. Their representations do not carry a message without at the same time reflecting the competing modes of experiences, the structural conditions, and the archival precedents that determine these representations. The experience of *life across* is narrated from inside and outside of the eventualities upon which these transmigrant intellectuals draw. The ideological nature of storytelling is turned into a metafictional parallel text that constantly considers the recognizability and discursive authority of the story-type chosen. The question of authenticity, originality, or truthfulness is at least postponed. Both the writer and the artist know that single archives and closed structural systems of enunciations have the tendency to (re-)produce (hetero-)normative stories, no matter how idiosyncratic and supposedly overarching they are. Exploring the mnemonic power of narrative queer-steps or audio-visual snapshots, they multiply archival dissonance. At the same time, their praxeology of narrative truth goes decisively beyond what has been variously described as the counter-discursive or dialogical imagination. Foucault’s notion of the archive and his celebration of modern literature and art as counter-discourse¹⁷⁴ cannot sufficiently explain the particular cross-cultural practice at work here. Neither can it be fully grasped with Bakhtin’s important evidence that in novelistic

173 “Walid Ra’ad—Scratching on Things I Could Disavow,” *Kunstaspekte* July 2007, 22 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?action=termin&tid=52070>>.

174 Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (*L’archéologie du savoir*, 1969; tr. 1972; London: Routledge, 2002) 142-50 and Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archeology of the Human Sciences (Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, 1966; trans. 1970; London: Routledge, 2002) 48.

writing “every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.”¹⁷⁵

In my view, any archaeology of the dialogic production and dissemination of Anglophone Arab meaning must consider the specific relational dynamics constricting the interpretation of words and images when the Arab subject speaks. Therefore, if one wants to name a specific Anglophone Arab stamping of the general *Archive Fever*¹⁷⁶ in contemporary literature and the arts, it probably lies in a poetics that incorporates the ideological and moral ambiguity of working across archives, Arab and non-Arab alike. It is my argument that such poetics can help one to allegorically imagine the as of yet all too often unimaginable correlation of mutually excluding archives.

5.3 Palestinian *Parkours*—Matters of (F)Act: Occupation, Deterritorialization, and Cultural Resistance

Emily Jacir is a Palestinian activist-artist. Born in 1970 in Bethlehem, in the occupied Palestinian territories, she grew up in Saudi Arabia, Italy, and the US, where she received a degree from the Memphis College of Art. Since 2006, she has taught at the International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah. Today she divides her time between Rome, Ramallah, and New York City. The transmigrant artist grew up well aware of the representations and misrepresentations of the Palestinian people, of their individual life stories, and collective history. Like other transmigrant Palestinian intellectuals, Jacir incorporates the insights gained from her experience of the cross-cultural dissemination of meaning into her own mode of artistic production. Therefore, the dilemma of mutually excluding systems of evidence (of competing archives) is at the core of her work.

Jacir first caused a stir in the New York City art scene when, in 2000, she placed her Christmas postcards (fig. 21) in Manhattan’s small stationery stores, thus smuggling the continuing actuality of military occupation into the aesthetics of the US Christmas industry, and again in 2001, with her refugee tent project *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages* (fig. 22), which traced the depopulation of Palestine in both a historical and a contemporary context. In the meantime, her art was afforded a space in high-profile international venues such as the Documenta, the Whitney Biennale, and the Venice Biennale.

Since 2005, Jacir has worked on the long-term concept and performance project, *Material for a Film*. The multimedia work is dedicated to the remembrance

175 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 280.

176 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

Figure 21: Emily Jacir, *Christmas 2000*, Christmas greeting card, c-print, 2000.



of the Palestinian activist, poet, writer, and translator, Wael Zuaiter (fig. 23), who was killed at the age of 38 by Mossad agents in Rome on October 16, 1972. While the PLO representative himself had always renounced political violence against civilians, he was suspected of being a member of the militant group, Black September, responsible for the Munich massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Summer Olympics. His murder marked the beginning of a series of secret retaliation attacks and assassinations perpetrated by Israeli intelligence against Palestinian activists in the Western diaspora. The details of what really happened in Rome have never been clarified.

Although the Israeli journalist, Aaron J. Klein, stated in his 2005 publication, *Striking Back*, that Zuaiter was seen by the Mossad as a terrorist merely posing as

Figure 22: Emely Jacir, *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948, Refugee tent and embroidery thread*, 2001. Installation View Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, 2003.



a moderate intellectual and that he consequently became the so-called “first man down”¹⁷⁷ of the Mossad’s counter-terrorism operations, the Israeli government has to this day denied any involvement. It was neither Klein’s real-life spy drama of Zuaiter’s murder nor its random filmic visualization in Steven Spielberg’s 2005 movie, *Munich*,¹⁷⁸ that spurred Jacir to present a Palestinian narrative but rather these as well as other Western depictions’ lack of detail and background regarding Zuaiter’s actual life. The main source and conceptual starting point of her documentary allegory is *Per un palestinese*,¹⁷⁹ an Italian anthology of tribute essays, poems, interviews, memoirs, and drawings edited in 1979 by Zuaiter’s spouse, Janet

177 Aaron J. Klein, *Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and Israel’s Deadly Response* (New York: Random House, 2005) 117.

178 *Munich*, dir. Steven Spielberg, screenplay Tony Kushner, Eric Roth, Universal Pictures & DreamWorks Pictures, 2005. Warner Bros, 1973.

179 Janet Venn-Brown, ed., *Per un palestinese. Dediche a più voci a Wael Zuaiter* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1979).

Figure 23: Portrait of Wael Zuaiter, detail from Emily Jacir's *Material for a Film*. Mixed media installation, 2005–ongoing. Here, installation at the Central Pavilion at the Giardini, 52nd Venice Biennial, 2007.



Venn-Brown. The anthology's English translation was published in 1984.¹⁸⁰ In one of its chapters, Elio Petri, a neorealist film director, and Ugo Pirro, a novelist and screenplay writer, elaborate on their plan to produce a documentary about Zuaiter's life. They present their scripts of conversations with persons who knew Zuaiter in Rome under the title "Material for a Film."¹⁸¹ The writers, artists, filmmakers, and journalists interviewed consistently assert that he categorically rejected violence. In fact, Zuaiter was never conclusively linked to the Olympics' murders. It seems that he was eliminated rather because he was a pioneer in trying to tell the Palestinian story to the world from a Palestinian point of view, an eloquent and well-connected spokesperson for the Palestinian cause in Europe. Pirro's premature death brought the film project to an end; it was never realized.

180 Janet Venn-Brown, ed., *For a Palestinian: A Memorial to Wael Zuaiter* (London: Kegan Paul, 1984).

181 Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro, "Material for a Film," *For a Palestinian: A Memorial to Wael Zuaiter*, ed. Janet Venn-Brown (London: Kegan Paul, 1984) 75-116.

Almost thirty years later, coinciding with the 35th commemoration of Zuaiter's assassination, a diasporic Palestinian investigation that takes up Pirro's idea of shedding light on the lost and obscured fragments of Zuaiter's life was awarded the Venice Biennale's prestigious Golden Lion. At first glance, Jacir's ongoing artistic research simply collects and exhibits historical documents with the aim of narrating an individual life story that has not been told. Her installations combine Zuaiter's private items, press photographs, news clippings, interview transcripts, video footage, as well as a film sequence of Zuaiter's featured part in Peter Sellers's 1963 movie, *The Pink Panther*. At the same time, this ongoing homage stands for the claims of memory related to the marginalized experiences of numerous Palestinian exiles.¹⁸² *Material for a Film* is as much about the Palestinian people as it is about one man.

I do, however, believe that there is more at stake in this project: Jacir's accumulation of documents related to Zuaiter's life story has all the trappings of the documentary genre. While each of her objects sheds light on another biographical fragment or contextual aspect, her retelling of the personal history willingly exposes the archival violence involved in the production of historical evidence. This particular quality of Jacir's work can be best illustrated with her 2006 performance at the Sydney Biennale. When Zuaiter was assassinated in Rome, he carried with him the second volume of an Arab edition of the *Arabian Nights* (fig. 24, 25). Since all available Italian editions were translations from European versions, the Palestinian intellectual was working on a new, direct Italian translation of the Arabic classic. According to the artist, Zuaiter's Arabic copy was perforated by a 22-caliber bullet. The Sydney performance of *Material for a Film* picks up precisely this deadly end to a failed cross-cultural transfer of the *Nights*—the failed translation of a text that has influenced Western misrepresentations and perceptions of the Arab world probably more than any other narrative.

During her Sydney performance, Jacir fired a gun at 1,000 blank-paged books (fig. 26). In the installation that followed, she exhibited these perforated empty carriers of meaning together with the single pages ripped out of what was presented as Zuaiter's original copy. The 1,000 blank pages clearly symbolize the thousands of Palestinian stories that have not been written (fig. 27). However, beyond the particular tragedy of Zuaiter's murder and other Palestinians' cruel fates, the performance work addresses the complex interrelation between physical power and representational validity in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The failed translation of *Arabian Nights* reminds us that the cross-cultural translation of stories, just like telling histories, is by no means an ideologically neutral undertaking. As Jorge Borges elaborates in his 1936 essay on "The Translators of *The Thousand and One*

182 Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007).

Figure 24: Wael Zuaiter's corpse after his assassination in Rome on 16 October 1972; detail from Jacir's mixed media Installation Material for a Film, 2005–ongoing.



Nights,¹⁸³ translation (any translation) is necessarily a mistranslation: a polemical act of translating against other translations, of imposing one's interpretation over another and thus outdoing other translators. In this view, Jacir's performance symbolically re-enacts the violent prevention of a strategic and, maybe, polemic Palestinian translation. It performs the deadly prevention of the resistive appropriation of the *Nights* by a Palestinian activist-intellectual. The particular symbolism at work here combines the Palestinian experience of violence with the Shahrazadian trope of resistance and the Borgesian notion of translating against.

Re-enacting the violent suspension of an emancipatory Palestinian self-representation, the Sydney performance broaches an issue that is at the core of the Palestinian experience: the denial of Palestinians' memory, the erasure of their archives, and the silencing of their voices. In this context, it is worth recalling that Edward Said's seminal 1984 essay, "Permission to Narrate,"¹⁸⁴ was written as a direct consequence of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the destruction of the PLO research center and archives in Beirut. According to Said, Palestinian history has been oc-

183 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," 92-109.

184 Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13.3 (1984): 27-48.

Figure 25: Arabic edition of the *Arabian Nights*; detail from Jacir's mixed media installation *Material for a Film*, 2005–ongoing.



cluded to the point that Palestinians “are invisible people.”¹⁸⁵ Therefore, the very act of creating and circulating a narrative or an image that proves the existence of Palestinians becomes a form of political resistance: “Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain, and circulate them.”¹⁸⁶ Said’s argument has inspired numerous writers and film makers, who created what Hamid Dabashi coined Palestinian “aesthetic of the invisible.”¹⁸⁷ *Ma-*

185 “A One-State Solution, KGNU, Boulder, Colorado, February 8, 1999,” *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said*, by David Barsamian and Edward Said (Cambridge, MA: South End P, 2003) 20.

186 Said, “Permission to Narrate,” 34.

187 Hamid Dabashi, Introduction, *Dreams of a Nation* (London: Verso, 2006) 18.

Figure 26: Emily Jacir, *Material for a Film*, performance 1000 blank books shot, 2006. Biennale of Sydney, Zones of Contact, 8 June–27 August 2006.



Material for a Film is influenced by this aesthetic attempt to make visible what has been hidden. In addition, Jacir's project can be linked to the trans-local resistance strategy of the Palestinian novelist and theorist, Ghassan Kanafani. Until his murder in 1972, the editor of the Beirut-based magazine, *Al-Hadaf*, called upon Palestinians to first analyze how representational regulations affect the almost unconditional acceptance of military occupation and to then take the local struggle for liberation into the civic domain of Western representation. Jacir's work draws on both Kanafani's concept of resistance literature (*adab al-muqawama*) and Said's permission-to-narrate imperative. It documents, preserves, and narrates the Palestinian experience.

However, as a work of performance art, *Material for a Film* transgresses the morality of counter-truth that dominates the traditional Palestinian resistance paradigm of writing or narrating back. It resists the dominant demand to explain to the world who or what Palestinians really are, to show to the world that they exist. Similar to the documents of the Atlas Group, Jacir's documents do not

Figure 27: Emily Jacir, *Material for a Film*, mixed media installation, Biennale of Sydney, Zones of Contact, 8 June–27 August 2006.



function simply as scraps of historical truth. Having witnessed the performative production of the perforated blank pages, we cannot know if the artist is manipulating her other materials as well. In order to interpret this work, one needs to acknowledge first of all that one is confronted with *matters of act* rather than with matters of fact, with *Tat-Sachen*, in German, rather than with *Tatsachen*. The Sydney performance explicitly stages the difference between the two. Jacir's work does not simply narrate Palestinian truths against hegemonic histories, thus leading to the contrapuntal harmony of an extended archive. Archival dissonance is not dissolved into any higher order. Her performative acts and conceptual exhibitions function as reminders that real experiences sometimes need to be re-formed or even perforated in order to be believed by others. The project creatively adapts and then extends the Saidian insight that facts do not speak for themselves: It explores both the procedures of memory and the strategies of making meaningful statements. The respective performative approach in an attempt to arrive at an *objective* view of a lost or obscured truth is not that of maximum detachment, in the Freudian sense, but of personal and subjective re-attachment.

Jacir seems to be more preoccupied with the modality of art as a fictocritical practice that constantly tests the capacity of art to control and extend meaning through form making. Her aesthetics of resistive re-presentation simultaneously functions as a poetics of artistic research.¹⁸⁸ It explores the representational regulation of a socio-political and historical phenomenon (the Palestinian cause) rather than its aesthetic display. Her aesthetics is an aesthetics of *formativity*,¹⁸⁹ not of form. It sets focus on the performative invention and production of forms that can or cannot tell the truth. It does not search for the beauty of truth but requires a dynamic rethinking and interpreting of our all too often static certainties regarding what is true and beautiful. In such artistic production, there is almost no vision outside the forming action itself.

Occasionally, Jacir's performative acts of controlling the relation between a historical event and its signification come along with an angry or even violent mood. Some might interpret her Sydney shooting as an act of artistic revenge. At other times, one gets the impression that the artist herself implicitly argues for a post-moralistic understanding of lies, as if she is saying that, within the Palestinian struggle, the powerful Israeli and Western lies need to be countered by lies of the Palestinians' own making. One should not forget that *Material for a Film* not only traces history but performs acute expressions within a concrete historical moment. Given the continuity of military occupation, settlement, and refugee tragedies, the project seems to argue that (factual historical) events matter little and that only stories of these events affect the world. The project indicates the emergence of new Palestinian strategies of cultural resistance. It allegorically suggests that what is assumingly *indeed* can only have an emancipatory effect in the world after it has been turned into an activity—only when it is *in deed*.¹⁹⁰

This should not be misinterpreted as an artistic call to arms. Nevertheless, *Material for a Film* might encourage a post-moral understanding of strategic lies and a refusal to be repressed by what the London activist poet Sean Bonney calls “police re-

188 On the artist as researcher, see Janneke Wesseling, ed., *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011).

189 I borrow the notion of formativity (*formatività*) from Luigi Pareyson's theory of artistic production. See Luigi Pareyson, “Art: Performance and Interpretation,” *Existence, Interpretation, Freedom: Selected Writings*, by Luigi Pareyson, ed. Paolo Diego Bubbio, trans. Anna Mattei (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2009) 114-40. On Pareyson's concept of performativity, see also Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cagnoni (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 158-60 and Edward Arthur Lippman, Rev. of *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, by Luigi Pareyson, *The Journal of Philosophy* 52.25 (1955): 791-96.

190 I borrow the fine but important differentiation between the meaning of “indeed” and “in deed” from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Scene I.V. 6-16. Here, the eunuch Mardian has not “in deed” affections because he can do nothing. See *The Riverside Shakespeare* 1353. I thank Marga Munkelt for this hint!

ality.”¹⁹¹ When Ugo Pirro asked Janet Venn-Brown about her assassinated partner’s reliability—“Did he also tell lies? Perhaps poetic ones?”—she answered in a quite evasive, yet significant way: “I wouldn’t call them lies; let us say romanticisms.”¹⁹² Against the background of this statement, it seems legitimate to argue that Jacir’s project encapsulates a poetics of post-romantic lies rather than an ethic of counter-truths. Such poetics is romantic in so far as it draws on the radical impulses of romanticisms (note the plural form!). *Material for a Film* is carried by a poetics of an equally active *and* activist romanticism.¹⁹³

The concept and performance project can be placed within a particular strand of cultural resistance that struggles against invisibility and that can be traced back at least to the resistance literature of the 1960s. It is spurred by a lack of exposure regarding one Palestinian’s life. Although it is concerned with exploring the collective meaning of this individual tragedy artistically, *Material for a Film* aims at more than charting spaces for speaking Palestinian truths to power or narrating a collective experience against the hegemonic Western/Israeli denial of that very experience. This is an archival documentary allegory which explores the dense relation between power and representational validity—a relation that prefigures the Palestinians’ present struggle for justice. It is precisely this double-movement of shifting a local emancipatory struggle to the global (art) market while at the same time exploring the conditions of the (im)possibility of effectively doing so that is characteristic for the recent transformation within transnational cultural resistance. Whether from within or from outside Palestine, this conceptual shift is carried decisively by many recent Anglophone works, the approaches of which go beyond older notions of resistance represented by activist-intellectuals such as Ghassan Kanafani or Edward Said.

I want to use the remaining pages of this chapter to selectively explore these works’ inherent frictions of truth and fiction with a particular focus on the questions of space, place, and (im)mobility. A spatial or geocritical approach to contemporary Anglophone Palestinian representation is almost inevitable. Given the geography of occupation and the spatial politics of its implementation,¹⁹⁴ a blind

191 Sean Bonney, “Minds do exist to agitate and provoke / this is the reason I do not conform”—Anna Mendelssohn,” *The Poetry Project Newsletter* (Feb./Mar. 2011): 17, <http://poetryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/PP_Newsletter_226_reduced.pdf>.

192 Janet Venn-Brown, “Material for a Film,” Interview with Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro, *For a Palestinian: A Memorial to Wael Zwaiter*, ed. Janet Venn-Brown (London: Kegan Paul, 1984) 80.

193 On the notion of active romanticism in the context of poetry, see Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson, “Introduction: Active Romanticism,” *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice*, eds. Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2015) 1-16.

194 On how the land of occupied Palestine has been hollowed out by Israel’s politics of space, see Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007).

celebration of cultural mobility in the age of globalization is in every sense of the words out of place.¹⁹⁵ Instead, there is an urgent need to blatantly address the violently adjusted fixity and rigid compartmentalization of Palestinian lives under occupation. The literary and artistic representations that I discuss in the following pages do exactly that. But they do so without accepting the given spatial order and its social impacts as a permanent state. While it is true that Israel's politics of occupation implement the separation of human space, one cannot talk about contemporary cultural resistance without also considering the artistic invention of alternative spaces and new ways of crossing borders: spaces of local and global transgression, real spaces of representation, as well as spatial imaginaries that question the logics of separation, resistive walks, unexpected routes, and courageous *parkours*:

A man going on a *sarha* wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. But not any excursion would qualify as a *sarha*. Going on a *sarha* implies letting go. It is a drug-free high, Palestinian style.¹⁹⁶

Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* was published in 2007. Shehadeh is a Palestinian lawyer, writer, and human rights activist who lives in the West Bank city of Ramallah. In 1979, after returning from his studies in England, he co-founded *Al-Haq* [truth, law, right of property, claim], an independent Palestinian non-governmental human rights organization based in Ramallah. He worked with *Al-Haq* as co-director until 1991, when he left the organization to pursue a literary career. Shehadeh is the author of several non-fictional studies on international law, humanitarian law, and the question of Palestine, such as *The West Bank and the Rule of Law* (1980), *Occupier's Law: Israel and the West Bank* (1985), and *From Occupation to Interim Accords: Israel and the Palestinian Territories* (1997). He was awarded the Orwell Prize in 2008 for his *Palestinian Walks*.

As I have mentioned earlier in this book, among the first Palestinian writers who decided to write in English in order to reach a global audience, to globalize the Palestinian question, was Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. From the late 1960s onwards, an increasing number of autobiographies, memoirs, and other sub-genres of self-narration have told the Palestinian story to the West in English, with or without the claim of collective representativeness, ranging from Fawaz Turki's *The Disinherited* (1972)¹⁹⁷ to Edward W. Said's *Out of Place* (1999). Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks* can be placed within this tradition of Anglophone Palestinian writing. At the same

195 See, on this over-totalizing trend, for instance, Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

196 Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (London: Profile Books, 2007) 2.

197 Fawaz Turki, *The Disinherited. Journal of a Palestinian Exile* (New York: Monthly Review P, 1972).

time, however, it marks a unique generic transgression. The text is a hybrid of a mimicry of the travel guide, an impossible travel memoir, a personal (anti-)travelogue, transporting the English-speaking reader into Palestine's shrinking geography of occupation, and a collection of political meditations commenting on the pitfall of the so-called peace process and its aftermath. The account of six essayistic-literary *sarhat* [walks; plural form of *sarha*] takes the reader on a hike through what remains of Palestine to expose the increasing impossibility of unrestricted wandering in the occupied territories.

Palestinian Walks is both fictional and documentary in style. With his personal journal, *The Third Way*,¹⁹⁸ published in 1980, Shehadeh had already crossed the genre borders between non-fiction and auto-fiction. Arguing that the occupation's ultimate aim is to encourage Palestinians to leave and to be replaced by Israeli settlers, he concludes that, as a precaution, Palestinians have to do everything, despite all material difficulties, to stay put on the land. He calls this *as-sumud*, which translates as perseverance, steadfastness, or simply staying in place. Derived from the verbal form *samada* [to proudly raise one's head], the term, as used in Palestinian national discourse, designates a non-violent strategy of resisting occupation by staying in Palestine and keeping daily life going, thus physically and morally affirming the collective Palestinian presence and future claims. In the realms of cultural practice and education, it refers to the relentless persistence of narrating the Palestinian experience, preserving its heritage, and struggling for human dignity.

Palestinian Walks can be read as precisely such an act of *sumud*. Using the Western genre of travel memoirs as a negative matrix, the auto-narrator of real, impossible, and imagined walks knows well that Palestine was long seen by Europeans and Americans as a desolate land without a people. As he is fully aware that Palestine has been constantly reinvented in Western travelogues, with devastating consequences for its inhabitants, he also knows that the justification for and legitimization of its colonization was laid down in so-called Holy Land travel accounts: British, German, and American pilgrimage narratives written in the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁹⁹ Shehadeh's accounts attempt to refuse these imperial spatial ideologies.

His travels cross no continents. The narrator of *Palestinian Walks* hardly manages to cross hills and valleys. Searching for Palestine's present space-time, Shehadeh's text runs counter to the world of imperial maps, military maps, or tourist maps, for that matter. The text itself resembles a *sarha*, meandering from the hills of Ramallah to family history, into the Palestinian past, and finally into the present situation. Unlike space in the accounts of past travel writers, Shehadeh's space is full

198 See Raja Shehadeh, *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank* (London: Quartet, 1982).

199 Mona Kattaya, "Writing the 'Real Jerusalem': British and American Travel Accounts in the Nineteenth Century," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 44 (2010): 14-27.

of people. Each sarha *walks* the reader through different and multifaceted aspects of occupation, from the draining of the Dead Sea for the irrigation of settlement lands to the pouring of concrete over the hills to support Israel's expanding industrial zones to the wall that not only isolates communities but also destroys land and livelihood. The social landscape, thus robbed of natural innocence, provides solace only next to grief, freedom only coupled with imprisonment, and sanctity never without danger.

One such walk begins with a recapitulation of how the hills of the West Bank have been turned into Jewish settlements. It describes the scattered, noncontiguous areas of land with which Palestinians are left today that cannot possibly constitute the basis of any viable state. Closures of roads force them to use unpaved side-tracks. The large number of checkpoints and obstacles placed by the Israeli army on West Bank roads further complicates daily life. The auto-narrator describes Palestinians as a people moving surreptitiously in their own country, like unwanted strangers, constantly harassed, never feeling safe, subject to the most abusive treatment at the hands of the soldiers controlling the checkpoints. These constraints of the ghetto life experienced in the cities of the occupied territories are reinforced by the so-called security wall:

The most destructive development, which boded only misery and spelled continued conflict for the future, was the wall being constructed by Israel. This stretched in a jagged course that was determined not only by Israeli military considerations but also by the special interests of settlers and land mafia lords, slicing through the hills, destroying their natural shape, gulping large swathes of Palestinian land.²⁰⁰

Still, the Palestinian narrator is determined that none of these humiliations is going to prevent him from taking his walks. Very good weather in spring 2006 adds further motivation. While preparing for the walk, he suddenly remembers an experience he had some months earlier when driving back from the Jordan valley and getting lost in the midst of newly built settlements and industrial zones. The further he drives in his memories, the more the reader is immersed in the narrator's claustrophobic feelings of disorientation and fear: "As a child I had a recurring nightmare in which I found myself in a strange place unable to find my way home. I would try to shout for help only to realize that I had no voice. This felt like a similar situation. I began to sweat. Where was I?"²⁰¹ He finally manages to find a way out of the settlement. The narrative leads us out of this memory back to the man's primary intention of taking a walk. However, there are other barriers to consider before the repeatedly postponed spring hike can begin. Due

200 Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* 190.

201 Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* 191.

to newly built bypass roads, finding a track “without settlers or practice shooters or army posts”²⁰² becomes a challenge. Reluctantly consulting an odious map, the auto-narrator finally works out a route to a hill that promises to avoid settlements and army posts alike. On his way, he reaches a beautiful natural spring site. There the Palestinian, who has tried to avoid any encounter with the occupiers, comes upon an armed settler smoking weed. A direct address by the younger Israeli man makes quickly slipping by impossible. The two get involved in a conversation which soon turns into an intense argument over questions of nature preservation, civilizational progress, ignorance and prejudice, Arab-Jewish (non-)neighborhood in past and present, mutual violence, property rights and compensation claims, and international law.

When the auto-narrator intends to leave, the settler calls after him to stop and join in a smoke: “It felt more like an order which the law, his law, gave him the power to enforce. I feared for the worse.”²⁰³ The passionate political hiker suspects a violent escalation of the situation and feels guilty of symbolic cooperation with the occupier. However, the strong opiated hashish takes effect. After the narrator is once more flooded back into the memory of another walk that ends in shootings by the police of the Palestinian Authority, the unintended Palestinian-Israeli encounter turns into an almost surreal moment of intimacy. The two seemingly agree to ignore their dissonant positions and discrepant positionalities. Yet the intoxicated vision of transgression and coexistence only lasts for a while before it is disturbed by the distant sounds of violent segregation:

I was fully aware of the looming tragedy and war that lay ahead for both of us, Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jew. But for now, he and I could sit together for a respite, for a smoke, joined temporarily by our mutual love of the land. Shots could be heard in the distance, which made us both shiver. “Yours or ours?” I asked.²⁰⁴

There is little optimism in this auto-narrative. There is no hero who takes risks to change reality. There is no self-victimization. These are the accounts of an ordinary Palestinian man who insists on continuing his rather privileged middle-class life as a free citizen and hiker. However, the experiences that he has on his walks are the epitome of a human tragedy which has long been unfolding on his land. If there are moments of optimistic trust in the shared humanity of all individuals involved in this conflict, these moments are quickly distorted by the violence on the ground. The same is true for Shehadeh’s earlier diary-based semi-fictional writings, such as

202 Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* 193.

203 Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* 205.

204 Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* 207.

Strangers in the House (2002),²⁰⁵ *The Sealed Room* (1992),²⁰⁶ or *When the Birds Stopped Singing* (2003).²⁰⁷

Occupation Diaries (2012),²⁰⁸ a rather recent collection of personal essays and anecdotes, can no longer modulate its inherent anger through walks, natural observations, or hashish visions. Like *Palestinian Walks*, these essays extend beyond the political domain into the private and psychological sphere. *Occupation Diaries* is an angry book that defies both standard Western liberal support for the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli agenda of occupation. It spans a two-year period, from December 2009 to December 2011, covering major events such as the 2011 Nakba Day, on which thousands of Palestinian and Syrian youths marched to the border of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, the killing of nine solidarity activists on board the Mavi Marama in May 2010, as well as the everyday experiences of a Palestinian living in Ramallah. However, Shehadeh criticizes not only Israel's continuing policy of occupation; the Palestinian Authority is also blamed for establishing what he sees as a "police state."²⁰⁹ The general fragmentation and deterioration of Palestinian civil society is related to an economic pseudo-boom fueled by international aid. Shehadeh condemns this development as a "scheme devised by European and US funders, a policy of anti-insurgency."²¹⁰ Yet, against all despair at the duplicity of repression by the Israeli army and the Palestinian Authority and the apathy of the international community, Shehadeh expresses a strong perseverance to resist and stay in Palestine: "we have no intention of going anywhere."²¹¹

Palestinian cultural articulations in English serve multiple functions: they are testimonies, forms of self-identification, and transnational calls for political mobilization. They are not simply about the transformative power of culture to liberate Palestine from occupation but about resisting representational annihilation. They strategically transgress the distinction between collective testimony in national literature and individual self-narration as well as the linguistic barriers between Arabic as a local idiom and English as a transnational communicational tool.

In this context, one cannot be surprised that the World Wide Web has increasingly been used by Palestinians to communicate with each other and people around the globe and thus to transgress both internal and external borders. Internet cafes

205 Raja Shehadeh, *Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine* (London: Profile, 2002).

206 Raja Shehadeh, *The Sealed Room: Selections from the Diary of a Palestinian Living Under Israeli Occupation, September 1990–August 1991* (London: Quartet, 1992).

207 Raja Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing: Life in Ramallah Under Siege* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth P, 2003).

208 Raja Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries* (London: Profile Books, 2012).

209 Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries* 86.

210 Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries* 43.

211 Shehadeh, *Occupation Diaries* 204.

exist in most Palestinian cities and refugee camps, and Palestinian counter-journalists use the internet to report their otherwise unheard news and perspectives. Many platforms are in English or are bi-lingual, allowing messages to reach a Western audience. Numerous websites have published regular eyewitness reports from the West Bank and Gaza, where Israeli forces deny journalists access to Palestinian areas under attack. The Electronic Intifada is one example of these transnational platforms of activism. It is an independent online news publication and educational resource focusing on Palestine, its people, politics, culture, and its place in the world. Founded in 2001, it is based in both Ramallah and Chicago. The Electronic Intifada has won awards and earned widespread recognition for publishing original, high-quality news and analysis and first-person accounts. Writers and journalists working for this web project include Palestinians and non-Palestinians living inside and outside Palestine and Israel. As one of its co-founders explains, the web project originated on Birzeit University's website, with Said's imperative of representational resistance in mind: "Birzeit's web team set about creating our own realisation of the 'permission to narrate'."²¹² The project came to life as a direct reaction to the September 1996 uprisings, when Birzeit students not only witnessed the harsh Israeli military violence, which ultimately claimed 88 Palestinian lives, but also felt powerless regarding the misrepresentation of the events in Israeli and Western mass media. This experience gave birth to the website, *On the Ground*, and a variety of similar projects. When the Second Intifada broke out in 2000, many of those who worked on the Birzeit website regrouped to compile the *September 2000 Clashes Information Center* website; one year later, *The Electronic Intifada* was born.²¹³ Arjan El Fassed and his cofounders, Ali Abunimah, Laurie King-Irani, and Nigel Parry, aim at enabling a growing network of human rights and media activists to challenge the distortions about Palestinians and their rights disseminated by various official Israeli media and media outlets throughout Europe and North America. The Internet has become a key new arena of narrative resistance.

The Electronic Intifada's *Diaries: Live from Palestine* project represents one important sub-field of this arena.²¹⁴ Created in March 2002 as sub-site within the Electronic Intifada's website, it provides writers with a space in which to record their opinions and reflections on their own experiences of living under occupation. Updated regularly, this citizens' source contains on-the-ground accounts and photographs by individuals, including doctors, aid workers, human rights activists,

212 Nigel Parry, "Permission to Narrate: Edward Said, Palestine, and the Internet," *The Electronic Intifada* 25 Sept. 2003, 20 Jan. 2016 <<https://electronicintifada.net/content/permission-narrate-edward-said-palestine-and-internet/4789>>.

213 *The Electronic Intifada*, ed. Ali Abunimah, Maureen Clare Murphy, Nora Barrows-Friedman, David Cronin et al. <<https://electronicintifada.net/>>.

214 "Diaries: Live from Palestine," *The Electronic Intifada* 19 Jan. 2016 <<https://electronicintifada.net/diaries>>.

and anyone else who has managed to get access to the Internet—and this despite repeated power cuts and curfews. The entries are often personal and private, sometimes emotional and literary, and regularly pedestrian. Residents upload their entries from home or Internet cafes, making their narratives immediately available to a wider, international, English-reading audience. Instead of lobbying the media, citizens confined to their homes in Ramallah, Nablus, Bethlehem, Gaza, and other places essentially become the media. The 2003 edited volume, *Live From Palestine: International and Palestinian Direct Action Against the Israeli Occupation*, contains essays by net-activists of the Electronic Intifada as well as reprints of diary entries.²¹⁵ Among those prominent figures who, until very recently, contributed to the Diaries project is Raja Shehadeh.

Whether on the internet, in published writings, or in the audio-visual spheres of art, the struggle of representational resistance is inextricably entwined with the experience of spatial restrictions related to the Palestinian geography of occupation. The anger, restlessness, frustration, and pain of forced segregation and walled immobility is depicted in feature movies like Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002)²¹⁶ as well as in video-works of a younger generation of Palestinian artists. Whereas *Divine Intervention* tells the tragic-comic love story of a couple that meets at military checkpoints and can only escape from the unbearable pressures of living under occupation through surreal dreams of unobstructed border-crossings and magic imaginations of Palestinian almightiness (fig. 28),²¹⁷ the Anglo-phone Palestinian-Russian artist, Larissa Sansour, expresses the violent limitation of Palestinian mobility by using the German 1998 film, *Run Lola Run* (*Lola rennt*), as a bitterly ironic matrix.²¹⁸ While the German Lola (played by actor Franka Potente in red-colored hair) runs in a new German capital city that finally got rid of its cold war separation wall, the red-helmeted Palestinian woman (played by the artist herself) in Sansour's 2008 short video, *Run Lara Run*,²¹⁹ is constantly forced to stop in front of the many fences and walls of the occupied West Bank (fig. 29).

Not all Palestinians have the material resources to transform the absence of freedom of movement into an act of internationally acknowledged art. The traceurs (those who practice parkour) of the Parkour Gaza Team²²⁰ instead use their bodies

215 Nancy Stohlman and Laurieann Aladin, *Live from Palestine: International and Palestinian Direct Action against the Israeli Occupation* (Cambridge, MA: South End P, 2003).

216 *Divine Intervention*, dir. Elia Suleiman, screenplay Elia Suleiman, perf. Elia Suleiman, Manal Khader, Avatar Films, 2002, DVD.

217 On the cinema of Elia Suleiman, see Dabashi, *Dreams of a Nation* 131–60.

218 *Lola rennt*, dir. Tom Tykwer, screenplay Tom Tykwer, perf. Franka Potente, Moritz Bleibtreu, 1998, DVD.

219 Larissa Sansour, *Run Lara Run* (2008), *Resistance[s]: Experimental Films from the Middle East and North Africa, Vol. III* (Paris: Lowawe, CNC, 2010) DVD.

220 See the group's website, *Gaza Parkour Team*, 27 June 2015 < <http://www.actionsportsfordev.org/partners/gaza-parkour-and-freerunning-gaza/>>.

Figure 28: Film still from Elia Suleiman's 92 min. film *Divine Intervention*, 2002. The sequence shows the main protagonist E's Palestinian Ninja fighter fantasy.



to run free (fig. 30). Founded in 2005 after the withdrawal of the Israeli army, this is, to my knowledge, the oldest organized parkour team in Palestine. Unlike most traceurs of the Western metropolises, the group directly links its sport of overcoming obstacles in its own post-/war urban setting to the political goal of liberation. Mediated into the world via internet, its members' free-running practice adapts the free-style philosophy of getting from one point to another as quickly and efficiently as possible to a situation where free movement is virtually impossible. What is elsewhere the imitation of a matter of survival here advances to an expression of survival within the prison-like situation of the so-called Gaza strip. Drawing on military training, parkour was innovated by French free runners in the 1990s as a cultural lifestyle of athletic performance. In Palestine, this performance functions as a cultural act of *sumud*: an act that transposes a unique poiesis of resistance.²²¹

Practicing parkour in Gaza might seem surreal to some. Yet it is not the act but the repressive conditions under which it takes place that make this performative practice seem unreal. In my view, it is precisely the hyper-real dimension of the Gaza Parkour team's performances that allows reading this cultural practice as one of spatial resistance. Against this background, I wish to close this chapter with an

221 On Parkour as a cultural practice, see Michael Atkinson, "Parkour, Anarcho-Environmentalism, and Poiesis," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 33.2 (2009): 169-94.

Figure 29: Film still from Larissa Sansour's 2:17 min. video, *Run Lara Run*, 2008.



equally extreme and sad representation of Palestinian deterritorialization, a filmic hyper-compensation of repressed powerlessness that willingly loses control over its feet on the ground.

From the outset, Larissa Sansour's 2009 mixed-media installation, *A Space Exodus*, eludes the question of whether there has ever been or will be a Palestinian on the moon. Born in Jerusalem in 1973, Sansour lived in Copenhagen for ten years and is now based in London. She regularly works in Bethlehem, Palestine. The activist-artist grew up well aware of the reductive meaning of truth when it comes to the representation of the Palestinian people and of the so-called peace process in international mass media. Her installation combines a video clip,²²² still photos from the video, and sculptures of little Palestinian astronauts (Palestinonauts) taking over the installation's space. The audiovisual work presents an impossible alternative (or anti-alternative) to both the one-state and the two-state solutions. It does so at a particular historical moment, after extended interim periods and multiple interrupted roadmaps which have manifested a final status of continuing occupation and expanding settlements—a moment in which many Palestinians, in Palestine

222 Larissa Sansour, *A Space Exodus*, dir. and perf. Larissa Sansour, prod. Søren Lind, Beofilm, Laver Film, 2008 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tNAuSrp6tk>>.

Figure 30: Member of Gaza Parkour performing in Gaza, 2014.



as well as in exile, have given up waiting for a just solution between equals, though the international community still speaks of the need for mutual compromises.

Sansour's extraterrestrial dystopian solution to the Palestinian question is as charmingly mischievous as it is despairing. The 5:25-minute experimental video shows the artist herself as a Palestinian astronaut landing on the moon and establishing a Palestinian exile colony (fig. 31). While *A Space Exodus* is shot and choreographed with state-of-the-art special effects, it explicitly does not look real. The video, which had its world premiere in 2008 at the Dubai festival's short-film competition, opens with a close-up of female fingers running over the controls of a space ship. "Jerusalem, we have a problem,"²²³ a woman's voice says. But there is no response from the Holy City on earth. After an uncanny moment of deafening silence, a woman dressed in a spacesuit plants her foot in the moon dust as she proclaims: "That's one small step for a Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind."²²⁴ This proclamation refers directly to the first US moon landing. The soundtrack—an Arabized variation of Richard Strauss's musical interpretation of Nietzsche's late-romantic critique of European morality, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1896)²²⁵—as well as the subsequent scenes recall Stanley Kubrick's famous 1968 movie, *2001: A Space*

223 Sansour, *Space Exodus* 0:36–0:38 min.

224 Sansour, *Space Exodus* 1:53–2:01 min.

225 Richard Strauss, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Op. 30 TrV 176, 1896.

Odyssey.²²⁶ In fact, the video sometimes appears like a very brief remake of several key images from Kubrick's science-fiction classic on the pitfalls of human evolution and civilizational progress.

Figure 31: Larissa Sansour, film still (2:17 min.) from *A Space Exodus*, 2009.



In Sansour's *A Space Exodus*, the Palestinian flag is prominently featured, as is her Palestinian spacesuit and the uniquely designed, orientalized space-shoes. But it is the twinkling stars and the earth in the distance as well as her low-gravity gliding across the image that evoke some transcendent freedom, far from the so-called political *facts on the ground*—far from the continuing occupation of the Palestinian ground. The film takes a paradigmatic narrative of extreme technological progress and transposes it onto a situation in which a population is bound, constrained, and denied the most rudimentary rights of movement. In the final scene, the female Palestinonaut waves to planet Earth (fig. 32). The camera focuses on her boots bouncing on the surface of the moon and eventually pans out as she fades away into outer space. Larissa Sansour's work leaves one grasping for meaning. The question of the work's mimetic capacity is obsolete. The work does not pretend to represent any fact of life in the West Bank or in the Gaza strip:

I think that reality in some cases could become so fictional that the only way to address it is to make work that exaggerates it even more. I find that this is truly the case when you look at the Israeli occupation of Palestine. I feel that work that

226 Stanley Kubrick, dir., 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, screenplay Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

attempts to be rationally grounded with facts and documentation fails to deliver an adequate and genuine picture of the surreal, absurd atrocities on the ground.²²⁷

Mankind's dream of extraterrestrial discoveries has become a nightmare in which the moon functions as a false promise of a better future for Palestinians. The non-planet, hostile to life, is imagined as a land without a people for a people increasingly without land.

Figure 32: Larissa Sansour, *Space Earth*, 2009, 45 x 80 cm, c-print.



Without using a single image of a soldier, a checkpoint, a wall, or a refugee camp, *A Space Exodus* emphasizes the traumatically exilic condition of the Palestinian people, unheard by the international community and threatened to fade into nothingness. At first glance, the work seems to portray Palestinian deterritorialization and loss exclusively in outer space. By doing so, however, it directs our attention to a very real and earthly struggle. The audio-visual exodus narrative does not represent Palestinian pain and trauma as an end in itself. The project needs, rather, to be seen as an artistic act of resistance. It is simultaneously a non-violent and translocal act. By taking the local struggle for dignity into the global art market, it voices the Palestinian demand for the world to overcome ignorance and the almost unconditional acceptance of military occupation and settlements that are blatant violations of international law. In this view, the work should be

227 Larissa Sansour, "Fiction and Art Practice'. Interview with Larissa Sansour 'A Space Exodus,'" by Wafa Gabsi, *Contemporary Practices* 10 (Mar. 2012): 115.

interpreted as a metaphoric encouragement of moral and practical solidarity with those who cannot emigrate to the moon.