GEOGRAPHIES OF ESCAPE:
DIASPORIC DIFFERENCE AND ARAB ETHNICITY RE-EXAMINED

by

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ABSTRACT

By means of a selective choosing of authors of Arab diaspora, this dissertation seeks to explore what it means to "write against the grain" in the context of differing national and ethnic affiliations. Literary works by migrant communities Christian and Jewish who settled in Brazil and Israel, and trace their origins to Lebanon, Morocco and Iraq, are covered in the chapters: Raduan Nassar's Portuguese-language novel *Lavoura arcaica* (1975) published in Brazil; Albert Swissa's Hebrew novel *Bound* (1990); and Samir Naqqash's "Iraqi," Arabic-language short stories *Tantal* (1978) and *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* (1980). These pieces of literature perform radical disruptions of dominant literary culture in Portuguese, Hebrew and Arabic respectively, opening rich linguistic possibilities in the body of Brazilian, Israeli and broader Arabic-language literatures. Detailed literary analysis of each work reveals the complex intersection of identities –ethnicity, race, religion, class, gender—and the diverse ways in which literature thematizes and aestheticizes those identities through language. Most importantly, through a close reading of the literary language and aesthetics in these works, this research project brings identity politics and aesthetics into a fruitful conversation, considering diasporic ethnicities as identities created anew in each instance of narrative framing. This theoretical gesture proposes a method to read social identities such as ethnicity from a literary text rather than into it, advancing a vision of social identity that is fluid and malleable in the context of literary creation and imagination. In the specific texts under consideration, the authors pose "geographies of escape" that dodge the seeming finality of cultural and geographical displacement by imagining and cultivating taboo attachments to place and memory. These attachments, in turn, descend into an appearance of pathology and madness due to their resistance against the harsh pressures of assimilation or transculturation in the new homeland.

KEY TERMS: Diaspora; ethnicity; narrative; intersectionality; aesthetics; thematics; nation; Brazil; Israel; Lebanon; Morocco; Iraq; Portuguese; Hebrew; Arabic.

Introduction: Geographies of Escape

Aesthetics and Identity Politics

The overarching debate that lies behind my research returns constantly to the relationship between aesthetics and identity politics. Aesthetics, in the context of discussions surrounding identity politics and art produced by "minority communities," may often be seen as retrograde and Eurocentric.[1] Indeed, the traditional reading of the concept has focused on Europe and has often advanced an elitist and retrograde brand of social politics. Nevertheless, aesthetics does not solely imply "literary taste" and the separation of art and literature into "high" and "low" varieties. Aesthetics, at least for the literary analysis of this dissertation, involves the deployment of linguistic strategies in literature that can defy and disturb separations between vernacular and avant-garde language, high and low branches of society and other facile binaries. Implicit in "aesthetic taste" is value judgment. The vision of aesthetics this dissertation poses, however, radically opposes the value judgment of "taste" in favor of a meticulous examination of the peculiar functions of language as it appears in a few pieces of literature of Arab diaspora.

The three authors I analyze in this dissertation are Raduan Nassar, Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash: a second-generation Lebanese immigrant in Brazil innovating modern Portuguese; a Moroccan-born Israeli Jew re-inventing Hebrew; and an Iraqi Jew continuing to write in an Arabic full of multiple registers and levels of experimentation. On the surface, they appear to have little in common. They write in different languages and employ distinct linguistic

strategies in relationship to their social identities. Why, therefore, am I looking at these authors together?

Two words epitomize my grouping of this cluster of authors: language and aesthetics. Each author stands out as a kind of outlier in the literary traditions to which they loosely belong: Brazilian literature, modern Israeli literature and modern Arabic literature. One of the key reasons for the difficulty to place them is, quite simply, that they revolutionize the literary languages in which they write: Raduan Nassar uses archaic language and "secret" Levantine Arab themes to obscure the specific immigrant struggles expressed in his novel *Lavoura arcaica* (1975); Albert Swissa relentlessly transgresses and pollutes the narratives of purity in Judaism and Zionism alike in *Bound* (1990); and Samir Naqqash uses communal markers such as Judeo-Iraqi dialect and folklore as experimental tools to enact mental instability and textual rupture in his short stories and novels.

What sets the discussion of Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash apart from many discussions of aesthetics is their cultural difference and salient, heavily marked social identities. As Arabs doubly marginal in the discussion of Arab ethnicity –due to migration to Latin America and to Jewish religion--, their aesthetic experiments have particular social implications and appear even more inaccessible given the lack of knowledge of the cultures they evoke in Brazil, Israel and the larger Arab world. The choice of these three authors, therefore, comes down to two crucial points: the aesthetic and thematic innovation of their works, on the one hand; and the radical cultural difference that their writing poses at the same time. These two factors force aesthetics and identity politics into a fruitful conversation, which considers the intersection of literature and politics in the context of cultural difference.

The question of the political implications of literature is heavily contested. The famous concept of "art for art's sake" has become the target of pointed critique with the emergence of post-colonial theory, critical race theory, cultural studies and a number of area studies models concerned with nation, cultural difference, history, ideology and other seemingly "non-literary" disciplines and issues. In agreement with the critiques, I will argue that literature is inseparable from politics and social context. Nevertheless, the discussion far from ends with this affirmation.

The larger question is not whether literature is political, but how it is political: more precisely, what kind of politics does and/or can literary fiction advance? Jacques Rancière famously argues that literature and its aesthetics have a politics distinct from that of political organizing and that elude more socially oriented models of politics (2006). Literature involves battles over representation, the correspondence of different literary styles with specific content, the significance and use of different words and images and many other clearly linguistic and aesthetic questions. While language and aesthetics are linked to issues of social class, cultural difference, ideology and any number of questions present in other disciplines, they assume a particular meaning and take on a peculiar shape when speaking of literary innovation.

The politics of literature is about an innovation of linguistic and aesthetic forms while bringing distinct content to bear on literary tradition. Form and content, as already famously argued by Paul Ricouer (1991) and Hayden White about history (1990), are inseparable and not only deeply interconnected: form often, or perhaps even always, is the content or a central component of it. Language and aesthetics are practical tools to engage and/or undermine previous literary patterns and accomplish what Rancière has called "a redistribution of the sensible" (2004). Innovation, thus, means taking presuppositions of what makes sense in a literary context and forcing them into a collapse, where the non-sensical, the bizarre and the

disruptive do not become common sense on a social level, but gain traction on the level of literary language and experimentation.

However, Rancière's vision of "the politics of literature," formalism's focus on form as content and other connected models do not sufficiently account for cultural difference and more specifically, in the case of this dissertation, for the peculiarities of "the language and aesthetics of diaspora and ethnicity." Culturally marked social categories have a different relationship to language and aesthetics than those categories with the privilege of enjoying the assumption of normality and exhibiting a violent hegemony. The French writers such as Balzac that Rancière points to as examples of the politics of literature do not face the same obstacles of communication and the same stigmas of ethnic difference that the writers in this dissertation do.

How, then, might one speak of the politics of language, aesthetics and literature written by Middle Eastern and North African Jews and Syrian-Lebanese Brazilians? The practical way this study will attempt to answer this monumental question is by viewing ethnicity as a literary aesthetic, a language and a thematic frame. While ethnicity is a social category and variable with an impact on the positionality of the author and even on their writing, ultimately the author narrates ethnicity through a literary and fictive imaginary that reinterprets and iterates ethnicity on its particular literary terms. This literary expression of ethnicity engages an idea of the "sensible" and "sensical" when it comes to ethnicity. Thus, in a very similar way to Rancière's idea of the "politics of literature," I am advancing a parallel vision of "the politics of diasporic ethnic literatures" where innovation not only involves literary forms in and of themselves, but how they interrelate, interweave and interact with the social category that is ethnicity.

Ethnicity's disruptive potential in a literary context is at least two-fold: a disruption of literary forms in and of themselves by means of diasporic ethnic resources in language and content; and a disruption of the hegemonic narrative forms surrounding ethnicity present both in the larger social world and in previous literary texts with an ethnic component. This simple, yet crucial distinction in relationship to Rancière's more universalist theory, helps to place cultural difference within his larger theoretical frame without falling into the trap of universalism and the negation of the implications of cultural difference in literature.

Language and Narrative

Before beginning a more theoretical reflection on the social categories of diaspora and ethnicity and their relationship, an attention to the "politics of language" as concerns the three authors under examination is in order. The social and literary implications for nation, cultural difference and broader language of the writings of Raduan Nassar, Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash need not be underestimated. Each author not only innovates their literary language of choice, they crack its possibilities of innovation open by extreme methods of experimentation.

Raduan Nassar, to put it simply, is the first Portuguese-language Brazilian author to write a novel –*Lavoura arcaica*, 1975-- on immigration that poetically constructs and deconstructs the process of transculturation by means of opaque language, metaphors and discourse. By drawing attention away from immigration itself, Nassar builds an immense tension between the visibility and invisibility of migrant trauma, indirectly expressed through Biblical-Quranic value systems, an explosive, burgeoning type of youth sexuality and the transgression of unthinkable taboos such as incest. He covertly infuses his text with Levantine Arab migrant heritage, cultivating an aesthetic ripe with archaicism and hyper-modern turns in Portuguese without match or equal in

the entirety of modern Brazilian literature. On an aesthetic and thematic level, Raduan Nassar's extreme innovations extend to the Portuguese language, its relationship (or lack thereof) to Syrian-Lebanese heritage and to experimental possibilities for exploring social identity in literature.

Albert Swissa, like Nassar with Portuguese, performs a radical disturbance when it comes to Hebrew in his novel *Bound* (1990). In great contrast, Swissa's narrative project is all about the bringing of visibility to a marginal community of Moroccan urban poor. Nevertheless, the means by which Swissa accomplishes this visibility is largely linguistic: a saturation of images and language registers from Hebrew that mirrors conditions of social distress in the housing projects. Swissa's brand of Hebrew shattered the dominant minimalist aesthetic (*dal ha'homer)* in Israeli literature (Swissa, 2012), filling Hebrew with color, noise and acute social injustice that disturbed its customary media of expression.

Samir Naqqash in his experiments with the Arabic language, accomplished two radical acts: resistance against Hebrew socialization in Israel and extreme innovation of modern Arabic. Though Naqqash remained extremely marginal in the world of Arabic language literature, the daring experiments in his "Iraqi" short stories and novels that used stream of consciousness, Dadaism, fragmented time and other techniques combined with Classical Arabic and varying Iraqi dialects did not go unnoticed. Naqqash achieved feats in Arabic that had not been previously attempted to the same degree, memorializing and literarily resuscitating Iraqi Arabics of another time and place. By means of footnotes, dialectal insertions and re-interpretation of folklore, Naqqash breathed life into cultural artifacts, creating a new textuality and visuality in modern Arabic.

Therefore, the differences between Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash are the formal components of their aesthetics. However, the general effect of their aesthetics in each language is ultimately the same: radical disturbance, disruption and revolution. This revolution in aesthetics demands an exchange with identity politics as Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash alike achieve a revolution in identity through aesthetics.

As concerns language and aesthetics, the cultural identities of the three authors in this dissertation are multilingual: Nassar writes in Portuguese with Arabic resonances; Swissa writes in multiple registers of Hebrew with occasional insertions of Moroccan Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Berber (some translated, some untranslated); Samir Naqqash uses Judeo-Iraqi and Muslim Iraqi dialects and footnotes them in his Iraqi-themed works. Multilingualism has been studied in detail in social science research related to immigrant communities and various branches of linguistics.

However, while multilingualism's impact on literature has received significant attention, the larger question of multilingual literary aesthetics –ostensibly visible or obscure and invisible insertions of concepts, phrases and linguistic patterns from other languages—has figured much less prominently in the discussion of literature than one might imagine (see Martín, 2008; Mehrez, 1992; Prince in Aldama, 2011; and the journal MELUS (Multiethnic Literature of the United States) for more relevant articles that employ analysis based on bilingual and multilingual aesthetics) . What I am calling "multilinguality" has a deep presence in the writing of diasporic authors, not always in the most obvious or most legible ways.

Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia can serve as a useful starting point for understanding "multilingual literary texts." Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin, is ""another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (324). Bakhtin

draws attention to the conflicting and multivalent nature of language in the novel as it relates to narrators, characters, social classes and so on. Thus, the concept of unified language in literature, in itself, already proves faulty. This insight helps to shed light on the complexities of language in prose literature and what they reveal about the forms, narrative structures and social significance of literature as a whole. Yet Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and linguistic hybridity does not fully account for the language(s) of Arab diaspora under examination in this dissertation.

While Bakhtin speaks of "hybrid utterances" and "many languages," he does so largely in the context of language variety and hybridity within one language. In the context of many diasporic authors, the resonances or echoes of a subordinate language or dialect persist within the adopted language, complicating the picture of heteroglossia to include the layers and registers of language across disparate language families that are unintelligible to one another and often deeply culturally divided as well. This complication requires another conceptualization of language that speaks to multilinguality and different diasporic conditions in a more robust and all-encompassing manner.

The term I will implicitly use as a tool to explore the language of my three authors is "literary idiolect." According to Oxford dictionary, an idiolect is "the speech habits peculiar to a particular person." In the context of literature, an idiolect would then be *the literary choices and language peculiar to a particular text*. In the diasporic context of this dissertation, rather than categorizing or finding a genre to describe the writing of individual authors, I will seek to uncover the peculiarities of language and narrative choices of each author's writing on an individual level. Multilinguality will feature heavily in the language, whether ostensibly visible or present in resonances and echoes.

Diaspora, Ethnicity and the Psychology of Place

Some like Lily Cho, in her essay "The Turn to Diaspora" (2007) see diaspora as a "subjective condition," others theorize about diaspora constantly as an object, and a multitude of approaches exist divided along theoretical lines and regional, racial and historical lines for African diasporas, Jewish diaspora, postcolonial diasporas (Chariandy 2006) and so on and so forth. I have decided to work from my own restrictive definition of diaspora for the purposes of this dissertation. My definition draws on the relationship of literature and the imagination in the specific context of diaspora and its sense of place. Diaspora, in the literary terrain this study examines, refers to an uprooted and restless state of the psyche that cannot help but imagine other places outside of the "host country" or "present location." Yet those other places are a non-existent phantom, a remnant of the past, a fading memory.

To think of diaspora as an exile from within, even as displacements are real, provides a much richer terrain for analysis of diasporic literature. After all, at least in the realm of literature, whatever the reality of the emotional and psychic panorama of diasporic thought, the imaginary and imagination take center stage. This "diasporic consciousness" or "migrant imaginary" is a rich canvas for diverse thoughts, human idiosyncrasies and distinct artistic renditions and iterations of cognitive disassociations, displacements and dissonance (Edwards, 2003; Kuortti, 2007; Mishra, 2007; Shackleton, ed., 2008).

The working definition of diaspora in this dissertation, therefore, is that of a potentiality for the literary expression of the psychological effects of displacement and transnational attachments. This understanding of diaspora serves as an anchor for a movement against the reification and essentialization of ethnicity. This project considers diaspora and ethnicity

together, adamantly refusing to separate between the two, employing diaspora as a theoretical tool to expand on visions of cultural and ethnic difference. By subsuming ethnicity, an often more rigidly considered social category rooted in narratives of origins, phenotype, kinship and so on, within the concept of diaspora, ethnicity acquires new life, fluidity and potential for intersectionality with other categories. Ethnicity becomes, in the context of the master works analyzed in this dissertation, a narrative of situating self, community and language in relationship to place, of constructing geographies of escape from the fixed notions of origins and cultural difference. Ethnicity, as advanced by my research into literature, is often inextricably diasporic and enveloped in displacements, in intersecting identities and attachments.

Thus, far from a necessary grounds for solidifying identity and its politics, literary diaspora is an uncertain world of uncanny creations that can often challenge the rigidity and permanence of homeland and any sense of rootedness in place (see introduction to Braziel and Mannur, eds. et al, 2006). The politics of ethnic identity, in the case of literary iterations of diaspora, can go any number of directions: they can be solidified or undermined; reified or destabilized. The literature I have chosen for this dissertation has a destabilizing impulse when it comes to identity that throws the clarity of social categories into question, even as it plays with them in its language and narrative structure.

I have chosen Arab diasporas in Brazil and Israel as objects of study –Syrian-Lebanese immigrant communities in Brazil and Mizrahi Jews in Israel[2]-- for two main reasons: the scholarly literature on these Arab communities is marginal and peripheral in the U.S. academy, even as it has grown more abundant in Brazil and Israel themselves; and Brazil and Israel provide fascinating case-studies in diaspora with powerful anti-diasporic national mythologies.[3]

Brazil's myth of racial democracy through miscegenation, famously advanced by the sociologist Gilberto Freyre in his book *Casa-Grande e senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1933) set the stage for many discussion of racial mixing and intercultural encounters in colonial Brazil to the present. For better or worse, even with the powerful critiques so many Brazilian scholars have elaborated in response to Freyre, the impact of the idea of "racial democracy through miscegenation" remains key to understanding Brazil's nationalist mythology.[4]

In spite of its heavy immigration, Brazil, in contrast to the United States, does not view itself as a nation of immigrants. Brazil, in its nationalist myth, is a welcoming, "cordial" land (see Buarque de Holanda, 1936) that absorbs strangers in its midst with ease, adapting their customs and identity to fit a larger Brazilian one. Brazil's national self-image, at least at its most extreme, leaves no room for an immigrant discourse and even less for a diasporic discourse of displacement and fractured belonging. In this sense, though Brazil has a significant Syrian-Lebanese community with diasporic histories, this history is not recognized in the larger nationalist narrative.[5]

The State of Israel has another take on immigration that is similarly anti-diasporic with a different foundation. Zionist nationalism relates to diaspora or exile –both encompassed in the Hebrew word *galut*—in two primary senses "the negation of exile" (*shlilat ha'galut*) and "an ingathering of exiles" (*kibutz galuyot*). Migration to the State of Israel, in this sense, came to mean redemption from the darkness of diaspora or exile. Constructing a Jewish nativity in the land of Palestine, largely based on the figure of native-born Jewish Sabras, took center stage while the diasporic realities of both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews were suppressed (see Alcalay, 1993; Almog, 2000; Boyarin and Boyarin, 2006; Zerubavel, 1997). The centrality of

exile/diaspora for Jewish conceptions of history (see Raz-Krakotzkin, 2007) was elided in favor of the creation of a "New Jew."

In the specific case of different Mizrahi communities, their dual Arab and Jewish identities conflicted with the ideology of a warring state with an "Arab enemy." A traumatic process of assimilation into what Zionists called a "melting pot" (*kur hittukh*) and author Albert Swissa has cleverly renamed a "smelting pot" (Alcalay, 1996) required a substantive retreat from public displays of Mizrahi culture until the cultural explosion of the 1980's (Horowitz, 2010). This lack of national visibility of Mizrahi culture did not mean that musical, culinary, linguistic and other traditions completely faded. Simply, in relationship to the more hegemonic Zionist public culture dominated by the Ashkenazim, much of non-Western Jewish cultural practices went underground.

Israel has not traditionally viewed itself as a nation of immigrants. Immigration to Israel, for Jews, immediately passes through the lens of return to homeland and spiritual redemption. However, the persistence of alternative homelands for Mizrahim in the Middle East means that the "sense of home," even for Zionist Mizrahim, very rarely squares with the vision of Zionist ideology. A powerful sense of longing much more complex than nostalgia continues to affect several generations of Mizrahim settled in Israel (see Shohat, 2003, 2006).

Therefore, this dissertation will view the writers under examination, Lebanese Brazilian, Moroccan Jewish and Iraqi Jewish immigrants as belonging to Arab diasporas. Israel, rather than a "Jewish homeland," will be read as another "host country" posing as a primordial homeland for Jewish peoples from diverse backgrounds. Brazil and Israel, albeit in utterly distinct ways, will both be seen as nations with a powerfully anti-diasporic stance in their nationalist ideologies that

cannot accommodate the rich ambivalence of Arab migrant identities, ethnic affiliations and senses of place. Literary diaspora, for its part, provides a geography of escape by means of experiments in language and thematics that artistically foreground the intensities of rootlessness, uprootedness and displacement.

The choice of the authors Raduan Nassar, Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash does not occur in a vacuum. What they all share remains at the heart of the experience and literary articulation of diaspora and ethnicity: an unrelenting drama of attachments related to place and memory. This drama often manifests, on the literary page, as a form of pathology or madness. Diaspora brings cultural difference to life through a linguistic aesthetic built on words and a thematic economy of the narrative patterns that those words construct, a form and a content of "literary diaspora." All three authors I have chosen have extreme methods for articulating diasporic difference.

Raduan Nassar, a second-generation Lebanese immigrant to Brazil, for all that he may wish to universalize and obscure the immigrant story behind his novel *Lavoura arcaica* (1975), cannot escape the pull of it. His writing, even as it tries to enter a larger Brazilian narrative world, lingers at the margins of Brazilian literature. By eluding direct engagement with Lebanon, Nassar only renders its presence more dramatic by means of familial discord, incest, murder and Biblical language. The immigrant world in *Lavoura arcaica* is so insular that there is no need for it to name itself except in roundabout references to ancestors, "a strange tongue" (Arabic), folk dance and *The Arabian Nights*. The movie version, directed by Luiz Fernando Carvalho (2001), as it visually renders much of what remains implicit in the original, loses the tension between visibility and invisibility of culture that features so powerfully in the novel. In the literary work, the sense of place is deeply tied to family, and in constant conflict for those who cannot lead the

type of "diasporic existence" prescribed by the family patriarch. He pushes a preservation of tradition, family and Biblical-Quranic values at all costs, even in a new location. The novel then becomes almost entirely a conflict over the meaning and configuration of place among immigrant generations.[6]

Albert Swissa, a Moroccan-born Jew who migrated to Israel, activates Morocco through a "memory of a kidnapping": one of the main characters, Ayush, almost escaped with his nanny to lead the life of a Moroccan Muslim. Even after migrating to Israel and leaving Morocco behind, the memory of this moment lingers as an obsession, as an escape from a cruel reality of urban poverty and discrimination. This desire and longing to imagine –and by extension, occupy— another place haunts almost all of Swissa's child protagonists (Swissa, 2012). This other place, though often unspoken, is an imaginary iteration of Morocco. Swissa's text, therefore, voices the madness of remaining attached to a place and memory that are no more, while at the same time exposing the powerful implications of escaping to that imaginary place.[7]

Samir Naqqash, for his part, uses his fidelity to Iraqi Jewish and larger Iraqi Arab culture as aesthetic instruments to underline a profound sense of disillusionment, disintegration of community and geographical displacement. Iraqi folklore, dialect and a larger cultural lexicon serve as painful and melancholy markers of dispossession, as the world Naqqash references also no longer exists. Yet his narrative approach remains firmly attached to Iraqi traditions and culture, while at the same time using them as dynamic literary experiments.

Each author, in their own way, constructs geographies of escape from "the host country" in which they live: Nassar conceals the presence of Lebanon in his book, focusing on the conflicting diasporic geographies between a father, Iohana and his middle-son, André; Swissa

speaks to the continued attachment and fascination with Morocco of his child protagonist, Ayush and the implicit desire to live in another place of the rest of his characters; Naqqash, in his aesthetic choices, maintains an attachment to Iraq, that on a practical geopolitical level, is no longer possible for its Jewish community. Each writer exposes the drama of place, the unrelenting desire for escape from exile on their own terms, such that their texts construct varying "geographies of escape" of distinct psychological tones.

Diasporic, migrant literary imaginaries very often depart from the non-place of diaspora, in all of its horror and rich possibility. Whereas the physical locations of Israel and Brazil could provide a stability, permanence or rootedness, or the diasporic imagination of Lebanon, Syria, Morocco or Iraq could generate an aesthetic of attachment to a reified, essentialized and/or concretized sense of place, the authors I examine in this dissertation –in addition to many others of Arab diaspora-- do not seek this path (Salhi and Netton, 2006). Permanence, stability, roots and place, for these authors, are impossible objects of longing or objects of literary manipulation.

Geographies of escape, in the context of literature, involve constructing a sense of place that is figurative or metaphorical, where the emotive impact of place and its impermanence has a distinct impact on the psyche. The traumas, desires and longing of diasporic persons often shine through beyond any fixity of place, and place comes across as a haunting different literary characters must withstand and process in order to retain a hold on their sanity. All too often, the burden of place overwhelms characters to the point of insanity, a common trope in intensely diasporic literature which appears in all three of the authors cited in this dissertation.

Ultimately, "geographies of escape" and migrant literary imaginaries expose two things: the artificiality of nation and any fixed notion of place; and the lingering impact of notions of

place on the psyche in spite of their artificiality. In the words of Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur in their introduction to *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*: "diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of nations and nation-states." (7). In the context of the literature of this dissertation, "diaspora forces characters to rethink and refigure their own sense of place."

The artistic license particular to the literary realm leads to an imagining of place that moves outside of the limitations of borders, nations and monolingual language. However, more than transcending those limitations, "geographies of escape" re-imagine and re-situate the markers of place. Far from a passive acceptance of cultural and geographical displacement, much of diasporic literature has the potential to displace dominant cultures and geographies. Arab diasporic writers, by means of their cultural difference and often cultural sameness (i.e., understanding and living both dominant and subordinate cultures at one and the same time), articulate cultural difference in highly distinct ways. This "in-betweenness," when translated into particular narrative strategies and techniques, has the potential to transform into radically disruptive literature.[8] All three authors in this dissertation perform an artistic act of this kind.

Reading Ethnicity and Diaspora

My dissertation expresses a profound dissatisfaction with some of the more common methods of reading ethnicity, diaspora and "minority literature." Once again, the omission of literary aesthetics in the conversation on social identities in literature begs a response. Furthermore, it begs the exploration of aesthetics without excessive recourse to fabricated and worn Western categories of beauty and experimentation such as the baroque, romanticism, modernism and post-modernism among others. The influences of the West may be

acknowledged without fetishizing and magnifying their importance. Many literary traditions –

Hebrew, Arabic, Brazilian and broader Latin American—exist to draw from in the act of literary

creation. The inner structure of the writings of the authors I am reading has multiple sources that

generate a peculiar literary aesthetic. Rather than cataloguing literary influence, my work seeks

to uncover the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of the language and thematics of three writers of

Arab diaspora.

The evasion of aesthetics as a literary category drowns out the ravishing literary

experiments that many non-Western and/or "minority" authors employ and the stunning

achievements in language present in their works. Much of post-colonial theory, ethnic studies

and cultural studies has ignored aesthetics as it is considered an ideologically tarnished ornament

of differentiation between "high" and "low" that misses the point: power relations and the

ideologically driven discourses that affirm them. Before laying out my method for reading

diaspora and ethnicity, I will discuss two key ideas in the theoretical consideration of "minority"

literature in the field: the master-slave dialectic and "the politics of representation."

Post-colonial theory has elaborated one of the most sophisticated theoretical models for

dealing with cultural difference. Post-coloniality, more than simply a condition of marginality,

embodies a position of continued subordination to colonial and neo-colonial power. One of the

most important trends in post-colonial thought is the use of Hegel's master-slave dialectic as a

tool to crack open universalist, Eurocentric and other mythologies that perpetuate colonial power

and ignore the subversive potential of cultural, linguistic and epistemological differences of

colonized, non-European peoples (see Bhabha, 1994; Derrida, 1967; Fanon, 1963 and 1967 and

Said, 1978).

The crux of the master-slave dialectic in post-colonial theory lies in the reliance of the master on the slave to be able to affirm his/her social identity, or in terms of difference, the need for an "other" to affirm the self. While this technique of situating the deceptive universalism of hegemonic cultures in relational context works well for deconstructing and destabilizing the literature of dominant groups (see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993), it does not necessarily work as well for the literature of the "subordinate" groups. This dialectical pattern of thought can almost do as much to affirm the power of dominant groups as its socially oblivious counterpart, at least when looking at the cultural production of subordinate groups. Dialectics can often usurp the agency and autonomy of subordinate groups as producers of culture and art.

Two crucial questions arise when placing marginal, non-Western literature in dialogue with the master-slave dialectic as a hermeneutical method: When reading the writing of a "minority," non-Western or marginal author, does the reader need the master to read the slave or do these categories often collapse? Does viewing marginal literature eternally in relation to more dominant literature unnecessarily perpetuate asymmetries of power and a subordinate position in artistic production? This dissertation will argue that reading authors from "marginal subject positions" as complex literary agents with their own literary aesthetics that are neither interdependent on Western models nor eternally caught in a set of power relations creates a different mode of reading and opens new interpretative possibilities. While social context remains crucial to understanding literature, its overemphasis can also become a hermeneutical trap that shuts off aesthetic and structural narrative dimensions of literature. Narrative structures and aesthetic-stylistic choices of a given author are not dependent on their marginal subject position or cultural difference, even if these factors remain filters for the reader.

The master-slave dialectic is often reactivated when someone from a dominant group –a literary critic, a general reader—begins to interpret the text from their own particular vantage point, imposing their racial, ethnic-based power on the text. In the context of Syrian-Lebanese and Mizrahi writers, the largely Western culture –though not entirely-- of Brazilian literary critics and the Ashkenazi literary elite imposes a Western and neo-colonial purview on their literature. This relationality brings to light the anxiety of hegemonic culture in relationship to the manifold demonstrations and artistic renditions of cultural difference in the form of "diasporic" and "ethnic" literatures. Therefore, to read non-dialectically is a formidable challenge that requires meticulous attention and patience.

An interrelated method, another of the most tried and true hermeneutical practices when it comes to cultural difference is "the politics of representation" (see Hall, 1997). In this model, everything represents something else and every such representation engages an ideology. As concerns literature, this tendency in early cultural studies transformed into a political engagement in criticism that sought to bring literature into dialogue with "real life." Representation was a world of competing takes on truth or truths, often meant to imitate reality in a classical vision of mimesis that happened to concern more modern issues of race, ethnicity, gender and so on. This mimetic model dominated much of early feminist critique as pointed out in Susan Lanser's classic 1986 essay, "Toward a Feminist Narratology." This dissertation, like Lanser does with gender, will attempt to build a modest version of "an ethnic narratology" that takes narrative structures and features into account as the primary ways of understanding ethnicity in a given text. At the same time, however, the power of cultural difference to disrupt narrative form will be acknowledged and examined.

In the "politics of representation," an approach that has been nurtured in richly complex ways by ethnic studies, critical race theory and cultural studies alike, literature enters a whirlwind battle over "accuracy of representation" when it comes to hot-button social issues. Yet much literature does not seek to advance "accuracy" so much as deconstruct, disrupt and disturb the "partial truths" that dominate the outside world. An implicit battle over representation may lurk behind the writing of literature on difficult social issues, but the structure of literature itself –due to the prevalence of ambiguity and ambivalence in many writings—often evades "representation of a community." One is then left with the question of how literature engages socially marked categories such as Arab ethnicity. This engagement largely occurs on the level of narrative resources, combined with a given author's particular take on ethnicity in the world of their fictive imaginary.

My argument against viewing "ethnic literature" primarily through a lens of competing representations neither negates the importance of representation nor does it analyze literature from a social vacuum. The theoretical framework for anti-representational hermeneutics is a narratological method of reading that seeks to synthesize narrative structures with the very real presence of social categories as a force within literary creation. In short, how does narrative, aesthetics and language take on the challenge of framing and depicting a given social identity? More than a representation, this narrative process can often involve an enactment, a fictional iteration or configuration of ethnicity on its own conditions. Ethnicity transforms --from a more fixed, essentialized, reified and ossified social category subject to the whims of power and hegemony—into a more autonomous, malleable, amorphous and unstable literary exercise of the imagination.

Representation does not allow this relative autonomy; one representation is contingent on others that have preceded it. This model of representation parallels the relationality and dependency in the master-slave dialectic. This dissertations seeks a more radically independent reading method to mirror the radical autonomy writers enact in depicting cultural difference and using it as an aesthetic tool to revolutionize language, narrative and stylistics. Nevertheless, the act of reading and interpretation engages in representational practice: it represents a given literary text "as something else."

Much of literary interpretation at least partially responds, in a manner similar to the idea of a chain of interdependent representations, to readings that have come before it. Therefore, my own readings will engage previous literary criticism and attempt to fill in the gaps and critically examine the tendencies in the scholarship on the works of these three authors. The trends in broader literary criticism, particularly in the case of diasporic-ethnic authors, reveal a great deal about the broader attitudes, anxieties and expectations in larger society concerning ethnicity. The approaches of literary critics to ethnic and cultural difference can even at times impact the way authors themselves choose to frame ethnicity. My own research has uncovered two primary critical patterns in relationship to ethnicity for Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash: 1) de-ethnicization, or the downplaying of ethnicity toward a more universalist and/or nationalist hermeneutics; 2) hyper-ethnicization, or the imposition of a social take on a particular ethnicity to the detriment of close readings of narrative, thematics and aesthetics.

What is lacking from both approaches is a means to place diaspora and ethnicity within an aesthetic framework. In this polarized model, ethnicity and a "more general narrative hermeneutics" seem to exist in opposition to one another. Narrative structures and ethnicity repel one another, as if ethnicity did not have to be recreated anew with each fictional rendering. What

I am proposing is not an "essentialized ethnopoetics" (Aldama, 2005), but a narrative framing of ethnicity where the meaning and iterations of ethnicity are fluid, malleable and constantly changing. Ethnicity seems to remain subject, in so many cases, to a process of reification where a murky set of realities transform into a neater, monolithic and uniform vision of essentialization. This reification and/or essentialization of ethnicity occurs both through the workings of non-marked, hegemonic groups and the marginal groups' visioning of themselves.

Literary criticism of "diasporic-ethnic literature" demands imagination on the part of the critic to complement the imagination of the author. Imagination means looking at ethnicity as something much more dynamic than a given category: as a term subject to the whims of power; artistically malleable by means of literary innovation; and provocative in its ambivalence and ambiguity (see Bhabha, 1994). Ethnicity as a social category and ethnicity as a literary instrument are not one and the same. Social categories, even if the act in itself is a fiction, demand a kind of synthesis that does not necessarily happen in a literary context. The irony in literature is that the act of reading, for all of its power, brings the social and the literary into contact and advances some form of synthesis. Reading, in itself, has a partially anti-literary bent as it performs the same kind of operation as defining a social category does: trying to compartmentalize the ambiguities, paradoxes and uncertainties that mark the world both inside and outside of literature.

Ultimately, filling in the gaps in literary criticism on ethnicity involves working against an impulse for synthesis of the term, for clarity and for comfort (see Sommer, 1999). Exploring how ethnicity and cultural difference disrupt hegemonic society on a narrative level, by invisible and visible means, serves the purpose of also disrupting social expectations regarding the depiction and understanding of a certain ethnicity. This kind of literary criticism is desperately

needed to begin to disengage ethnicity from a web of social expectations, kitsch stereotypes and superficial pre-programmed images. Running away from ethnicity in narrative analysis is not the answer; however, neither is affirmation by saturation where cultural difference is made omnipresent, inevitable and alienating.

The question remains how to read ethnicity from a literary text rather than into a literary text. Ethnicity, in a literary context, ought to be contingent on the narrative framing a particular author inserts within a particular text, part of the more general literary idiolect. In short, by means of the hermeneutics of exegesis –reading from the inside-out rather than outside-in—the danger of ethnicity becoming a static, reified or essentialized category, a social relic, a kitsch stereotype becomes less acute. The text brings a vision of ethnicity and diaspora to life that often may not correspond to real life or attempt to imitate it.

Literary textuality and sociological and anthropological descriptions of ethnicity, particularly literature that destabilizes identity categories, seek out different goals: sociology and anthropology respectively, as well as many other disciplines in the social sciences, attempt to reach a synthesis of ethnic-based discrimination and stratification, social formations and community ties, etc.; literature often finds refuge in ambiguity and ambivalence, and the inability to represent human experience. Literature tests the boundaries and plausibility of social theories of ethnicity by imagining new configurations of ethnic affiliation and belonging that do not fit into social patternings and interpretations so common in the social sciences. Literature advances radical subjectivities that interrogate the possibility of stable subjectivity by means of the same ambiguity and ambivalence.

Therefore, reading ethnicity from the text means to understand the ways that language and thematics uncover ambiguity and ambivalence and render them both aesthetically and thematically. This exercise in ambiguity is at the heart of what I am calling "ethnic narratology." In this, I am following a field called "post-classical narratology" that seeks to consider "form and context together" (Darby, 2003 and Shen, 2005) "bring social context into formalist literary analysis" (Prince, 2008) and exhibit a greater attention to race and ethnicity in narrative theory (Aldama, ed., 2011). The ambiguity and ambivalence of authors in relationship to their ethnicity generate a dramatic narrative approach in which experimental technique and implicit narrative forms breathe life into ethnicity without providing an anchor of stability as to its meaning and social function. Narrative forms give ethnicity life; some vague externalized construction of ethnic identity does not succeed at reifying ethnicity. More generally, readers are the ones who impose an outside construction of ethnicity on a narrative in their interpretation, often ignoring the fragmented forms within which ethnicity crystallizes in each individual work.

Narrative aesthetics, particularly in the case of cultural difference, has the glaringly present echo of ethnic, racial and other affiliations in its constitution. Yet this intimate echo is not constitutive, nor does it inform the writing of ethnicity necessarily; its resonance means that one cannot speak of many texts' narrative forms without engaging the impact of ethnicity as a *reconstituted category* in the framing of narrative. Ethnicity is re-constituted, re-framed and re-interpreted with each aesthetic choice made on a text ethnically themed, such that it becomes amorphous, malleable and ghostly as a literary category, ready-made for manipulation, transformation and adaptation.

Ethnic narrative forms can include the insertion of marginal languages and dialects –or even foreign concepts-- into an otherwise monolingual text; the use of aspects of cultural

difference, diasporic consciousness or ethnic identity as narrative devices to frame the most fundamental structural elements of a story such as character development, foreshadowing and narrative voice; and a play on hegemonic images of an ethnic group to create irony, humor and narrative subversion of the literary conventions of a given society. The possibilities for ethnic narrative forms seem endless, as artistic license creates the conditions for innovation and imagination. While they may not be endless per se, the possibilities for imagining ethnicity in literature are arguably greater than the discursive terrain present in most academic disciplines and even in social interaction.

Ethnicity and narrative form are rarely explicitly viewed together as ethnicity is commonly viewed as a social issue and often nothing more than a literary theme. This inclination in literary criticism all too often results in the most crude form of reductionism as to the meaning and deployment of ethnicity on a thematic and aesthetic narrative level. Cultural difference becomes a number of different things on a literary level according to this model, but does not end up paired with the possibility for literary innovation. Ethnicity and other forms of differences in literature, when narrative form is ignored, often become an interrelated laundry list of "representative" models of difference: an object of "exoticized" consumption or an opportunity to educate the "normalized" and "hegemonic" group about difference; a sociological, anthropological or historical representation of the "essence" of a culture or ethnicity at a given point in time; an instance of "corrective politics" that seeks to fill gaps and right distortions in the dominant representations of a particular social group; or, by extension, a larger "representation of reality" that seeks out accuracy, even if by means of fiction.

The problem that all of these models of interpretation share comes down to ignoring the relationship between ethnicity and narrative form. Even in the most "representational" model of

writing, specific narrative structures and forms are deployed in order to "represent" ethnicity. The process is neither innocent nor objective. A literary idiolect, of linguistic and/or aesthetic choices, informs the particular visioning of ethnicity that prevails in any given text. Focusing on representation pretends that the imaginary that informs the textuality of a work smoothly and seamlessly serves its purpose of representation without a larger crisis in representation itself. This dissertation, through texts that explicitly play with a crisis of representation, proposes that the idea of literary representation conceals its own origins. In the context of diasporic Arab ethnicity, a context deeply concerned with representation and images, this crisis has profound implications. I am arguing that both by an analysis of narrative form and an awareness of thematics or thematization on the level of structure, this crisis of representation and the aforementioned reductionism of ethnicity can be overcome.

Thematization of ethnicity moves far beyond the idea of ethnicity as a singular, solitary literary theme. Thematization encompasses the broader thematic patternings present in a literary work; a theme remains more divorced from the narrative structures of piece of literature, as it is just one link in an infinite chain of interpretative possibilities. Thematization of ethnicity means the thematic inner workings of a novel, short story or poem in relationship to ethnicity. In other words, how the work conceives of and frames ethnicity on a conceptual level. While thematization is largely conceptual and discursive, ethnic narrative forms occur on the level of aesthetics. Both involve language, but thematization means the "more general take on ethnicity" whereas narrative form embodies "the more concrete literary tools deployed in order to produce the thematization."

Thus, narrative forms and thematization are intimately related to one another, yet when examining ethnicity, the dominant trend in literary criticism is to look at "ethnic themes" without

equal attention to narrative form, and to the structural level on which themes crystallize: what I am calling thematization. This tendency seems to stem from the fallacy that hot-button social issues are issues, cultural difference is just difference, and not subject to the same narrative constructions, the same aesthetic twists and turns and the same robust thematizing as "more neutrally viewed" literary subjects. This dissertation argues that ethnicity need be viewed with the same narrative complexity as any other "theme," which ultimately means dissecting the narrative structures behind ethnicity in a given work, i.e. how ethnicity relates to the larger narrative discourse at work in any given piece of literature by "diasporic-ethnic" authors. The thematization of ethnicity is the broader narrative framing of the subject in light of the aesthetic, linguistic and other resources at the author's disposal.

Thematization is the basis for the meta-fiction or meta-text of ethnicity in any given work, the vision literarily advanced by the novels and short stories under examination in this study. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the possibilities are infinite for thematizing ethnicity and it would not be true to see the imagination as a free enterprise, the heavy distinctions in this study will show two primary things: authors function within the social and literary context in which they developed as writers; authors also are able to draw, due to the richness of that context, from an immense well of influences and inspirations which can lead in multiple and plural directions. Ethnicity and other social identities are not trapped any more than any other subject imagined literarily; they are trapped differently and face different obstacles due to the politics of ethnicity as a social category. This dissertation will focus more on the realm of possibility while recognizing some of the limitations and boundaries in literary creation and interpretation alike.

Diaspora and ethnicity themselves are not a literary genre; they are literary realms of possibility. Diasporic awareness and ethnic affiliation enrich the resources behind different authors' literary creation, but they do not pre-determine the direction each author takes with the narrative strategies that they employ. Diaspora and ethnicity are malleable; they are literarily manipulable and transformable.

The philosophy of departure for the literary analysis to be performed, therefore, is that each work is a genre onto itself, and that identifying common patterns among a group of works need not require the compartmentalization of all of them into one genre or a period. This approach narrows the imagination in literary criticism, and further misrepresents the literary imaginary of diaspora and ethnicity. Whether boxing in diasporic writers with each other because of social identities, or isolating themselves from each other through non-diasporic categorizations, the act of designating genre and period is a rigid reification that reeks of determinism and often falls short of capturing the rich interaction of stylistic and thematic influences at work in a particular piece of literature.

Ethnicity has many languages. The languages may be overtly mixed, some may be hegemonic and others more subordinate and ethnicity may be an echo or an overtly disruptive linguistic presence. In this sense, ethnicity moves further than Deleuze and Guattari's model of minor literature that delineates that in order for radical disruption to occur, literature must be written in a "major language" (1986). Either way, ethnicity enjoys a multiplicity and pluralism in a literary context which it is often denied in the all too often less imaginative worlds of social interaction and categorization.

However, as identified in the writings of Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash, one of the most critical issues in understanding the languages of ethnicity constantly returns to its deployment of ethnic markers –implicit or more explicit—through narrative strategies on the level of the aesthetic. What this more concretely means is that the literary idiolect --the language chosen to express the ethnic resonances of a text—ties ethnic affiliation into patterns of linguistic and aesthetic techniques that then produce a thematic vision of ethnicity's significance on a narrative level. A chain of narrative strategies that generate aesthetics and thematics of ethnicity, which make use of ethno-cultural markers by their presence, absence or specific mode of framing create a language of ethnicity with a specific core set of objectives relayed to the reader through that language. The language of ethnicity is a question mark that requires interrogation and interpretation to uncover how a particular text deploys language in relationship to ethnic themes. It is not a given that an "ethnic text" is about "ethnicity" and deploys an "ethnopoetics." The poetics, just like the idea of the ethnicity, are far from stable, readily legible or coherent in many cases. Ethnicity is literarily made; it does not make literature itself. Each chapter of this dissertation explores how ethnicity can be literarily made.

Chapter 1 examines Raduan Nassar's dazzling novel *Lavoura arcaica*'s dramatic take on the tensions within a Lebanese immigrant family in the interior of Brazil. Language, in Nassar's case, is a form of ethnic camouflage. Ethnicity is in hiding behind the wonders of the Portuguese language, and Nassar's secret knowledge –the extent of which he has never revealed—of his Lebanese heritage. Ethnicity is a meta-text, a philosophical debate, Biblical-Quranic precepts and contingent familial patterns of character development. Ethnicity is many things, but not a reified, essentialized or concretized identity. Ethnicity is a haunting passed down differently along the

generations, an unspoken patriarchal tyranny, a suffocating family unit and a "Mediterranean temperament" expressed through affection and love, in mourning and in celebration.

Chapter 2 delves into Albert Swissa's brilliant literary experiment with the ideological and linguistic boundaries of modern Hebrew literature. In Albert Swissa's *Akud*, Moroccan Jewish ethnicity becomes the scathingly ironic, desperately distressful flip side of purity. Tried and true tropes, imaginary pillars that sustain both Jewish religious life and Zionist nationalism – foundations for the panorama of much of Israeli literature-- are deployed to their own destruction. Ethnicity is a pollutant, a dangerous toxin that dirties both sacred language and the religious and nationalist awe surrounding the story of the binding of Isaac or *akedah*. The use of language, as much as the thematic vision of neighborhood and child psychology, throw Zionism and Judaism into disarray and trangress both of their boundaries of purity.

Chapter 3 dissects the tremendous Arabic-language experiment in two short stories by Iraqi Jewish author Samir Naqqash. Naqqash's literary project plays with deep challenges in the world of literary criticism and wider readership: the universalization of radical ethnic difference; putting standardized and dialectal language on equal planes; the understanding of folklore as an abstract frame of reference with a more concrete set of markers to activate its world of signification. Naqqash's project is about making local markers such as folklore and dialect metaphysical. Very few writers in Arabic or any other language have succeeded to the extent he did at rendering multiple registers of language and culture into a markedly ethnic metaphysics.

Nassar's Lebanese ethnicity transforms into linguistic camouflage; Swissa's Moroccan ethnicity symbolically pollutes boundaries of purity; Naqqash's Iraqi ethnicity individualizes communal markers into an ethnic metaphysics. The vast differences between their approaches to

ethnicity are evident, yet among several similarities, one stands out in particular: the relationship between migrant identity and madness. The traumas of diasporic migrants, in all of the works analyzed in this dissertation, border on pathology and descend into madness.

In Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash alike diasporic Arab ethnicity appears pathological. However, its pathology responds to an even more pathological reality: the discrimination, transculturation and traumatic historical shifts that take place through Arab migration. The strength of all of their writings lies in their refusal to use social explanation to reduce the intensity of the madness and/or pathology their characters experience. Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash alike normalize pathology to the point that the borderline between pathology and "the normal" is blurred in extremely productive ways. In short, diasporic Arab ethnicity and migrant consciousness, in the world of dominant majorities almost always remain under the gaze of pathology, but for these writers linguistic innovation, narrative experimentation and thematic imagination generate diasporic, migrant and Arab worlds that are intensely disruptive of Brazilian and Israeli nationality. Pathology and madness expose greater pathology and madness disguised as "normality" and "sanity." And in the end, who is interested in reading literature that is normal or sane?

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[1] The retrograde status of aesthetics in area studies, cultural studies and ethnic studies exists for a reason. Considerations of literary taste or high-brow experiments in literature have often served as a means to exclude already marginal communities from consideration as "literarily sophisticated." This particular issue was pointed out to my by Professor Christi Merrill at my defense on August 22, 2013.

[2] Syrians and Lebanese historically migrated in large waves to Brazil in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of these immigrants were Christian. Later waves around the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990 included many Shiite Muslims. Mizrahi Jews are Jewish communities predominantly from North Africa and the Middle East –some from Central Asia and India as well—most of whom migrated to Israel en masse in the 1950's. Jews from Eastern Europe are referred to as Ashkenazim, and the division between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim is one of the contentious topics in contemporary Israeli politics.

[3] The very concept of diaspora is not very widespread at all in mainstream Brazilian culture; Israel, on the other hand, conceives of itself through the idea of the return of a 2,000 year old diaspora to its homeland. Neither country,

therefore, provides a fertile space for asserting Arab diasporic identities. This Israeli hostility on the one hand, and Brazilian indifference on the other to theidea of diaspora ultimately means that communities of Arab Jewish and Syrian-Lebanese migrants do not have a flourishing space to assert the diasporicity of their culture overtly.

[4]Colonial history is key to understanding Brazil's self-image, conception of race and reception of immigrants. The mixture of European, African and indigenous peoples continues to inform Brazil's relationship to ethnicity, such that other ethnicities such as Arab do not enter the discussion so much, except for the Moorish heritage of the Portuguese.

[5]Several other diasporas of note in the Brazilian case are on the one hand, the descendants of African slaves, Japanese immigrants, Jewish immigrants and Italian immigrants. For more on African diaspora in Brazil and reflections on diaspora from a Brazilianist see Kim Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition São Paulo and Salvador* (1998) and "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse" (2001). For more on immigration and ethnicity including Japanese, Jewish and Middle Eastern immigrants, see the following books by Jeffrey Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question* (1994); *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (1999); *A Discontented Diaspora: Japanese-Brazilians and the Meanings of Ethnic Militancy* (2007); and his latest *Immigration, Ethnicity and National Identity in Brazil* (2012) in which he argues that the race relations and ideas of ethnicity of post-abolition Brazil shaped much of the immigrant experience in the country.

[6] The summaries of the two novels (one by Raduan Nassar and one by Albert Swissa) and the two short stories (both by Samir Naqqash) will take place in each individual chapter. Here I am introducing the idea of geographies of escape, a central idea implicit in my thesis and the subsequent textual analysis.

[7] Albert Swissa gave a keynote address at the University of Michigan on March 28th, 2012. In the speech, he spoke of the longing of his child protagonists to be in another place as a major driving force behind his text. A broader discussion of this event will take place in Chapter 2.

[8] Here I am following Homi Bhabha's idea of "in-betweenness" and ambivalence with an important caveat: less attention to the dialectical relationship between dominant and subordinate cultures.

Chapter 1: The Dramatic Meta-Text of Ethnicity in Raduan Nassar's 'Lavoura arcaica'

The ghostliness of ethnicity, to varying degrees, marks the work of Raduan Nassar, Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash alike. Their aesthetic experimentation with ethnic identity in the context of diasporic displacement exposes a dramatic and ambivalent relationship to any sense of origins. Aesthetic and formal displacement of signifiers and language mirrors a similarly perplexing and irresolvable relationship to identity: the meaning of Lebanese for a Lebanese Brazilian, Moroccanness for a Moroccan Jew in Israel, Iraqi for an Iraqi Jew outside of Iraq, etc. Ethnicity and the sense of place in diaspora are phantoms with which each writer grapples on their own terms.

In the writing of Nassar, Lebanese Arab ethnicity becomes invisible and only tacitly present through subtle insinuations, a literary technique which begs several questions: what does it mean to be Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil? What traumas of dislocation and what kind of transcultural modifications did this immigrant community experience with the early waves of the late 19th and early 20th century? What place, if any, does Syrian-Lebanese immigrant history occupy in Brazilian nationalist narrative? What position do the descendants of Arab migrants occupy on a diasporic map? According to Raduan Nassar's novel *Lavoura arcaica*, Arab heritage is a ghost: "he [our grandfather] was the direction in our conjoined steps…in that ruin of corridors…not allowing us, except in repressed breaths, to inhale the mournful perfume of our sorrow that emanated from his solemn wandering through the house… (Nassar, 1989: 46). The glaring invisibility of the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil's dominant history and national ethos eludes

concrete mapping, and rather than seeking to correct the invisibility, Nassar chooses to explore it as a literary theme.

In Brazil's racial laboratory, a spectrum of white, black, indigenous and perhaps Asian groups, descendants of Syrian-Lebanese migrants –with their white, olive or light brown skin-- dissolve into the color gradations of Brazil's colonially inherited and then nationally appropriated models of miscegenation and "whitening" (Skidmore, 1974). Initially cultural segregated, working as poor peddlers and modest agricultural laborers, immigrants from the Levant in Brazil climbed the social ladder over the initial immigrant generations. Stereotypes of Arab immigrants as peddlers and shopkeepers did persist over time, even as subsequent generations adopted Brazilian social mores. Many Syrian-Lebanese immigrant children intermarried with non-Arab Brazilians --though women were often under more pressure to marry within the community—and men and women became doctors, corporate employees, small business owners, politicians, lawyers and teachers. The first and second generations of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants reached a disproportionate level of success in Brazil given their numbers in the population, and largely adapted to local customs, while still maintaining an elusive ethnic identity (Karam, 2007; Lesser, 1999; Truzzi, 1992 and 1997). Ironically, Brazilian and even international accounts of Syrian-Lebanese immigration have exaggerated the numbers of this immigrant community, pushing its visibility and emphasizing its contributions to Brazilian social life (Karam, 2007, see Table 1).

Table 1: Immigrants in Brazil by to country of origin from 1880 to 1969

	Portugal	Italy	Spain	Germany	Japan	Middle East	Others
1880-1909	519,629	1,188,883	307,591	49,833	861	31,061	171,498
1910-1929	620,396	245,003	263,582	101,703	85,716	79,102	266,598
1930-1969	464.,055	142,334	140,538	56,606	160,735	30,301	232,939
Total	1,604,080	1,576,220	711,711	208,142	247,312	140,464	671,035
Share	31%	30%	14%	4%	5%	3%	13%

Source: Lesser, Jeffrey (1999): Negotiating National Identity. Immigrants, Minorities, and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil. Duke University Press. Durham & London; eigene Berechnung

However, this numerical visibility has not translated into a visible accounting of Syrian-Lebanese experiences of assimilation and/or transculturation into Brazilian society. Syrian-Lebanese migrants underwent a highly traumatic experience of migration that eventually weakened the structure of many families and often destroyed the older social mores that held them together. This dislocation and disembodiment of Syrian-Lebanese traditions and customs has remained largely muted and invisible in Brazilian public discourse. Visions of Arab culture in Brazil most often manifest by means of consumerism: food, soap operas like the wildly successful 'O clone,' belly dance classes, international business and more recently tourism to Morocco (Samy Adghirni, 2010; Zélia Adghirni, 2012; Cherkaoui Ghazouani, 2002; Karam; 2007). The latest waves of Shiite Lebanese immigrants to the Paraná region in southern Brazil have complicated this picture, as their Muslim dress, greater attachment to tradition and more fluid mobility as migrants have marked them as an "other" (Arruda, 2007; Machado e Silva, 2008). Nevertheless, this new trend in Lebanese immigration is far beyond the scope of this dissertation and this chapter. The earlier, mostly Christian waves of Syrian-Lebanese migrants largely accepted a radical uprooting from the ways of life in their countries of origin, as evidenced by the sense of alienation experienced by many young "Brazilian Arabs" in more recent tourism and organized trips back to Syria and Lebanon (Karam, 2007).

Brazil's culture itself occupies a liminal space between East and West. As written in Hess and DaMatta's collection "The Brazilian Puzzle" (Arenas, 2003: 24; and Hess and Damatta, eds. et al, 1995), Brazilian public and intellectual life are largely Western-inspired, whereas popular culture and folklore preserve Eastern elements, particularly indigenous and African. Yet within this puzzle, little place existed to absorb Levantine culture and its own mixture of Jewish, Christian and Islamic, Ottoman, Arab and earlier Phoenician cultures. The knowledge of the Arab Levant in Brazil derives from Western-imposed models of ancient Greece and the larger Mediterranean in higher education and largely from Orientalist fantasies reveling in exoticism and primitivism (Athayde, 1976; Coelho, 1988; Tahan, 1938 and 1965; Teixeira, 2002; Zilly, 2009). While important Romantic Arabic language poets and literary societies did meet in São Paulo, where they established a thriving, transnational literary and journalistic culture, they did not leave a distinguishable mark on mainstream Brazilian society (Vargas, 2006).

This chapter explores precisely how the invisibility of this "ethnic difference and dislocation" becomes visible through socially and culturally informed reading of literary experimentation. The primary question that I attempt to answer is how Raduan Nassar's 1975 novel *Lavoura arcaica* succeeds at dramatizing this tension through language. A double movement occurs in the narrative between literary camouflage by means of allegory, figurative language, evasion of history and context on the one hand, and dramatic and tragic cultural conflict inside of an immigrant family on the other. This interplay creates a peculiar tension between invisibility and visibility of culture, where the obfuscation of cultural markers ultimately further emphasizes the struggle to fend off the disappearance of heritage in the context of diaspora and migration, family repression and rebellion.

Many "ethnically themed" texts represent ethnicity by means of specific markers including family stories, food, dress and the presence of language. These narratives actively seek to make immigrant cultural visible, intelligible and audible. Nassar's narrative echoes with "ethnically themed culture" through the majestic transcendence and order of values drawn from the Bible, its intersection with the Qur'an, the naming of characters and the web of relationships between them. Nassar's text, thus, is more "ethnic" than it may appear to some. Immigrant cultural mores remain implicit and partially concealed to a reader unfamiliar with issues of migration and Levantine Arab culture. The family's inner conflict becomes an ostensibly timeless meta-text on the value of rebellion and obedience, and of patience and passion, ideas that may appear divorced from immigrant culture, but actually expose the unsettling intergenerational drama of migration and the gradual erasure of a Lebanese Arab past. After providing some author biography, an analysis of literary criticism and a short summary of the novel for the sake of context, this chapter will lay out the prime examples of this Nassarian approach of underlining immigrant dislocation through disingenuous camouflage. I will look at issues of kinship, Biblical-Quranic speech-acts and the concepts of patience and impatience as simultaneous indicators of "ethnic identification" and figurative, allegorized meta-physical reflections. Finally, I will conclude with thoughts on issues of allegory and cultural translation in Nassar's novel.

Among prominent Brazilian authors, Raduan Nassar's cultural formation stands out as a fascinating amalgam, a complex variant on more common national stories of miscegenation and cultural cannibalization in Brazil.[1] He was born in Brazil in the town of Pindorama, São Paulo State in 1935, the seventh of ten children of a Lebanese Orthodox Christian immigrant family that had arrived in Brazil by boat fifteen years earlier in 1920. His parents, João Nassar and

Chafika Cassis, married in their home village of Ibel Saqi in South Lebanon a year before setting sail for South America. Raduan spent much of his childhood in the interior of São Paulo, where his family owned a fabric store and raised animals. Pindorama was a town full of "Mediterranean" immigrants of Syrian-Lebanese, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish origins (Bosi, ed., 2001: 7-8, 48). Nassar's early years were marked by the routine labor and tasks of agriculture and small-scale commerce, echoes of the village culture of South Lebanon and Arabic language and culture, a pan-Mediterranean world of southern European and Levantine immigrants, and Brazil's own particular local culture as had developed in the São Paulo interior.

Nassar had an exceptional memory since childhood, which helped him to build a massive Portuguese vocabulary by consulting dictionaries; suffered from epilepsy at a young age; once practiced religion with pious fervor, studied philosophy at the University of São Paulo and was part of a literary society there with writers such as José Carlos Abbate and Dalton Trevisan. He re-read the Bible and Qur'an shortly before writing *Lavoura arcaica*, and had the opportunity to visit his parents' village in Lebanon ten years prior (Bosi ed., 2001: 8-11). Nassar's move to São Paulo opened up new opportunities for personal development and intellectual growth stifled by more provincial rural life. Yet the importance of rural society would make its way into much of his literary creation even after moving to the city.

Thus, Nassar has a stunningly vast and highly eccentric well of literary influences, an "atypically Brazilian" variety of sources such as the Bible and the Qur'an, stories of Ottoman feudal life, classical Greek philosophy, the culture of the Brazilian interior, a profound and materially grounded sense of rural life and the literary high life in the big city. The difficulty categorizing Nassar as an author points to a deficit of certain kinds of cultural and intellectual

diversity in Brazilian nationalist narrative and by extension, in the work of Brazilian literary critics. The most glaring insufficiency is an absence of immigrant narratives and immigrant culture in mainstream Brazilian literary discourse,[2] and most certainly an almost total elision of the rich plurality of historical narratives of Syrian-Lebanese migrants to the country.[3]

However, Nassar's level of exposure to Syrian-Lebanese culture, the extent of his knowledge of the Arabic language and the precise influence of "ethnic heritage" on his writing remain mostly a mystery. Beyond the pages of his novel, the most palpable evidence we have of his parents passing on their culture to Raduan is an interview with Edla van Steen and his essay "*Nachahmung und Eigenwert*" (Imitation and Self-Worth), (Meyer-Clason, 1987; Van Steen, 2008). In the interview, Nassar mentions his father's stories of rural life in Lebanon under Ottoman rule which contributed to his "political consciousness." In his article published in German, he alludes to the challenges of growing up as an immigrant and writes on Brazil's relationship to Europe (Lemos, 2003).

Nassar has a small body of literary work –a novel, novella and short story collection— that he published in the opposite order of their composition. *Lavoura arcaica* (*Ancient Tillage*) was first published in 1975, and he completed an entire version of his novella *Um copo de cólera* (*A Fit of Rage*, 1978) in 1970. His short story collection, *Menina a caminho* (*A Girl on the Road*, 1994) was composed in various stages: Nassar wrote the title story, *Menina a caminho*, in 1961, and with the exception of the one story *Mãozinhas de seda* (*Tiny Silk Hands*), he published or at least composed the other stories individually in 1970 and 1972 (Bosi ed., 2001: 10-11). *Lavoura arcaica*, in spite of being published earlier, represents the culmination of his work.

The important difference between Nassar's earlier works and *Lavoura arcaica* is that the latter work profoundly engages his immigrant heritage. Nassar's narrator in the novel treats ethnicity with great ambivalence, detachment and even criticism as a stifling patriarchal family unit, in a manner that neither clarifies Nassar's or his protagonist André's relationship to Lebanese culture. The director of the film version of the novel, nevertheless, sensed its cultural specificity and traveled to Lebanon with Raduan Nassar to get a sense for the "Mediterranean ambiance" (Carvalho, 1998). Though the narrator never mentions the Arabic language by name, nor uses the word "Lebanese," the novel's characters, discourse and dramatic structure all do share an intense link to Lebanese-Christian culture.

On the surface, *Lavoura arcaica* seems less about immigrant travails than a timeless Biblical tale: it inverts the story of the prodigal son, prioritizing the conflicting attachments of the main-character André to family and to his autonomy, and engaging in larger debates surrounding passion and reason, desire and the value of patience. Yet the Bible, autonomy from family and the main character's impatience are, in fact, the "expressive core" of the novel's "ethnic narrative forms." Abstracted, philosophical and sublime rituals –poetic sermons, monologues, dialogues—constitute the unsettling axis of ethnicity, the drama surrounding the preservation of ethnic heritage and the rebellion against its most treasured principles.

The novel, in following the story of the prodigal son, has two parts that make up a deceptively simple plot: "Departure" and "Return."[4] Part one begins with André's brother Pedro arriving to take him back home, and then descends into loosely connected, non-linear bursts of monologue, memory and André's eventual confession to an incestuous relationship with his

sister Ana. The second shorter part of the novel coincides with André's return home and the tragic climax of the story.

Lavoura arcaica's plot eludes any easy categorization as the text lends itself to a loose accumulation of memories, monologues and sermons and privileges rhetorical debate and lyrical expression as a transcendent mode of action. The structure of the language, simultaneously archaic (i.e. highly evocative of the Bible, pastoral and anachronistic) and stunningly inventive, stands out from the beginning and is easier to detect and analyze than its content: mostly the convoluted thoughts of the main character André, who is subject to fits of epilepsy and rapturous highs and lows bordering on dementia. The plot of the novel revolves around one singular event: the consummation of incest between André and his sister Ana. Yet this central component of the story only comes out halfway into the novel, and the narrative develops and reveals facts in non-linear chapters that alternate between long verbal digressions, fragments and ellipses. In reading further, the background and consequences to the incest prove more complicated: quasi-incestuous affection between André and his mother in early childhood; divisions in personality between different family members; Ana's sensuous dancing at family celebrations; the repressive family culture in their immigrant home; André's seeming consummation of incest with his younger brother Lula after his return; the father's desperation to preserve the legacy of the deceased grandfather for the next generation, etc. The novel slowly exposes the roots of the immigrant family's inner conflict and then dramatically unleashes the tragedy: the patriarch Iohana slays Ana at the celebration of André's return.

Raduan Nassar's Lebanese background may be far from a secret in the world of Brazilian literary criticism, but many of the critical Lebanese-Arab components in *Lavoura arcaica* seem

to have remained its best kept secret. Any detailed bio of the author or extended study on his work tends to recognize that his parents were Lebanese immigrants (Nogueiras Jr., n.d), yet the significance of the fact for his fiction remains largely unexplored. The publication of *Lavoura arcaica*, largely due to its simultaneous engagement with and obfuscation of Lebanese-Arab ethnicity through language and narrative structure, remains a culturally singular event in the history of Brazilian literature. Nonetheless, the quite voluminous corpus of articles and books on *Lavoura arcaica* mainly separate Nassar's immigrant identity from his formidable literary talent. The reception of Nassar has tended to latch onto the "familiar" in the text; critics have mostly focused their praise on his command of the registers of literary Portuguese and retreated into abstract reflections on aesthetics, philosophy and narrative structure. Some have acknowledged that *Lavoura arcaica* stands alone, without a clear relationship to the rest of modern Brazilian literature (Abati, 2006; Faria, 1976; Pinto, 1995). Nevertheless, the particular brand of Lebanese Arabness that marks the novel has received limited attention.

The obscure, incidental references to Arab cultural elements –the haunting memory of the deceased grandfather and his wisdom; the debate over a story from the *Arabian Nights*; family celebrations dominated by dancing of the dabke;[5] references to singing in a "strange language" and to Arabic terms of endearment; the designation of figs and dates as "ancestral fruits;" the introduction of Quranic values and language into a non-Western Christian purview— hint at Nassar's broader infusion of Lebanese-Arab values into modern Portuguese. These factors have received quite marginal treatment in the literary reviews and articles; many scholars mention them only in passing or based on superficial visions of Arab culture. Some more recent scholarship has revisited Portuguese versions of the Qur'an and *One Thousand and One Nights* in order to recognize Islamic and Arab influences, but has generally avoided any systematic

analysis of Arab heritage (Bessa Ferreira; 2012; Rodrigues, 2006; Teixeira, 2002). In short, countless profound and valuable articles, books and dissertations have been written on *Lavoura arcaica* and Nassar's larger body of work, yet only a few have touched on his Lebanese-Arab heritage in detail (Ferreira, 2011; Iegelski, 2007; Lemos, 2003; Souza-Fuertes, 2010).

Another Brazilian Lebanese writer, Milton Hatoum, wrote:

> Raduan's novel impressed me so much…also because of aspects that I would call thematic affinities or ties from a common culture: Lebanon, with its Islamic, Biblical and Eastern resonances which Raduan incorporates into the *topos* of the return of the prodigal son in *Lavoura arcaica*…Raduan is perhaps the first author of Arab origin in Brazilian fiction to evoke themes from Eastern culture in such a dense and lyrical manner…" (Hatoum, in Bosi et. al, 2001: 20)

Rather than explaining Lebanese immigrant history and culture to a curious audience, Nassar uses them as instruments to heighten narrative tension and generate his own Portuguese-language poetics. The psychologies of the fictional family and the discursive utterances echo with Arabic resonances, in spite of the presence of only one Arabic-language word, *maktub*,[6] in the entire text. The language of Nassar's novel is thus at least bicultural (Paes, 1995)[7] if not multicultural, located between two places and languages, while at the same time preserving the integrity and poetic verve of an exclusively Portuguese-language text.

The language itself is a dramatic instance of transculturation,[8] a bidirectional instance of cultural and linguistic cannibalization only possible for an immigrant who both intimately belongs to a diaspora and the more dominant national culture. The "Arab" narrative components are neither the exclusive thematic ingredient of Nassar's richly allusive prose, nor do they preclude the incorporation of knowledge of botany, livestock and practical aspects of farm work; Greek philosophy, particularly sophism; stylistics of the *nouveau roman* and numerous other

sources of inspiration (Bosi, ed., 2001: 8-12). The "Arabness" in Nassar's text also does not seek "othering" or alterity as a narrative object; it remains open to the pull of other cultures and referents. The "otherness" in Nassar's text, while recognizable to a cultural insider such as Hatoum, or someone familiar with Arab heritage, does not cross the threshold from figurative insinuation into visible, more overt cultural naming.

As much of Brazilian literary culture absorbs difference into the syncretic mix that constitutes nationalist myth (Buarque de Holanda, 1936; Freyre, 1933; Prado Jr., 1942) and is also the subject of historical revisionism (Hess and DaMatta, 1995; Santiago, 2000; Silva, 1995), Nassar's text quite seamlessly crept into its larger world. Brazil, with its self-perception based on racial miscegenation, cannibalistic ingestion of other cultures in "*antropofagia*" and "Brazilianization" of what is "foreign," (Andrade, 1928; Ribeiro, 1995) Brazilianized *Lavoura arcaica*, eventually deeming it a central novel by one of Brazil's "greatest living authors." Both *Lavoura arcaica* and *Um copo de cólera* are considered "classics of Brazilian literature." (Bosi in Nassar, 1989). Yet most critics relegated Nassar's Syrian-Lebanese ethnicity to the margins.

'The Word Is in First Place': Ethnicity as Speech

One of the first and most important ways that Raduan Nassar's text defies assumptions about the "writing of ethnicity" or of "immigrant identity" is its almost complete avoidance or obfuscation of visible markers to ossify his characters into some sort of cultural mold. In fact, more than a set of repetitive and embodied practices –cooking, language, rituals, stories of homeland—the markers creep surreptitiously and briefly into the text of *Lavoura arcaica* through an elevated Biblical-Quranic discourse and arcane Nassarian poetics that surrenders and

engulfs ethnic identification inside of a philosophical and allegorical world. Ethnicity is

embedded in a discourse and a speech, such that it becomes a meta-text of ethnicity.

Leyla Perrone-Moises, one of the few literary critics to recognize the profound

importance of Arab culture in Nassar, said the following about *Lavoura arcaica*:

> *Lavoura arcaica* is the first great book about Lebanese immigration in Brazil. Far
> from stereotypes, typification and the picturesque, what we find is the difficult
> process of transculturation, the transformation of values and the clashes occurring
> over three generations in the same family. And, despite the transformations, the
> permanence of a culture through the discourse of its heir, enriching a new
> language with unprecedented resonances from the original (Perrone-Moises in
> Bosi ed., 2001: 69).

Lavoura arcaica is not a novel preoccupied with immigrant visibility, as only a few subtle

indicators mark the family as "other": the non-Brazilian names of some characters such as

Iohana, Zuleika and Huda; referencing words of affection and verses in a "strange language"

(i.e., Arabic); the mother's mourning at the end of the novel when Ana is killed; the

grandfather's clothing and an Arabic proverb he used to say, etc. *Lavoura arcaica* is a novel of

rhetorical struggle over power inside of a Lebanese-Arab immigrant family; most of the novel

explores the middle-son André's discursive challenges to the values and claim to authority of the

tyrannical patriarch Iohana, who bears the Arabic name for John. Patriarchal authority is

embodied in sermons upholding seemingly timeless and incontestable Islamic-Christian values,

while second-generation rebellion seeks to re-shape and re-mold that discourse to opposing ends.

The Gospel of John opens: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God

and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus' every word and parable was a holy ritual imbued with

spiritual and revolutionary potential. Similarly, *Lavoura arcaica* approaches speech as an

inspired act of great weight for familial relations. The patriarch Iohana states: "Every word is, in

fact, a seed; among the human things that can astound us, the strength of the word is in first place; it precedes the use of our hands, it is in the foundation of every practice" (162). The lingering power, suggestiveness and timelessness of words functions as a given that unifies the rebellious André to his father Iohana. Words organize events, such that the processing of events through inner monologue and externalized speech-acts overshadows the novel's chronology. Words give substance to practices, whether in sermons, monologue or dialogue. The immigrant home that seems to always draw family members back into its inescapable web stands for multiple values memorialized, ritualized and enacted through speech-acts (mostly sermons): principally a patriarchal system of kinship, the austerity of rural life and the chief value that serves as their glue: a Lebanese-Arab conception of patience (*sabr*).

Very few chapters narrate events as they happen in a sequence; most of the chapters involve sermons, monologues, dialogue, bursts of memory or fragments. Sublime words, philosophical debate and obfuscation of the concrete –ethnic difference, immigrant tradition, the specifics of rural Brazil—prevail to the point that the novel appears to primarily concern patriarchy, taboos and transgressions, sexual freedom and personal ethics. Argument, pontification and artful deployment of "the Word" play into the novel's mystifying poetics of obfuscation. The characters' only escape from the circle of family occurs through them: to elude the clutches of family involves the construction of an alternative discourse; the first-person narrator's "independent identity" takes shape through speech-acts that contrast with the sermons of the father; the narrative voice in *Lavoura arcaica* develops primarily on a metaphysical level and the values of the family largely take shape through discursive utterances. This fact lays the foundation for the mystification of ethnicity into a world of allegory and symbols. Ethnicity, in Nassar's narrative, is conceived of as a verbalized discourse or meta-text.[9]

The novel depicts a conflicted process of transculturation. The narrative language ironically embodies the very transcultural transference that never harmoniously extends to the entire family. According to the novel, the codes of kinship and the responsibilities inherited by the second generation in the Brazilian countryside are archaic and obsolete, hence the use of the word "archaic" in the book's title. As mentioned in the work of Fernando Ortiz (1940), transculturation involves both the death and persistence of numerous cultures that evolve into something new, and most significantly involves clashes and conflicts. In *Lavoura arcaica*, the patriarch Iohana's rigid outlook does not allow for novelty in the space of family. He cleaves to archaic visions of the world that, to some of the characters in the family, have lost their immediate relevance. The narrator André crafts a language that creatively draws on age-old traditions, but defiantly transforms their meaning and purpose. While the language does succeed at reviving ancestral culture, it does so with antagonism and in overt confrontation. *Lavoura arcaica* thus narrates the paradox of transculturation in a modern immigrant context where older traditions and desires of some of the younger generation are tragically incommensurable.

Even so, the discursive concept of "family" in the novel primarily involves the attempt to harmonize "competing points of view" through familial bonds and responsibilities, through dialogue and love: "...the gentleness of heart of every one shall anoint his [brother's] wound, and their lips shall kiss his unsettled locks tenderly, for love in our family is the supreme form of patience..." (61). While love certainly exists in the family, the possibility for dialogue and differing viewpoints does not. Thus, the family's self-concept is radically disconnected from reality and tragedy results from this "impossibility of dialogue."

Chapter 25, where André and his father's points of view directly meet, sheds light on the ensuing drama building throughout the earlier pages. At one point of their long debate, as André obscurely tiptoes around the real issue –that his family, in spite of its love, stifles his freedom and "denies him the right to live" (166)—, he reflects on dialogue: "I admit that the opposite is believed, but even if I lived ten lives, the result of a dialogue would always be belated fruit, if ever to be reaped at all" (162). This impossibility of understanding between father and son, incompatibility of desire and passion with the austerity dictated by family is the underlying thematic consistency found in each of the novel's fragments.

Each section of the novel, when reconsidered in light of the failed dialogue in Chapter 25, involves a dialogic encounter between André and another member of the family. The first eighteen chapters include lyrical monologues directed at André's brother Pedro and at the reader, interspersed with one of the father's sermons and a story from *The Arabian Nights*. The dialogue between Pedro and André fails miserably: Pedro weeps for his brother's dementia and returns home with him, only to "wander crestfallen between tree trunks" (172), burdened with the secret of incest. André further describes "clamming up in front of his mother" (67) before leaving home, unable to reveal his true feelings to her, and tries unsuccessfully, in an extended monologue, to convince Ana of the soundness of their love. In Chapter 25, André tiptoes around the real issue at home –individual freedom—to spare his father's feelings. When he openly confesses, his father explodes and André surrenders, sunken by the harshness of his father's words. The most prolonged attempt at dialogue ends in violent verbal conflict and the staunch assertion of Iohana's patriarchal authority.

While Iohana's sermon and worldview provide an important backdrop for the story, the dominant discourse belongs to André. The middle son's perspective prevails by means of narrative monologue; the chapters give discursive shape to his rebellion and blasphemy. The whole novel, to be precise, is an extended assemblage of utterances and development of the discursive subjectivity that is André (Piati, n.d.).

The primary symbols of the father's discourse are his extended sermon in Chapter 9, the narration of a story from *1001 Nights* in Chapter 13 and his extended debate with André in Chapter 25. Three other chapters include small fragments from his sermons. Of the chapters that involve extended narration of Iohana's viewpoints only one does not elicit commentary from André in parentheses or through dialogue. André's narrative power takes shape by dominating textual space, which ironically occurs while the pull of familial attachments brings him back home. André's dominance is an impossible discursive dominance that ultimately leads to actual consequences, as his family life consists of an opposing discourse and yields more social power.

Before Iohana's sermon in Chapter 9, André already throws the value of the sermons into question in Chapter 7. André points to the unspoken sexual behaviors involving his father and mother and at the evidence found "under the clothes bin" (44) that indicates a surrender to unrestrained passion. Thus, Iohana's sermons are inconsistent, and by extension, their father's behavior is hypocritical. Pedro's instinctive response is to "raise his hand in reprimand" (48) only to hold it back and lament his brother's "delirium."

Chapter 8 involves an implicit mockery of the sermon that immediately follows in Chapter 9. It further sets up a division between the rhetorical style of André and his father Iohana. In many of the chapters where André expresses himself through lyrical monologue, and

without any explicit addressee, he is quite liberal with question marks and exclamation points "Where was my head? what fodder was that which made the bed smoother, more fragrant, more peaceful...?" (50) and "what a hidden and patient seed! what sluggish hibernation!" (51). His discursive style includes bursts of passion, disorder, uncertainty, anguish and exuberance. The questions and exclamations involve sensations rather than ideas, a pattern that distinguishes André's discursive style from his father's. Iohana's sermons involve almost no questions or exclamations: they state ideas as if they were facts, foregone conclusions and human obligations.

Iohana takes great care to express an ordered view of the world, and André gives his emotional impulses free rein. André's speech conceptually descends into a beautiful obscurity often found in modern and post-modern varieties of poetry, and as his subjective discursive style dominates the narrative, it is no wonder that many have the called the narrative style of *Lavoura arcaica* "prose-poetry" (Becherucci, 1976). The passion of André's disordered discourse ultimately defines the text.

In this sense, *Lavoura arcaica* starts from the point of rebellion rather than the primary rhetorical source of the patriarch. In spite of the chronological nature of events in the narrative, the novel takes shape in discursive fragments, often moving backwards. André's critique of the sermons precedes exposure to the sermons themselves: "my pillow was made of dung, there where the most improbable plant germinates…a certain venomous flower that virulently buds, tearing the moss covering the texts of the oldest elders (52). André states his opposition to tradition and mocks his father's reverence for time and patience: "and in that silence scoured in harmony, smelling of wine, smelling of dung, to compose time there, patiently" (52). In focusing

upon dung and wine, the speaker pollutes an idyllic pastoral world. Chapter 8 sullies the principal values undergirding the pastoral lifestyle: resignation; submission; patience.

Most fundamentally, the conclusion of Chapter 8 blurs the purified world of time and patience from the father's subsequent sermon: "Time is the greatest treasure of which a man can avail…without a measurement suitable to it, time is nonetheless our greatest good: it has no beginning, it has no end…omnipresent, time is found in everything… (53-54). Iohana's sermons do not mention God or Christ; they focus upon the virtue of patience and the grandeur of time. In *Lavoura arcaica*, cyclical time becomes tantamount to the workings of God.[10]

André manages to contaminate the sermon beforehand, but cannot undo "the social foundation of authority." His defiant challenge only occurs textually. In this manner, *Lavoura arcaica* is a highly self-conscious, post-modernist text that focuses on the narrative power of words within the bounds of the novel itself and also reflects critically on the relationship between modernity and "pre-modernity" in its engagement with the "primitive" and the "archaic" (Canclini, 1990: 23 and Colas, 1994). Narrative rebellion exists almost exclusively within the bounds of textual possibilities, and inside of a text suspended in a transcendent illusion of timelessness. It is only when the novel shifts into more direct action, into an immanent and more concrete set of family relations in Chapter 23, that tragedy can no longer be avoided.

Nassar does not choose the core value contested in the novel in a cultural and historical vacuum. The point of conflict is a philosophical impasse --steeped in a millenary discursive tradition-- between a concept of patience passed down from rural Lebanese ancestors and the primordial desire to freely express emotions and sexuality. Patience in *Lavoura arcaica* draws on the semantic field of the term in its classical Arabic use. In the Quranic and hegemonic Arabic

sense, the word *sabr* does not simply mean a willingness to wait, but rather embodies a whole

array of values such as restraint of impulse; resignation to time and God's will; perseverance;

etc. (Izutsu, 2002). The Arabic word *sabr* has a great semantic range and social reach in Arab

culture, appearing repeatedly in the Qur'an, in hadith, in poetry, proverbs, folklore and religious

commentary (Mashhadānī ,1995). Levantine Christians, for their part, often cite the story of Job

as exemplary of the patience required in life, entreating their family members and friends to have

the patience of Job (*sabr 'ayoub)*.[11]

Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1949) transforms the reverence for patience and the

value placed on waiting in East and West into the object of absurdist irony. Nassar cleverly

preserves the dimensions of meaning of patience in the Portuguese text, turning the different

connotations of the word into a meta-textual debate over cultural values between immigrant

generations. In Nassar's text, patience in the Levantine sense both remains rich in meaning and

retains the archaic, impractical hue by which it may be viewed by detractors.

The patriarch Iohana's descriptions of patience clearly connect it to Arab heritage:

> …it is in the memory of grandfather that our roots slumber, in the elder that fed
> himself salt and water to provide us with a clear word… grandfather, with two
> fingers in the pocket of his vest, would smoothly draw his watch to his palm and
> rest his calm gaze upon the hours like someone intoning a prayer; cultivated with
> devotion by our ancestors, patience shall be the prime law of this house, the
> austere beam that buttresses our adversity… (59-60).

The ultimate symbol of patience in the sermon is the deceased grandfather. He embodied "the

prime law of the house cultivated with devotion by [Lebanese] ancestors" (60). The continuation

of ancestral values in Brazil, according to Iohana, requires both submission to time and

perseverance in the face of adversity. Though his sermon appears metaphysical and abstract,

Iohana's words resonate with values drawn from Arab heritage. It is no small matter that such an "Arab" conception of patience is to be "the prime law" of the migrant family's house. Patience is culturally specific, but Nassar connects the value to larger philosophical reflections and thus ethnicity becomes a contested philosophy that obscures and masks the depth of the culture in which it is embedded.

André, for his part, defends drinking, desire and the sensations that give color to life:

> …and it occurs to me suddenly to want, and I can! watching the sun imbue itself with its ancient blood, flex its flawless muscles…prick my hide at the sharp edge of its metallic light…I had simply formed a fist, raised my hand and made my temporal decree: impatience also has rights! (89-90).

The assertion of impatience as a right does not make sense in a Brazilian context as it would in a Lebanese one. Thus, in spite of the broad applicability of the questions surrounding patience in *Lavoura arcaica*, they come from an Arab, Islamic-Christian source that imbues the terms with a distinctive richness. André's idea of impatience, a foil of *sabr*, draws on an array of interconnected values. His impatience is not simply an inability to wait, but rather an active refusal to wait for life's pleasures; an impassioned surrender to impulse and immediate sensations; a harsh critique of "perseverance" as a waste of energy; and a rejection of explaining adversity by means of the designs of time. This multi-faceted idea of impatience is the foundation of André's rebellion against Lebanese heritage, his restless desire to leave its rigid principles behind.

The story from *1001 Nights* in Chapter 13, based on "The Sixth Brother of the Barber," serves as a focal point for this philosophical struggle over patience. Yet ironically, the emphasis placed on patience is based on a mistranslation of the original Arabic, in which the word

translated as patience, *fitnah*, actually is more accurately translated as "wit" in Husain

Haddawy's 1990 version. Nassar most likely gathered his version of the text from a variation of

Galland, likely Brazilian Alberto Diniz's classic translation of *1001 Nights* from the French,

which has gone through more than twenty editions in Brazil. The word patience does appear in

this text, but not clearly as the central element of the story. Nassar's choice of how to explore

and rewrite the "Sixth Brother of the Barber," like many important questions regarding his

biography and writing, remains a mystery.

However, most importantly, Nassar drastically modifies the common focus on the *1001*

Nights as an object of exotic consumption; while the palace in the story is fantastically ornate,

the text is stripped bare of its furnishings and turns into a meta-story on a core Islamic-Christian

value. As previously mentioned, *Lavoura arcaica*'s version does not even correspond to the

nature of the original, which does not revolve around patience, but rather the cunning of a king

forcing a starving man to pretend to eat and drink. The original includes the starving man

striking his lord and listening to the singing of fair slave girls and in a subsequent story, after

twenty years of living by the sovereign's side, the man's "lips and sexual organ were cut off"

(Rodrigues, 2006). Iohana omits the end in an act of moralistic sterilization:

> They both intermingled consummation, giving themselves over to the unstable
> play of the intoxicated, oscillating their heads and their midriffs slowly…the old
> man abruptly interrupted the false inebriation…"Finally, by dint of my search
> across the whole world, in the end I have found a man who has a strong spirit, a
> firm character, and who, above all, revealed that he possesses the greatest of all
> virtues of which a man is able: patience…and the starving man, thanks to his
> patience, never again knew hunger… (85-86).

In the original story, the humorous spirit and imaginative character of the starving man

Shakashik receive more attention and he even strikes his host:

"My lord I cannot drink any more." But as the host insisted, my brother, still pretending to be drunk, raised his arm until the white of his armpit appeared and suddenly hit the host on the back of the neck with a slap so hard that the place resounded with it. Then he gave him another slap, and the the host exclaimed, "What is this, you vile man?" My brother replied, "My lord, you have admitted your slave into your house, fed him, and given him wine to drink until he became drunk and unmannerly. You should be the first to tolerate his foolishness and pardon his offense." When the host heard my brother's reply, he laughed heartily and said, "Fellow, I have been making fun of people for a long time, but never till now have I met one who has the wit and ability to humor me like. I do pardon you" (Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*, 1990, 291)

As clearly emerges from reading the actual text, the laudable quality in the sixth brother of the barber is not Iohana's kind of patience. His playful wit earns the admiration of his host. Shakashik outwits his clever lord by imagination rather than submission. A picaresque tone dominates the numerous volumes of *1001 Nights*, in a manner largely devoid of moral and ethical absolutism. Thus, this source-text actually represents an "ancestral tradition" from the Levant that undermines the goals of Iohana's sermons. In making this choice from *1001 Nights*, Nassar hints at the malleable and multiple sources of "Arab heritage," which would not always affirm Iohana's rural austerity and archaicism.[12]

The parenthetical commentary on the story that André vocalizes to his brother Pedro includes the starving man striking his host, but the context in which it occurs relates more to the conflict of values in the novel. André objects to the torment of the starving man on moral grounds, primarily the presumption that the weak must submit to the whims of the strong:

(…the most powerful sovereign of the Universe confessed that in fact he had just found…the man of strong spirit, firm character, and…patience; yet before that accolade was professed, the starving man --with the astonishing and colossal force of his hunger, violently pummeled the old man of white and handsome beard, explaining himself before his indignation: "My lord and laurel of my brow, you well know that I am your slave, your submissive slave…whose thirst you quenched at last with a number of aged wines. What do you expect, my lord, the spirit of the wine went to my head…")… (86-87)

André's commentary reinstates a central component of the original tale: the starving man raising his hand to his host. Yet the tone of the story has shifted. Rather than simply an act of wit, the poor man's violence transforms into an act of rebellion against a despotic sovereign. André's re-interpretation of his father's parable ignores the response of the sovereign, as André values the act of rebellion itself more than any tangible result. He manipulates the story to make it relatable to his own subjection to the tyranny of his father Iohana.

The novel is primarily a conflict between men, where women are relegated to silence and to the background. [13] The foundational conflict relates to the development of André's character, which clearly occurs mostly by means of monologue and the foiling of his values and manner of speech with the sermons of his father. In various chapters, André turns the core values present in the father's sermons upside down. Chapters 16, 17, 18 and 20 all involve a re-enactment of some of the chief values Iohana transmits: the first asserts the right to libido and desire, "I will set that wood aflame…instantly making the largest room in the house into the granary of my testicles" (94); the second sees the incest as a largely inevitable machination of time and fate to be achieved through patience, "there existed the shrewd, precise measure to retain the trusting dove in the center of its snare; in one hand a heart in flames, in the other an adroit line that was to be tightened with geometry…" (100-101); the third connects the loss of virginity between siblings to holy sacrifice, "…a miracle, my God, and I will bring You back to life and in Your name I will sacrifice a sheep from my father's flock…" (106); and the last outwardly defends incest and blasphemes God and Christ. Iohana sees time and patience as signs of submission, resignation and an acceptance of order; André sees time and patience as sometimes necessary instruments in activating and realizing restless desires. In other words, André latches onto the view of patience through a lens of utility and instrumentality; Iohana cleaves to a traditional Lebanese-Arab and

more widely Eastern view that emphasizes the beauty of waiting itself and the dignity in steadfast resignation to adversity.

After Chapter 20, André returns home and the mode of narration shifts considerably. The violent discursive opposition André expressed before returning home largely dissipates and he returns to the "stifling environment" he had so wished to escape. A prevailing sense of gloom has settled over the house: André's mother is not the same since he left; Ana has withdrawn into her pious faith; Pedro returns bearing the burden of secret incest; Lula aches to leave like his brother and experience the outside world.

The family's collapse is accompanied by the collapse of its values, namely patience. The eternally patient patriarch, who bursts out in anger against his son in Chapter 25, ultimately loses control and abandons his sacred aura of restraint:

> … my father's noble brow…shone for an instant in the indolent light of the sun as his entire face was covered in an abruptly dark and gloomy white, and from there all reins were set loose, a ray of lightning broke with fatal speed: the cutlass was within reach and, cracking the group open in a burst of wrath, my father struck the Oriental dancer in one singular blow… it was the patriarch himself, injured in his precepts, who had been possessed by divine wrath…he was the guide, the solemn wooden board, was the law ablaze… (192-193)

Patience served as the glue that held the immigrant family together, or in Iohana's words, "the austere beam that buttresses adversity" (60). The transgression of the incest taboo and André's defiance of the family's core values ultimately led the larger-than-life *paterfamilias* to give in to his passions and violate his moral laws: "worlds of passion are worlds of unevenness, it is against them that we must stretch the wire of our fences" (56).

In this sense, the murder of Ana, more than an instance of violence against a family member, represents the disintegration of family. Iohana the patriarch tried to lead by example

and preserve the austere and rural way of life that only patience and resignation could uphold. His resistance to rebellion and the discursive source of his power proved resilient all the way until he discovered the secret of incest. Only the transgression of such an ingrained prohibition such as the incest taboo, an unspeakable, tacit and unbreakable pact prescribed by the most foundational components of the life of family and clan (Levi Strauss, 1969) led to the collapse of Iohana's unwavering patience and restraint. The conclusive, irreversible demise of immigrant family culture required the core representative of its laws, the patriarch, to commit the last transgression. This final act ultimately reveals the restlessness and passion behind Iohana's obsession with the value of patience, and his desperation to preserve immigrant heritage.

Yet Nassar's immigrant tragedy eludes concrete markers of conflict, mythologizing and philosophizing in place of contextualizing and historicizing. Patience, in modern Brazilian Portuguese, has little cultural materiality. It is an ossified value present in archaic proverbs and the Bible.[14] *Sabr*, on the other hand, is conceived of differently in both modern Arab culture and in the Lebanese-Christian world of Nassar's parents: it is a breathing, living concept that echoes and resonates through Bedouin folklore, pre-Islamic and more recent Arabic poetry, Quranic Surahs, Biblical stories, rural proverbs and the world view of many peasants and city dwellers resigning to the will of God and struggling against tremendous adversity. By not using the word *sabr* or explaining the meaning of patience in Arab culture, Nassar leaves the concept suspended between its archaic, fossilized place in much of Brazil's more Western culture and its vivid, highly material presence in the cultural heritage of the Arabs. This ambiguity allows for a rich debate on patience in the novel, and a preservation of the language's archaism.

"Ethnic" Narrative Framing

In addition to displacing ethnic representation from visible markers to the verbal utterances and variants of poetic speech, Nassar performs a second major disruption of literary thematizations of ethnicity. He covertly deploys cultural difference as a tool to frame his own meta-narrative. In other words, Nassar exploits values, rituals and symbols from a foreign immigrant world to narrate a deceptively universal family tragedy. The implicit use of Syrian-Lebanese culture extends to such narrative fundamentals as foreshadowing, character development and climax. Family –and its cultural specifics—makes it way into the minutest scenes in the novel, but even more importantly, serves the foundational role in their framing.

In Chapter 6, the middle son André, makes a crucial statement to this effect:

> Since my escape, it was hushing my revolt (what incisive silence! what texture to my rage!) that I distanced myself from the farm step by step, and if by chance I asked distractedly, "where are we going?" --it did not matter that I lifted my eyes and reached completely new, even less harsh, landscapes, it did not matter that I led myself walking to more and more remote regions, for out of my yearnings I would clearly hear a rigid judgment: it was gravel, an unyielding bone divested of any doubt "we are always going home" (35-36).

"We are always going home." This deceptively simple quote encompasses the complex intrusion of immigrant family space on the individual autonomy of the second generation. The space of home far exceeds physical geography and creeps endlessly into the psychological and affective world of all of the members of the family. No matter how remote or distinct the lands that André reaches and in spite of his revolt, his mind always returns to or is on route to home.

Time in *Lavoura arcaica* is cyclical and seasonal, always returning to its beginnings. Family mirrors the timelessness of time: its pull is cyclical and circular; the austere, laborious life on the farm, the piety of the father and the majesty of his sermons, and the bonds between family members all recur through cyclical ritual: "The earth, wheat, bread, table, family (the

earth); they exist in this cycle, father said in his sermons: love, labor, time" (183). Iohana's

sermon further hints at a similar idea to "always going home." Children, in following the novel's

pastoral symbolism, are like cattle herded by a shepherd-patriarch, always returning to the same

place: "we do not question, in the pure bareness of the plains, the tortuous trails traced through

the pastures beneath the hooves of each flock: for cattle is always headed towards its trough,

cattle is always headed towards its watering hole" (62). Family and children are caught in the

web of time, home and familial bonds, which together seal and frame the tragedy.

The narrative foreshadowing of tragedy too draws from Nassar's Arab heritage:

> (In memory of my grandfather, I record these words: to the sun, the rain and the wind, to other shows of nature that sustained or destroyed the fruits of our labor, grandfather, in great contrast to the promiscuous discernment of my father… would always respond with a coarse belch tantamount to all of the knowledge, all of the churches of worship and all of my father's sermons: *Maktub*.) (91)

Maktub, which means "it has already been written," references a Book of Destiny on which the

future of all is the written, the famous "Guarded Tablet" (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūẓ*) extensively

discussed in Islamic hadith and Quranic commentary by scholars as renowned as al-Qurtubi, Ibn

Atiyeh, al-Hafez Ibn Hajar and al-Bukhari (Wikipedia, *Lawḥ Maḥfūẓ*, Arabic), present in *The

Arabian Nights* (Burton, 2011 ed.) and much of the Orientalist imagination. In Hadith Qudsi,

sayings 4 and 16 in particular emphasize "the control of God over time" (4) and that "God has

written down good and bad deeds," and many others speak of the Day of Judgment, in which

humanity will be divided and judged according to what God has written on the "Guarded

Tablet." In the context of Nassar, *maktub* hints that the future of humans on Earth is pre-written

and expresses an overarching fatalism and sense of resignation to fate and Divine Will.

As concerns the plot of *Lavoura arcaica*, the Arabic term hints at irresolvable conflict heading for a tragic conclusion. Nassar predates by more than a decade the more famous Portuguese-language work to evoke the term *maktub*, Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988).[15] Nassar paints the concept with an overarching sense of gloom, the opposite of its popularization in Coelho's novel as a positive, empowering sense of destiny. The fatalist tone of the novel, in following the idea of immutable destiny, constantly builds while concealing the object of fate.

Chapters 10 and 12, parenthetical commentaries like Chapter 15, also foreshadow the tragedy, in a tone of morbid inevitability:

> (Smelting the glass and metal of my cornea...a cylindrical coffee roaster, smoldering, blackened, sorrowful and phlegmatic, spinning through memory on its crank…and a gloomy iron kettle, crashing day and night against its tract…and…many other tiny, powerful fragments that I preserve in the same pit as devout guardian of the family possessions.) (64-65)

In this chapter, commonplace possessions take on a gloomy quality of decay. André encounters his home in a dream-like daze and assumes a mournful tone in describing mundane objects: a coffee roaster is "blackened and sorrowful" (65), an iron kettle is "gloomy." He evokes morbid, death-like sentiment in using the Portuguese word *poço* (well or pit) for the "removal of clay pots" and *fosso* (pit) as the place where such things are to be preserved.

In short, this chapter hints at the mournful air the migrant family breathes, and that permeates the simplest objects to be found in the space of home. Memory and cultural traditions are on the path to extinction and, at the same time, youthful hopes for self-realization are being extinguished. The pull of family and its antiquated domestic relics prove resilient, yet the threads holding it together continue to unravel. The immigrant home is fighting against time, the very immutable agent that drives destiny and which the father worships like a deity. The end of a

distinct immigrant family life is pre-written. However, one manages to uncover the tragic

foreshadowing in *Lavoura arcaica* mostly in retrospect. One of the primary narrative tools used

to this suspending effect is the fragmentation of the novel into loosely connected parts: the

"fatalist" chapters are spread throughout the book, extremely brief and easily forgotten.

Chapter 12 engages the discipline and sense of law that prevails under the family's roof:

> (...and it is catching sight of the wares, and also the wardrobe of the family, that I hear diffuse voices scattered in that dark well…and I start pulling from that bundle of routines, one by one, the sublime bones of our code of conduct…and I reencounter…our most hidden shame betrayed in the blushing of our faces...at that table, more than at any other place… we underwent, eyes lowered, our apprenticeship in justice.) (77-78)

While repeating the "dark imagery" from Chapter 10, this section focuses on tyranny within the

family unit. André decries the codes essential to its behavioral logic, exposing violence inflicted

upon innocent children in upholding such a prohibitive lifestyle. The children in the family have

no sense of empowerment: they have "blushing faces" and "lowered eyes" (78). Passive

acceptance of this order stifles certain members of the family to an unsustainable breaking point.

The grandfather's "belch," *maktub*, captures the winding web of relationships, desires

and hopes that destroy the family in the end. However, in following the tradition, humanity is too

blind to perceive and comprehend the signs of its own destiny. The narrator André and the author

Raduan Nassar lead the readers blindly through a minefield of family obligations, human desires

and mini-revelations before unleashing tragedy in its shocking inevitability. The non-linearity of

the novel serves to emphatically advance the fatalism behind the term *maktub* and frame the text

in accordance with its principles.

Connectivity to the Left and Right of the Dinner Table:

The family home, its bonds and relationships serve as the central instrument for character development in the novel. Two distinct spaces of tradition embody the family's inner conflicts, tensions and the struggle over authority. One is constant, unchanging and ossified: the dinner table where the patriarch, Iohana, gives his sermons "…father at the head, the wall clock at his back, his every word pondered by the pendulum…" (53). The dance circle for the dabke, on the other hand, is dynamic, spontaneous and even dangerous: "…Ana would not hesitate, impatient and impetuous…with a red flower like a curdle of blood clipping the edges of her flowing black hair…" (30). The sermons at the dinner table profess a reverence for patience and propriety rooted in Arab heritage, while the dance circles at family celebrations serve as a dramatic enactment of tradition without such clear controls over behavior and sexuality. The dinner table defines the characterization, family structure and divisions, while the dabke stands out as a symbolic cultural site where tragedy and passions are acted out.

Nassar's novel frames traditional codes of family responsibility and the divisions between its individual members within a highly insular structure, embodied by the seating at the dinner table. The dynamics of these relationships have received more treatment in literary criticism (Pinto, 1995; Rodrigues, 2006; Tartáglia, 2011), but not as a culturally specific phenomenon. In order to better understand the family dynamics in *Lavoura arcaica*, I will turn to the research of the anthropologist Suad Joseph. Her ethnography concerns Lebanese family structure, kinship and patriarchy based upon fieldwork conducted in the 1990's. In both Joseph and Nassar, Lebanese familial structures uphold patriarchal authority and wed family members

to each other through a system of "connectivity" that subsumes the sense of self through collective obligations and attachments:

> …connectivity meant that persons expected intimate others to...anticipate each other's needs...They saw intimate others as extensions of each other. Connectivity can be one-sided, with one person in a relationship perceiving the other as part of the self…but…it was mainly reciprocal, with women and men, juniors and elders, equally engaged and interwoven in webs of relationality.... (Joseph, 1993: 467)

One immediately recognizes the immense collective responsibilities demanded of children in many Lebanese families. The identities of its members have a contingent, dependent quality to others in complex "webs of relationality." Precisely this network of projections of affect, and the heavy sense of duty it entails, shape the narrative discourse in *Lavoura arcaica*: "…to keep the house upright, we had to strengthen our feeling of duty, honor our blood ties, not grow distant from our door, answer father when he asked, not turn our eyes from a brother in need…" (23)

More specifically, Joseph's notions of "connectivity," "webs of relationality" and "selving" help to read family and allegory in Raduan Nassar. Connectivity is meant to refer to the overall familial structure that denies individuality and autonomy; webs of relationality are the relational flows between members of the family; and selving is the peculiar, non-autonomous sense of subjectivity that results from the relational flows. These three concepts are crucial to understanding the mode of character development that prevails in the novel. Yet one must note an important difference: in Joseph's research, connectivity is a self-sustaining system of kinship; in Nassar, the connectivity is broken, contested and ultimately pathologized by the members of an immigrant family.[16]

The families examined in Joseph's field work and depicted in Nassar's fiction do not admit autonomy as a right or even a consideration. In the case of Nassar, this "connectivity"

impacts narrative choices. No character exists in isolation from the others and all are trapped within the same immediate family circle. Nassar takes the insularity of family a step further, reducing the large extended family or *hamula* in Arab culture to a smaller nuclear structure. The only times when the extended Lebanese-Arab family in *Lavoura arcaica* gathers are at moments of celebration, and for the dancing of the dabke. This narrative choice of Nassar's corresponds to the separation of his own immigrant family between the city of São Paulo and the state's interior, a sign of cultural changes endemic to immigrant life (Bosi et. al, 2001: 7-9; Truzzi, 1992).

Neither Joseph's work nor Nassar's artistic imagining of family are meant to be absolute. Joseph's research takes place in modern Lebanon in the 1990's and Nassar crafts his fiction from an entirely distinct society, Brazil, and a different historical period, as his parents left a semi-feudal, post-Ottoman reality in rural Lebanon. The link between their two conceptions of family largely resides in the psychological weight wielded by its structures of affect and patriarchal power relations. The relationship between the mediums of literature and ethnography is a complex and blurred one, as the latter has moved more in the direction of subjectivity and the creativity of fiction in recent decades. By using Joseph's ethnographic research as a reading tool, I am neither claiming an equivalency between its take on family and that in Nassar's novel, nor attempting to label *Lavoura arcaica* an ethnographic novel. I am merely suggesting that by employing some of Joseph's model of "connectivity," deep psychological structures of attachment and affect present in Nassar may be better understood.

The existential quote on family, "we are always going home," encapsulates the crushing insularity of home and the human emotions that accompany it. The immigrant home in Nassar actively contains and fences in the characters, engulfing and subsuming their subjectivity to the

point that characterization takes shape as a link in a collective tree, by a seat at the collective dinner table, by positioning oneself relative to words addressed to a collective in a sermon. Individuation and interiority are foreign words or unachievable escapist fantasies: "…wisdom is precisely the ability to not confine oneself within that small world: humble, man abandons his individuality to form part of a greater unit from which he retrieves his greatness"…. (147-48). Nassar's story turns to collective identities and relationships that constitute the circle as the primary mode of characterization. The development of characters does not involve an emphasis on interiority or individual peculiarities, as would often be the norm in modern Western fiction (Benjamin, 1968 and Lukács, 1971). Interiority already forms part of a powerful family collective. In his essay "Narrative Men," Todorov speaks of action and plot in *1001 Nights* shaping character development (Todorov, in Marzolph, ed., 2006: 226-238). Nassar's text engages in a similar process, developing its characters through webs of relationality within an immigrant family unit. No character has the autonomy to think of himself or herself outside of a family context. What actions signify for family determines their meaning; the meaning of personality too exists in relationship to the system of authority and acceptable behavior proscribed by the patriarchal household. The symbolic weight of family relationships dismantles any illusion of interiority, engulfing the characters and the very narrative.

Notably, *the plot does not include a single major character from outside of the family*. Characters outside of the nuclear family are only mentioned in passing at the family celebrations, or in André's lengthy monologues. The narrative structure and choices of literary figures themselves do not admit autonomy from the confines of family authority (Ferreira, 2011; Morgan in Kristal, 2005: 117-118). In other words, the narrative structure of the novel reflects a familial arrangement similar to that outlined in Suad Joseph's research.

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Rather than examining André's departure, the work revolves around the perspective of family, presenting his escape as a massive failure. The novel begins with André's older brother Pedro's arrival, interrupting André's fleeting assertion of sexual autonomy by masturbation:

> My eyes on the roof…the room is inviolable; the room is individual, and a world, the room a cathedral where the white rose of despair is picked in anguished intervals from a rough stem in the palm of a hand, for first among the objects the room exalts are those of the body… (9).

Opening the novel with a masturbation scene sets the stage for the devastation of Biblical taboo. Masturbation or onanism (Onan "spills his seed" in order not to sleep with his deceased brother's wife) leads to the death of Onan (Genesis 38:9-10).[17] André attempts to find, by sexual exploration, an alternative way of life to the Bible's classical prohibitions and to the moral codes in his immigrant home. Yet, André picks a "white rose of *despair*." The masturbation scene, though seemingly an act of freedom and release, describes a passive state of affairs: the individual is the room, not the human subject. The main character André, in spite of the measure of freedom afforded him by his "escape," cannot develop as an individual. The room provides temporary freedom, but the bonds of family he feels pulling at him have no spatial bounds.

André's exploits during his absence from home receive meager attention; the effect of his departure on family remains paramount and dominates the novel's plot from the opening pages:

> I felt the torrential weight of the entire family in his [Pedro's] arms; we looked at each other once more and I said "I wasn't expecting you" was what I said… "I wasn't expecting you" this was what I said a second time and I felt the powerful force of the family pouring down upon me like heavy rainfall… (11)

The characters in '*Lavoura arcaica*' are incapable of breaking away from home, and this inescapable barrier follows them in the totality of their existence. Subordination to family equally touches the characters that choose to submit and those who wish to rebel. André, who

stages the boldest rebellion, admits his inability to build an autonomous life on two occasions: "no more than an illusion, in my case, the happiness that I could have discerned beyond the bounds of my father" (24) and "'understand, Pedro, that I already knew since the most tender puberty how much disappointment awaited outside of the limits of our home" (69).

In short, the dramatic tenor of the entire novel derives from the inextricable bond between each character and other family members. Therefore, the highly figurative characters in the text are not simply figurative because the text is allegorical; rather, in following Joseph's theory, each character's sense of self is neither stable nor autonomous, but subject to a flow of self-projections and emblematic family responsibilities with literal consequences. The novel's mode of characterization appears hollowly figurative rather than profoundly individual precisely because of the literal entrapment of each character within the symbolic confines of family.

The connectivity in the family appears to be tripartite, characterized by three fundamental patterns of relationality and selving: doubling, the positive extension of the values of the self; foiling, the negative extension of self; and passionate displays of reciprocal love that materialize within the confining context of familial authority, but are ultimately not contingent upon that order. The connective structure defers to a patriarchal order that privileges male desires over female ones[18] and the will of elders over that of juniors (Joseph, 1993, 1994 and 1999). For the structure to survive requires the dominance of an authoritative self, the patriarch, over the selving and relationality of the various members. Foiling of the patriarch that undermines his authority, precisely what André represents, threatens the cohesion and persistence of the family structure.

The family is presented as a social body that strives to sustain unity. Yet important distinctions in personality within the body create inner conflict:

These were our places at the table when time for meals or sermons: father at the head; on his right, by order of age, Pedro came first, followed by Rosa, Zuleika and Huda; on his left, came mother, and then I, Ana, and Lula, the youngest. The right branch was a spontaneous growth from the trunk, from the roots; the one on the left bore the stigma of a scar, as if mother, where the second branch began, were an anomaly, a morbid protuberance…it could perhaps be said that the distribution of seats at the table (they were vagaries of time) defined the two family lines…(156-57)
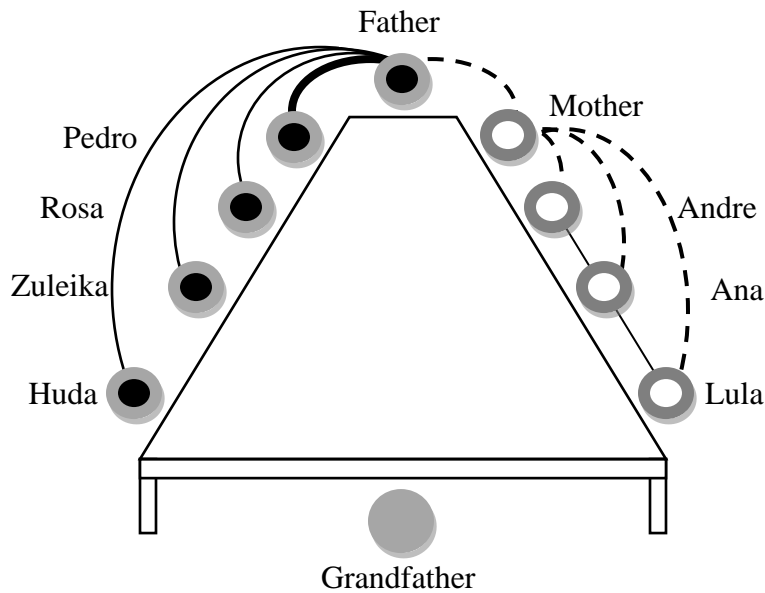

Figure 1, created by Julia Johnson based on my description

Lavoura arcaica poeticizes a material void of home and family. Landscapes, sexual desires and impulses and the dancing at family celebrations are painted in color; immigrant domestic life languishes in black and white. The sublime poetics that so capture the reader's imagination are a counter-poetics of rebellion; the symbolic relations of the family are a memorialized phantom. The dinner table lays out the familial relations in a skeletal, diagrammatic form that exudes archaic regression and irresolvable fissure.

The table where Iohana professes his sermons is the definitive space for understanding the bonds of the family. The father sits at the head as ultimate authority; the ghost of the

grandfather (a symbol of millenary Lebanese culture) remains at the other head; Pedro, Rosa, Zuleika and Huda follow Iohana's every command; the mother, Iohana's presumed partner, obeys him, but her love for André is overbearing, and this protuberance from the roots of the family extends to André who impulsively seeks to discover sexuality and self by consummating with his sister Ana; Ana too has a sensuality she cannot deny in conflict with religious piety; and Lula feels equally stifled by the family life as André.

A quite coherent symbolism of the right and left sides emerges in Nassar's novel, as defined and understood by the binarism of Iohana's family ethics. For him, the right side represents conformity and/or union, as well as an austere sense of honor and patriarchy. This order is upheld by the "rational" virtue of patience and by submission of children to the inner logic of the family. The father Iohana rules with an iron fist of a tyrant, drawing his moral authority by the rhetorical mastery of his religious sermons and his status as patriarch; Pedro is the first-born son to pass on his legacy: "the voice of my brother, properly calm and serene, it was a prayer that he uttered when he began to speak (he was my father) of the lime and the stones of our cathedral" (18). Rosa, Zuleika and Huda, as the novel develops them, seem largely voiceless, immensely loving and generally submissive daughters who, like Pedro, accept and embody the patriarchal family structure.

The left side of the table exudes desire, impetuous affection, and other dangers of emotional impulse. On the surface, one might read this division as one between the left and right wings of politics or conservative social tradition and progressive modernity. While not entirely incorrect, these readings jump into broader social themes alien to the insularity of the Lebanese migrant family; they further ignore the context of a division between left and right in the Bible

and the Qur'an, an Islamic-Christian symbiosis common in Lebanese and larger Middle Eastern culture. The left is considered a source of impurity, particularly the left hand. It is wicked, the source of moral vice and impulse; the right virtuous, pious and morally sound. The story of the prodigal son involves seating at the right and left sides of a family table. Further, the Qur'an separates people into "Companions of the Left and of the Right." Those of the left are bound to damnation "mid burning winds and boiling water" (Qur'an, Sura LVI, 41) and those of the right to paradise "mid thornless lote-trees and serried acacias...outpoured waters and fruits abounding" (Qur'an, Sura LVI, 28-30).[19]

The Lebanese family circle in which each of Nassar's characters is embedded in a cycle of projections of the self through family ties which leads to a promiscuous doubling and foiling of characters, and amorous webs of love, attachment and passion that defy the facile binaries that constitute Iohana's brand of ethics, largely based on patience. The narrative disregards the seemingly more independent development of interiority that often typifies modernist novels and remains wedded to collective relationships often discarded in post-modernist writing. The more complex development of "selving" occurs on the left, more rebellious or subversive, side of the table: André and Ana are doubles of each other (though their statuses as son and daughter differ according to unequal gender roles), especially considering the first-person narration and that Ana means "I" in Arabic. This doubling evokes both a sense of possession --"and it was then a quivering that I pressed between them as I ran through the back yard in elation yelling she's mine she's mine… (LA, 97-98) and "'Ana was my disease…my madness…my breath, my blade, my shivering goose flesh…" (109-110)-- and a sense of equivalency: "thinking that we were earthly beings, and all that there was in us would only germinate into one with the water that came forth from the other" (115) and "we have our fingers, the joints in our knees, hands and feet...

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understand that beyond our fingernails and our grief, separation would mean the mutilation of our bodies" (130-131).

The incestuous relationship between André and Ana, rather than a departure from the collective family body, is a consummation of the passions and connectivity within the family unit itself. Incest is a form of "selving": a carnal consummation of both affection and a sense of doubling of the self. Ana, like André, "more than anyone else in the house has a body smitten with the plague" (30). They share a taboo sensuality that the austere moral codes of the family do not allow. The incest in Nassar's novel, just as much as the transgression of a taboo, is an act of "selving" by the main character, an extension and projection of self and family into the realm of sexuality --his own distorted expression of devotion to the family.

The flows of connectivity and relationality, though most dramatically embodied in the brother-sister relationship between André and Ana, grow more complex in looking at other characters. For example, Lula's eyes look like Ana's and "his eyes are close to André" (24). He is thus both a projection of André's rebellion and desire for escape, as well as a double projection of André's own double, Ana, in appearance "in his eyes, daring and pretense were mixing...his eyes were, without a shadow of a doubt, the primitive[20] eyes of Ana!" (181-182). This fact appears to lead André to consummate with Lula. All of which creates a complex "web of relationality" like a set of lines running through the three characters' identities.

The act of incest with his sister Ana –and subsequently with his brother Lula—is a "failed escape." These sexual acts only further indicate the interdependent relationships that make up the family. The most unspeakable, pathological form of rebellion takes place within the family circle rather than outside. Everything began in André's childhood with a quasi-incestuous

closeness to his mother,[21] then eventual consummation with Ana and some form of sexual relationship with Lula, an extension in the order of seating down the left side of the dinner table. Pathology from within, grounded in the family's affections, personal relations and seating at the table, is ultimately the only means to destroy the weakened –but stubbornly resilient— connective structure of the immigrant family.

André has a distinct, eroticized identity and sense of self with his unnamed mother, sister Ana and younger brother Lula as opposed to his relationship with his father, brother Pedro and sisters Rosa, Zuleika and Huda. This division does not deny, however, the love between all members of the family. Yet love in the family cannot erase the fact that the core structure of the family is irremediably split. This symbolic fissure underpins the webs of relationality within the family, which push to preserve unity in the midst of disunity, an irresolvable inner conflict.

The dabke has a multi-dimensional function in *Lavoura arcaica*. The same dance scene, with mostly the same metaphors and words, recurs in Chapters 5 and 29. The verbs shift from the Portuguese imperfect tense to the preterite in order to serve a thematic function: the first scene is a memory that happened multiple times, a retrospective gaze on the origins of André's desire for Ana; the second is meant to be read as an irreversible moment in time, post-consummation of incest, where family collapses. The dabke, described as a dance circle rather than folk dance, stands in as the ultimate symbol for the circularity of time, encompassing both origins and death in its rapturous movement: "…the circle…would then accelerate its movement…[it was]the large round of a mill spinning celeritous in one direction that with the playing of the flute would rise again and turn back on its axis…" (30). In shaping the circularity of time, the dabke also becomes the physical site for the unfolding of tragedy.

The dabke, as the most concrete marker of immigrant culture in *Lavoura arcaica*, serves a paradoxical social function. A revered tradition, in which "elders sing verses [in Arabic]" (31) and Iohana "herds the young" (29), it is also the space for Ana's unabashed sexual expression: "…she swiveled her body, she knew what she was doing…to hide her poison first out of sight under her tongue, and then bite the cluster of grapes that hung in orbs swollen with saliva…(31) The fragile tension between sexual energy and social repression in *Lavoura arcaica* temporarily loosens through celebration, rhythm and dance, but also reaches its climax in the same space.

The commingling of sensuality and social tradition in the dabke is not exclusive to Nassar's text, but also an intrinsic quality to the dance.[22] Every dabke circle has a skillful male leader, called the *rawīs* (leader or head) who directs the movements by his dexterity, rhythm and enthusiasm. In Nassar's work, the patriarch Iohana is the *rawīs*. Yet the dabke is also a place for the expression of sensuality and sexual tension, within limits. A woman will often dance in the center by the flute player.[23] In both dabke scenes, Ana takes on the role of awakening sensuality in the family. In the first, André falls prey to her seductive movements "my eyes filled with bitterness did not budge from my sister who had the soles of her feet on coals stamping marks that were burning inside of me." (LA, 33) In the second, she is killed at the hands of the father when he discovers the secret of incest. In Nassar, the dabke is the site of an incestuous male gaze on the female body.

The tragic elements of *Lavoura arcaica* begin and end with the contradictions, tensions and sexual energy of the dabke. Yet the nuances escape any reader unfamiliar with the tradition, as Nassar never mentions it by name or even bothers to contextualize. The passion of the dabke is blinding and brings the family's two incommensurable forces of disunion and connectivity to their climactic head. Though the family body is unable to withstand the transformations of time

and rebellion, its sense of connectivity and patriarchal ethos remain intact, which explains the

despairing, mostly unified reaction of the family to the murder of Ana:

…from the mournful silence that had poured down behind that gesture, as if from the pains of childbirth, a primitive wail burst forth:

Father!

and another voice, a cavernous howl, full of despair

Father!

and from every which way, from Rosa, from Zuleika and from Huda, the same forsaken yell

Father!

it was strangled bleating

Father! Father!

our assurance where?

our protection where?

Father!

and from Pedro, prostrate on the ground

Father!

and I saw Lula, that child unsettled so early on, reeling on the ground

Father! Father!

the family's union where?

Father!

and I saw mother losing her mind, tearing out handfuls of her hair, grotesquely uncovering her thighs, exposing the purple streaks of her varicose veins, beating a stone fist against her chest

Iohána! Iohána! Iohána!

and coming to her aid was of no avail, and refusing any consolation, walking through those compressed groups murmuring as if she were wandering through ruins, mother began to wail in her own language, sending out a millenary lament that continues to travel across the destitute

coast of the Mediterranean: there was lime, there was salt, in that rough word was desert sand and grief (LA, 193-94).

At the dramatic culmination of family tension, the climax of the novel displays the disintegration of the structure of family, mimicked by the incompatible indentation of the text's lines. Yet, members from both the left and right side of the table call out to their father, the patriarch, in desperation, hope for guidance and in a "Mediterranean" (i.e. "Arab") display of grief.[24] The character of Ana disappears, never to be spoken of again, and André does not speak again either, except to record fragments from his father's sermon at the end of the book. The family calls out in mourning for the sense of order symbolized by the father, who ironically oversteps his own restraint with the most finality in a violent act of passion. The end hints at the persisting psychological impact of the family circle across inter-generational gaps, at conflicting desires and senses of morality, and at unspoken, repressed emotions on the right side of the table.

Allegory and Cannibalization: 'Lavoura arcaica' as Narrative Camouflage

Raduan Nassar's work was published during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985), an era of dangerous assertions of patriarchal authority and many ethical dilemmas. Important themes in *Lavoura arcaica* –tyrannical impositions of morality and patriarchy, the repression of rebellion-- have great relevance to this period in Brazil's history. Thus, it is no surprise that many in Brazil may have read the novel as an allusion to the lack of freedom of life under the dictatorship and the polarizing political forces at the time (Coimbra, 2011; Menezes, 2008; Morelo, 2011; Zilly, 2009). Yet beyond the repressive mechanisms of family patriarchy, very little concrete narrative evidence exists in the novel to point to national politics.[25] This absence of any more overt political allusions contrasts strongly with Raduan Nassar's other major works –*Um copo de cólera* (Nassar, 1978) turns conjugal quabbles and copulation into a metaphor for

political and social tensions in Brazil of the time and *Menina a caminho* references the polarizing

history of Getúlio Vargas and class divisions in rural Brazil (Nassar, 1994).

The rural São Paulo setting in *Lavoura arcaica* remains mythical rather than Brazilian,

and in this imaginatively mythical environment is precisely where the novel's engagement with

Syrian-Lebanese immigrant identity develops. Nassar makes few concretizing gestures in the

book to add local color; he refrains from naming towns, exploring characters outside of the

family, relating immigrant stories or exhibiting an emphatically Brazilian colloquialism in his

language. Only the tools of rural labor mark the regional specificity of the setting (Zilly, 2009).

The distinct lyricism of the novel is rural and archaic, though set to the general rhythms of

Brazilian Portuguese; its eroticism, metaphor and character development remain entangled in

primal signifiers tied to agriculture, land and nature (Lotito, 2007), and also philosophical

ruminations that derive from Biblical, Quranic, classical Greek and proverbial traditions.

Lavoura arcaica does narrate the disintegration of "ancestral" and "millenary" values

that hold an immigrant family together, but through a largely philosophical meta-textual

presentation that obfuscates, allegorizes and mythologizes immigrant culture.[26] In contrast to

Paul de Man's famous take on allegory in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," Nassar's use

of allegory does not demystify: it distracts; diverts and dazzles. It creates an illusion of

transcendent temporality parallel to the illusion of escape of the prodigal son André from the

clutches of family. Language, thematics and style are timeless and transcendent, even as the

space and time of the novel remain contained within the stifling confines of an immigrant family

circle (Benjamin, 1977; Summer, 1991). The family and its immigrant culture reflect a hybrid

form of allegory composed of Levantine Arab, Quranic and Biblical, rural-pastoral, ancient

Greek and pagan sources. The philosophy and language dabble in nihilism and the Baroque (Deleuze, 1993; Maravall, 1980; Vattimo, 1988). Nassar's allegory, thus, fuses philosophical and ethical considerations with multiple figurative signifiers, allegorizing immigrant culture rather than setting up a signifier-signified relationship between stages in history. Archaic, anachronistic time exists in the narrative present, and the only way out is through rebellion.

Allegory in Nassar does ironically expose a disjuncture in temporality as de Man suggests, yet in an opposing manner. The allegorical language affirms the transcendence de Man ascribes to symbolism, yet full of cynicism and ambiguity. The plot itself hints at an immanent and historically situated temporality specific to narratives of migration, but expresses it through a heavily figurative narrative aesthetic. The play with transcendent allegorical language reveals another important disjuncture: the uneven referentiality and the dubious meeting point between Lebanese-Arab culture and more common literary signifiers in the West. Raduan Nassar's reading public, for the most part, often lacks knowledge of Lebanese culture and Arab heritage (Teixeira, 2002; Rodrigues, 2006; and Zilly, 2009).

Allegory, in Nassar, is a narrative trick, an act of disingenuous camouflage: it gives poetic voice to inter-generational immigrant drama as a timeless struggle between millenary proscriptive values and individual desires, which overshadows the markedly Lebanese-Arab narrative features present in the novel. Nassar's anomalous instance of allegorical anachronism also has a peculiarity that sets it apart from other cases: experiences of Syrian-Lebanese immigration do not fit into the base of knowledge of the hegemonic culture of reception in Brazil. In other words, Nassar's references a strange and foreign world for his readers. The novel

simply does not correspond to any common trend in Brazilian literature or hegemonic construction of Brazilian nationality (Arenas, 2003).

Nassar's novel projects a bicultural, bidirectional allegory that leaves most Brazilian readers without a specific reference point to historicize and contextualize the myth. Allegory masks its own indecipherable "Oriental" signifier/signified (traditional cultural codes in a Syrian-Lebanese immigrant family) through its apparently familiar Western signified/signifier (the Bible, sophist philosophy, Greek tragedy, pastoral imagery). Consequently, the referentiality of the allegory's signifier and the signified collapse; the specific setting is rendered a void that the Biblical mode of signification cannot resolve, with the Lebanese-Arab cultural signifiers mostly concealed. The Biblical mode of signification does not coincide neatly with the narrative; though the backstory of incestuous desire between André and Ana has loosely related Biblical precursors –the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 and Salomé's dance of the Seven Veils for Herod in Mark 6:21-29—the novel does not so much follow Biblical symbolism and allegory as exploit and invert it to new ends. The Bible, indicative of the Lebanese-Arab traditions of the fictional immigrant family, is archaic and conceives of itself as timeless. References to Scripture, in *Lavoura arcaica*, are a conceptual and aesthetic tool for writing and conceptualizing Lebanese-Arab culture, but not one of the principal tools for reading the narrative content. Philosophical debate and Lebanese-Arab culture have a much more central hermeneutical function for interpreting *Lavoura arcaica* than allegories from Biblical lore.

Furthermore, Raduan Nassar's novel turns an important concept in Brazilian modernism, *antropofagia*, on its head. The principle that Brazilian culture ought to figuratively ingest other cultures within its own domain and on its own terms underpins the irony of Oswald de Andrade's

Manifesto antropófago (1928). The main cultures intended for absorption are European, as the process of cannibalization remains one rooted in colonial encounters between African, indigenous and Western elements, the latter often harbingers of modernity. Nassar engages in a different kind of cannibalization and a process of invisible translation: on the one hand, he ingests Levantine Arab culture into his Brazilian Portuguese, an anomalous instance of absorption of non-Western immigrant culture into Brazilian literature; and he also cannibalizes in reverse, bringing Portuguese into Lebanese immigrant space, in an artistic mimesis of language in a bicultural social environment. His novel, by its very nature, engages in an implicit process of translation, or as the concretist Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos called it, transcreation (*transcriação*), that recreates and reimagines Arabic culture largely in the absence of an operative literary Arabic vocabulary (Campos, 1987). Nassar's novel crafts a language that is ostensibly one, but in fact covertly multiple in its origins.

Lavoura arcaica's deployment of Lebanese-Arab culture does not occur without paradox. Raduan Nassar, on the one hand, writes of an ossified immigrant generation –exemplified by the patriarch Iohana—that cannot envision the changes on the horizon. His characters are embroiled in a tragic conflict over the future of an ancestral heritage, a conflict without room for negotiation and flexibility. Simultaneously, the language, philosophy and discourse of the narrative itself, which are dominated by the rebellious voice of the second generation, André, generate the very mixture of cultures that seems to elude the interactions of the fictional characters. Nassar's text shows immigrant heritage to be malleable; the narrator manipulates symbols, creeds and values, and even cleverly engages classically Orientalized images from the *The Arabian Nights* and of the "sensuous Arab female dancer."[27]

Nassar generates, in composing the novel, a text full of mythology, empathy, drama and critical questioning of moral values that also figuratively narrates the feelings of invisibility, ambivalence and destruction that mar the relationship of many second-generation immigrants to their ancestral origins. The sense of origins in itself is an elusive concept rather than a given, and even more so after immigration and in the non-place of diaspora. Precisely this sense of invisibility and the vanishing of immigrant culture, a history largely unrecognized in Brazil, seem to fuel the narrative developments and literary flourishes Nassar joins to his fictional immigrant family: "our poor family, prisoner to such constant phantoms!" (193).

Nassar, in conclusion, writes of immigration, Arab ethnicity and diaspora from a vantage point of phantasmic invisibility. His language, just like Brazilian society, occludes and obscures immigrant identity. While the radical experimentality of his language approximates that of Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash, the thematic framing of ethnicity radically differs. Ethnicity is a phantom in Nassar because of its invisibility, rendered through a peculiar rhetorical language. In Albert Swissa, for example, ethnicity is not a phantom because it is invisible. It is a phantom because of its ambiguous meaning as both an object of social discrimination and the bearer of fading memories of another time and place.

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[1] While Raduan Nassar's childhood is far from unique considering Brazil's rich history of immigration, the deep influence of his particular cultural hybridity on his literature does not have a parallel in modern Brazilian literature. A Brazilian identity such as Nassar's is also conspicuously absent from Brazilian national meta-narratives.

[2] Important exceptions exist to this rule, particularly among Brazilian Jews. The prominent author Moacyr Scliar explicitly explored Brazilian Jewish identity and less prominent writers such as Samuel Rawet explored immigrant alienation in his short story collections *O conto do imigrante* (Immigrant Stories) and *Diálogo* (Dialogue). For a further discussion of Brazilian Jewish literature, see Nelson Vieira's *Jewish Voices in Brazilian Literature: A Prophetic Discourse of Alterity* (1995).

[3] Other Syrian-Lebanese writers in Brazil include, most prominently, Milton Hatoum. Other minor authors exist, but not of much prestige in Brazilian literature. For treatment of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in Brazilian literature see

Ana Miranda's *Amrik* (1997) and Jorge Amado's *Gabrielo, cravo e canela* (Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon, 1958) and *A descoberta da América pelos turcos* (How the Turks Discovered America, 1994).

[4] The plot follows an André Gide story, *Le retour de l'enfant prodigue* (The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1907).

[5] The dabke is a traditional folk dance from the the Arab Levant. It is popularly danced in lines or semi-circles in which people lock arms and stamp their feet inside and outward in a common rhythm. Though never named in Nassar, the description of the dance circle in Chapters 5 and 29 evokes the tradition.

[6] *Maktub*, which means "it has already been written" in Arabic, refers to an Islamic notion of divinely ordained Quranic destiny written on a guarded tablet (*lawḥ maḥfūz*). Islamic hadith has further discussed the cultural notion of a "guarded tablet" and its implications for the notion of free will, connecting it to the Arabic terms qada (divine decree) and qadar (divinely ordained fate or divine power), the latter is found in the Quranic Surah Laylat al Qadar (Night of Destiny or Power). The term *maktub* also appears in Sufi poetry and in *1001 Nights*; the latter source is arguably where Orientalists accessed the idea. This more exotic notion á-la-1001 Nights is the context with which a Portuguese-language audience is most familiar, and may even be Nassar's primary point of reference.

[7] José Paulo Paes coins a term "anfibismo cultural" (cultural amphibianism) to describe the cultural mixture present in various Brazilian writers such as Per Johns, and also in Nassar's *Lavoura arcaica*.

[8] My operative definition of transculturation draws both on the work of Fernando Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabazo y el azúcar* (1940) and Ángel Rama, *Transculturación Narrativa en América Latina* (1982): the conflictive process of absorbing two or more highly distinct cultures which results in loss of aspects of an original culture and the creation of something new; and innovative cultural expression by recovering original culture by means of its encounter with modernity. Nassar's text's transculturation is primarily linguistic and the adjustment of different characters to cultural transformations is far from evenly or harmoniously experienced.

[9] While verbal expressions of culture and ethical practices that resist assimilation are not uncommon themes in immigrant literature, they are often concretized through markers such as food, language and stories.

[10] For more on God and time, see Hadith Qudsi 6 on God and *dahr* or the vicissitudes of time: http://hadithqudsi.sacredhadith.com/hadith-qudsi-4/

[11] This cultural tidbit came out in conversations with both Ghenwa Hayek and Anton Shammas (Personal Communication).

[12] Note the urban setting of the *1001 Nights* in contrast with the rural setting of *Lavoura arcaica*.

[13] With the exception of her dancing of the dabke, Ana has no outlet to express her sexual desire. She never speaks in the novel and is described as dead and silent when consummating incest, putting her sexual union with André on a blurry borderline between disengagement and rape.

[14] An important exception to this rule might be the backlands (*sertão*) of the Brazilian Northeast, where resignation to adversity and patience are much more alive due to harsh material conditions and fervent Christian faith.

[15] The term *maktub* was again referenced by Coelho in his collection of tales, *Maktub* (1994) and by Brazil's Orientalist mathematician, Júlio César de Mello e Souza (1895-1974), who assumed the pen name of Malba Tahan, created an alternate biography for himself and wrote dozens of books on Arab folklore and legends.

[16] The contrast between Joseph's research on connectivity as a functional system of kinship and Nassar's portrayal of it as a broken system subject to contestation is a key point of contrast between Joseph and Nassar, and illuminates Nassar's larger literary project: subjecting immigrant culture to philosophical interrogation.

[17] In Christianity, the story of Onan is indicative of masturbation as "deadly sin." In Judaism the argument largely concerned disobedience to God and the duty to marry the childless widow of one's brother. This issue was raised to me in a discussion with Nick Block (Personal Communication).

[18] The most marked indication of the patriarchal structure is the non-development of the female characters. The rebellion against the patriarchal family structure occurs from a male-centric point of view. Women's perspectives, aspirations and daily life are not explored.

[19] The Quranic undertones in Nassar's text are mostly poetic and syntactic features. Important exceptions are the citation of the Qur'an Sura IV, 27, a verse that prohibits intercourse with mothers, daughters and sisters and the grandfather's proverb "to make out a white thread from a black thread" which comes from Sura II, 187.

[20] The word "primitive," in the context of Nassar's language, refers to primordial sexual desires and evokes the ancient and the millenary. It is not meant to separate between the levels of development of civilizations.

[21] Hints at the quasi-incestuous nature of their relationship and the mother's excessive affection recur throughout the novel in Chapters 5, 7, 11, 20 and 24: pp. 27, 38, 66-68, 136, 156-157. This incestuous tension in relationships between mothers and sons also appears in Milton Hatoum's novel *Dois Irmãos* (The Brothers, 2000). For more on the close mother-son relationship in Arab culture see: "My Son/Myself, My Mother/Myself: Paradoxical Relationalities of Patriarchal Connectivity" in Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self and Identity, ed. by Suad Joseph, Syracuse University Press, 1999.

[22] This complex relationship between sensual abandon and social repression in the dabke is an instance of Nassar's fresh take on images from Orientalism. The dabke comes to embody both repression and release, and to symbolize the narrative tension that has been building throughout the entire novel.

[23] The information about the *dabke* comes from a conversation with Anton Shammas (Personal Communication).

[24] Nassar never uses the words "Lebanese," "Arab" or "Arabic" in his text. The only regional identity attributed to the immigrants is a Mediterranean one. This approach speaks to Nassar's more pan-Mediterranean understanding of his identity based upon the immigrant population in his hometown. Nonetheless, indirect references to Arabic and Arab culture are present throughout the novel.

[25] Nassar's *Lavoura arcaica* is a powerful example of the limitations of Fredric Jameson's theory on the national allegorical character of fictional third-world texts in his essay "Third World Literature in the Age of Multi-National Capitalism" (1986). The text is allegorical, but not a national allegory, rather it is a metaphysical immigrant allegory. For a response to Jameson see Aijaz Ahmad's "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" (1987).

[26] My working definition of myth in relationship to Nassar is the evocation of ancient tropes that obfuscate the specifics of characters and setting. See: Northrop Frye, "The Koine of Myth: Myth as a Universally Intelligible Language." *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*. Ed. Robert D. Denham. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990.

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[27] Nassar replaces the more Orientalized "belly dance' with the rural folk dance, the dabke and introduces a richer, more complex sensuality and aura of tradition into his narrative.

Chapter 2: The Aesthetic of Impurity and Transnational Akedah in Albert Swissa's 'Akud'

Albert Swissa's *Akud* (1990), like both Nassar and Naqqash, engages in a radical aesthetic experiment grounded in diasporic Arab migrant identity. In contrast to Nassar, Swissa's text foregrounds and vividly depicts Moroccan ethnicity through the grinding poverty of a peripheral urban location. While Swissa paints a particularist picture of Moroccan Jewish identity in Israel through the subjective experiences of an array of characters, he does give a sense of the collective struggle of a neighborhood and does not obscure markers of Moroccanness from the text. Class identity and its relationship to Moroccan ethnicity remain a backdrop through which to understand the novel, and its staggeringly original language.

Albert Swissa's work subverts the common assumption in many literary cultures that to "realistically" or "accurately" describe poverty requires an "impoverished," "minimalist" or "restrained" aesthetic. In *Akud*, the narrator deploys a rich series of resources and registers in language that are considered "high" to describe what Yerach Gover deems a "gutter reality" (1994). Though artificial, this "high" and "low" divide in reading language and aesthetics remains significant, and in the context of Israeli literature and Hebrew language registers, a crucial method for reading literary texts in Hebrew.

At first glance, the language in Albert Swissa's *Akud* may appear to drown in artifices and ornaments. To many Hebrew readers and critics, the layering of syntax, narrative perspectives, colorful adjectives and multiple linguistic registers becomes excessively decorative and extravagant.[1] Yet *Akud*'s beautifying idiolect forces worlds which Hebrew fiction has falsely

binarized into contact: the grime of the Israeli street and the spiritual cosmology of Judaism; ethnic discrimination and national allegory; migrant memory and the myth of the binding of Isaac. The text stains whitewashed visions of religion and nation. Swissa's defiant gesture resists arbitrary boundaries drawn by dominant Ashkenazi society: boundaries of beauty, dignity and purity. Boundaries that have frequently served to exclude Mizrahi, and more specifically Moroccan, subjectivities from the most prized modes of signification within Israeli literature.[2]

As Hochberg (2007) points out, Swissa's narrative language creates a "literary dissonance" by writing about a "lowly" social environment in elevated Hebrew. Nevertheless, I would argue that this dissonance results from the social conditioning of his readership and Israel's literary elite, which in Swissa's own words "expect that if I'm writing about life in development towns, the language has to be scarred, a stammering limping Hebrew" (cited in Hochberg, 2007, 105). Swissa's novel mixes vernacular, sacred and modern literary Hebrew together as facets of his own artistic formation, but also as presences in the language of the neighborhood. As an ultra-orthodox child who attended yeshivas, and as part of the Moroccan community, Biblical, rabbinic, Kabbalistic and Sephardic liturgical Hebrew all permeated Swissa's social world. However, in translating these different linguistic registers into the literary medium, Swissa engages in a radical "redistribution of the sensible" to borrow Rancière's terminology (2004), in which the pre-programmed associations of Moroccan youth in Ir Ganim – poverty, wretchedness, abjection, inarticulate speech—are not reinforced in the narrative style chosen. Swissa's literary choices also radically displace the hegemonic "regimes of representation" (again Rancière's words) when writing of ethnic oppression in Israel –often some combination of a proud, corrective mode of writing or an outward condemnation of institutional and social obstacles to integration. The narrator –both an outsider looking back in and a

neighborhood insider—disrupts the expectations of much of the readership not by offering corrective representations of the Moroccan community, but by rendering the distress of individual youth in that community through a dynamic, saturated and artful literary aesthetic.

Language has a politics, as Rancière says of literature and its aesthetics (2004 and 2011). Albert Swissa's *Akud* (1990) has its own plurality of languages, and thus it follows that the novel also has its own plurality of politics. Its narrative subverts, disrupts and satirizes the politics of Moroccan ethnicity in larger Israeli society by a number of creative means. The narrative does not follow a linear mold, engaging in what I will call an "aesthetic of layering." In analyzing the entirety of *Akud,* character voices and perspectives, and even literary stylings, must be peeled back like the layers of an onion, as their connections are only loosely understood and articulated. This layering, which includes echoes of Kabbalah, Hebrew modernism, Sephardic liturgy, Aramaic, Talmudic, Biblical and Rabbinic lexicons, the grotesque and carnivalesque, the body motions of the corporeal mime theater in which Swissa was trained among other influences,[3] should all be taken into consideration.

The overarching politics of the language in Swissa, in spite of its aesthetic complexity, is quite simple: to pollute, eradicate and obliterate any sense of calm and stability attached to narrative signs, be they linked to meta-narratives of Israeli nation, Jewish religion or to Moroccan ethnic identity. Swissa's novel is a text that resonates with contamination and death, and all the while affirms life and resistance, in midst of all of the restless drives and affect of his characters who are conflicted and torn between multiple forces in their lives that they struggle to navigate: the authority of family; the codes of the street; state-run institutions; those they love and those they fear. The narrator's wicked, restless irony trangresses the boundaries of purity and

impurity in Jewish religion, and the deeply patriarchal contracts that hold up the foundation of Zionist allegorical narrative and Jewish genealogy, primarily the story of Abraham and Isaac.

I will focus on two main subjects in the chapter: the aesthetics of impurity used to pollute Jewish symbolism and vividly depict the urban slum of Ir Ganim; and the collapse of patriarchal Hebrew economies of death and agony in the novel's transformation of the trope of the binding of Isaac or *akedah* and its relationship to Zionist nationalist allegory, and by extension to Moroccan Jewish family dynamics. Moroccan ethnicity, within this context, is subordinated to a perplexing class identity and to the fragility of human memory. Every cultural marker in Swissa is significant, if only to show its own transience, distance from the younger generation and seeming route to extinction. Like Nassar, unsettled second-generation characters point to the impossibility of preserving Moroccan heritage from the past within his text, and the transformation of Moroccan Jewish culture within Israeli society. Before delving into the text, I will provide background on Moroccan Jewish identity in Israel, and a summary of the text and its literary reception.

To be Moroccan in Israel or a Moroccan Israeli implies a poor socio-economic status. The word "Moroccan" in hegemonic Ashkenazi Israeli culture signifies a chain of pejorative social concepts, and the primary association is the totality of the word poverty in the elite imagination: abjection, misery, ignorance, pathology, contamination, kitsch stereotypes, etc. (Bar Yosef, 1960-61; Dahan-Kalev, 2001, 20__?; Gelblum, 1949; Marx 1970) Moroccan Jewish ethnicity often served as a negative dialectic proof of the "cultured sophistication" of the Ashkenazi (Cohen, 2002). Journalists and intellectuals like Ariel Gelblum and statesmen like David Ben-Gurion disparaged North African –but particularly Moroccan—immigrants to Israel, and Moroccans seemed to fall lower on the social hierarchy of Middle Eastern Jewish

immigrants to Israel, a fact attested to by differing levels of social mobility with Iraqi and other

Mizrahi sub-groups (Khazoom, 2008). The term *maroco-sakin* (Moroccan knife) referred to the

popular rumor that Moroccan male immigrants carried knives on their person and the word for a

vapid bimbo in Israeli culture, *freha*, comes from a common female name among Moroccan

Jews. Moroccans also suffered staggering rates of incarceration in the 1960s and 1970s in Israel,

reaching as much as eighty percent of the Jewish population in Israeli prisons when they only

made up much less than half of the Israeli Jewish population (Rosow, 1982).

Moroccan poverty has a profound spatial dimension, both urban and rural, as Israel's

development towns, urban slums and poorer *moshavim* (agricultural settlements) have

disproportionately Mizrahi populations, and many of them have an especially large Moroccan

demographic. The "ethnic gap" (*hapa'ar ha'adati*) in Israel largely occurred on the basis of

urban planning and distribution of agricultural settlements, such that the internal Jewish

inequalities in Israel are largely regional and spatial, a fact attested to by an abundance of

literature on ethnic inequality in Israel in sociology, architecture and other fields (Ben-Ari and

Bilu, 1997; Hatuka, 2010; Rotbard, 2005; Swirski, 1989 and 1999; Yiftachel, 1998 and 2006).[4]

All of which explains a scene in Swissa's novel: the assumption of a man in Bnei Brak, a town

near Tel Aviv, that the character Yohai is from the heavily Mizrahi southern Tel Aviv

neighborhood of Hatikvah (Swissa, 1990: 25).

Swissa's novel was a stand-out in its time and even in the entire body of Israeli literature

in its vivid, detailed, extremely attentive portrayal of the space of a heavily Moroccan urban

slum. The earlier transit camp novels, mostly written by Iraqis, explored Mizrahi urban poverty,

but very little fiction had come out on the public housing projects built by the Israeli State in the

1960s and 70s. Swissa was one of the pioneers of such a genre in Israeli fiction. His novel teems

with empathy and dynamically engages the social codes in the housing project. Yet Swissa neither romanticizes life within a dismal space, plastered in asbestos and seeping with sewage, nor does he operate from an artifice of characters that all view their oppression the same way or even consciously acknowledge its existence. Architectural markers of material deprivation in Ir Ganim appear constantly in *Akud*, particularly the repeated references to sewage and concrete more generally, and specifically to bomb shelter synagogues, dirt roads and unpaved streets and to the Israeli phenomenon of the *tromi* (טרומי) , a word for the apartments constructed from prefabricated building materials that dot the landscape of the Ir Ganim neighborhoods.

The set of negative, dialectical Moroccan prototypes constitutive of Ashkenazi normality seemingly would generate a corrective politics, ethnic pride and hostility against social institutions on the part of Moroccan Jews. Indeed, in their radical activism and popular culture, all of these tendencies are most certainly present (Chetrit, 2010). Yet in the Mizrahi literature boom of the 1980s and 1990s, prominent Moroccan prose writers were few in number, overshadowed by the greater number of educated and socially mobile Iraqi intellectual figures. The more renowned Moroccan literature was generally poetry, and only in more recent years has a younger generation of Moroccan Israeli authors emerged with greater force in the world of the Israeli novel.

Thus, when Albert Swissa published his work in 1990, he was one of the first Moroccan novelists, together with Uziel Hazan, to make a visible mark on the Israeli scene. For lack of visibility, one might presume he would try to provide a similarly corrective politics as found in the earlier writings of Iraqi authors over the previous three decades, such as in Shimon Ballas' groundbreaking *Ha-Ma'abara* (*The Transit Camp*, 1964), Sami Michael's *Shavim ve Shavim Yoter* (*All Are Equal, But Some Are More*, 1974) and Eli Amir's *Tarnegol Kapparot* (*Scapegoat*,

1983). Swissa did not make any corrective gesture in the writing of *Akud*; in fact, his text explored, expanded, satirized, embellished and indirectly challenged the hegemonic phobias surrounding the Moroccan Jewish community in Israel. Yet at the same time, this paradoxical, ambivalent class politics of seeming self-denigration through irony, coupled with Swissa's extremely saturated literary aesthetic, produced an extremely disruptive and daring narrative of Moroccan poverty in Israel, a highly stylized narrative art of distress unsettling in its vivid preoccupation with the social climate of a heavily Moroccan neighborhood.

Swissa appears to explore the ambivalent position of Moroccans within Israeli society at least partially on the society's terms. His text does not engage in any visible corrective politics, and can largely reinforce the demonization of Moroccans in larger Israeli society. Yet he paradoxically transgresses the discursive frame for discussing social phobias surrounding Moroccan Jews by adorning his language in artful excess, scathing irony and devastating empathy. *Akud* does not correct or even overtly resist the vision of Moroccan Jewish ethnicity that Israeli society propagates through images in the media, popular culture and discriminatory institutions; it explores the devastating effect of crushing poverty and spatial degradation imposed on children "coming of age" by displacing the meaning of those very images and normalizing a space of stigmatized social formations: violent gang members; problem children and criminals; pregnant Moroccan teenagers and popular beliefs in the evil eye, demons and Kabbalah. His novel seems to respond directly to Ariel Gelblum and David Ben Gurion, as if to say: "if you want us dirty, I'll make us dirty! If you think we're animals, I'll use animal adjectives to describe us." A veiled, yet angry defiance lies behind the textual irony in *Akud*, against the dehumanization of Moroccans by the largely Ashkenazi establishment.

Swissa's text dynamically and coquettishly teases the Ashkenazi reader, shuttling between scenes of clever ingenuity in the street, animal-like abjection, sympathetic humor and irony and hopeless despair. Ultimately, *Akud* explores the richness of neighborhood life through an engagement with and internalization of Moroccan stereotypes in the child protagonists and a relentless sense of social distress they vainly attempt to overcome. All of which creates an enormously complex, ambivalent and torn brand of class politics.

Albert Swissa's novel *Akud* (*The Bound*, 1990) narrates the adventures of three young pubescent Moroccan Jewish boys growing up in the Jerusalemite slum of Ir Ganim –Yohai, Beber and Ayush-- in three sections of increasing length. The relationship between the children of three families --the Pazuelos, Sultans and Monsanegors--, their parents and the street ultimately constitutes the disordered and dynamic social environment the novel depicts. The third person narrator weaves in and out of the minds and actions of multiple characters, saturating the novel with a heterogeneous cacophony of language (Shen, 1991). Childhood games, the activities of violent gangs, sexual discoveries and instances of abuse, the endless struggles between parents and their sons, the oppressive atmosphere of Ashkenazi-run institutions catering to poor Mizrahim such as orphanages and public schools, popular religious beliefs and the practice of rituals all make their way into the novel. Each part has a distinct linguistic style and mode of storytelling, such that they can be read independently of one another.

Part 1, "Bound," narrates the struggles of Yohai in the Winter of 1970, a young boy torn between his reverence for his father Mr. Pazuelo, a cantor and butcher, and his brotherly love for the leader of a youth gang, David Ben Shushan. His father sends him away to religious school in Bnei Brak, only for Yohai to run away from school, get lost in the unfamiliar city and fall into the hands of an elderly Ashkenazi man who molests him. The narrative in this part introduces the

important trope of the binding of Isaac or *akedah*, as a cause of incomprehensible dread and religious reverence, symbolized in the relationship between Mr. Pazuelo and his son Yohai. In parallel, Part 1 familiarizes the reader with the inner world of the neighborhood's youth gangs: "In those days, there were a great many turf wars…David Ben Shushan was the leader of the gang, a boy full of spirit…Yohai always walked about with a shaved head and was known…as a fearless warrior" (12).

Part 2, "Blessed Orphans," moves forward three years to the Summer of 1973 and abandons the first part's more linear narrative, exploring the frustrations of Mr. Sultan in Israel; memories of his southern Moroccan village; the visit of Moroccan relatives from France; violent games and fights of the same youth gang from Part 1; and his son Beber venturing into a posh neighborhood to pick up his "cousin" Yvonne (actually secretly his half-sister), who he desires with passion and a sense of disgust. Beber ends up discovering sex with Yvonne as he pursues her in the bedroom at night and then the story fast-forwards five years into the future to 1978, where Yvonne and Mr. Sultan attend a neighborhood gathering and spot Beber, who has since turned to a life of crime. This section explores the figurative orphanhood of a generation of Moroccan Jewish children raised by the street and their relationship with other youth. Children in this part of the text are unruly orphans, like the dominant Biblical image of Ishmael, complicating the more prototypical obedience of Yohai for his father. Beber, the youth criminal, passes over from the conflicted, but generally subservient Yohai, into a more radical opposition to his father and the obligations of family.

Part 3, "The Futile Efforts of a Fading Memory," takes place in the transition between summer and fall in 1974. The longest and most baffling section, it occupies more than two thirds of the text; the section mostly focuses on the troubled, brilliant mind of Ayush, a rebellious,

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street-smart, imaginative and crazy young man about to have his Bar Mitzvah. Ayush feels so overwhelmed by the hopelessness of his life that he retreats from the world: first by clinging to the memory of his nanny in Morocco, who temporarily kidnapped him and almost turned him into a Muslim; second by cutting class to watch Westerns and war films at a downtown movie theatre; third by communicating with a female doll he eventually turns into a man; and fourth by committing suicide by rolling, in a race cart, down Costa Rica Street into Kabbalistic infinity. Part 3 interconnects multiple themes together: childhood rebellion; memories of Morocco; the secret connection between Isaac and Ishmael and an ambivalent and ambiguous take on sacrifice.

Trying to give a synopsis of the plot in itself speaks to the stunning breadth of Swissa's literary project. He covers infinite themes, uses infinite similes, metaphors, resources and registers from Hebrew. Swissa's Hebrew deeply disrupted Israeli literary culture: he discarded the minimalist aesthetic (*dal homer*) in much of modern Israeli literature where descriptive language and psychology were most often framed through measured restraint (Swissa, 2012),[5] and chose to write in this way precisely in dealing with urban poverty. Instead of writing the suffering into the housing project through a passive resignation to misery, Swissa chose to wrap the acute distress of his characters, the material limitations of their environment and the gritty appearance of the neighborhood architecture in agitated and stylized literary velvet. His playful, highly original idiolect radically differed from any writer who had come before him, and to a specific end: to use high registers of modern and religious Hebrew to vividly portray the intense rhythms, movements, sounds and encounters that made up the memories of his childhood in the housing project of Ir Ganim.

The complexity and inner conflicts of the characters fit into the vast madness of a social climate subject to the mostly unspoken impact of the great distress and adversity in the

neighborhood the narrator only rarely states explicitly: "They only calm down full of nerves, because here you don't put out a fire with water, you let it burn to the end" (266) and "Here one does not resort to arguments and proofs; there are only threats and pleading" (132).[6] Moroccan ethnicity in the urban periphery, in Swissa's narrative vision, means finding ways to survive emotional duress and torment without respite. Though Swissa has been accused of glossing over the violence in Ir Ganim (Sarna, 1991), his novel does not present an idealized picture in the least of the behavior of youth gangs and the real violence inflicted on children in the space.

While Swissa's dense narrative does include many markers of Moroccan culture such as often untranslated language, including Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Berber, and folklore, village stories, Moroccan food, Sephardic liturgy, pilgrimage celebrations and henna, these displays of Moroccan culture form part of a larger social climate, and an often combative encounter between the generations. They exist as emblems of a waning culture, and what remains more concretely is neighborhood, Israeli street culture and social discrimination.

Therefore, *Akud* imagines Moroccan Arab ethnicity very differently than *Lavoura arcaica* does Lebanese heritage: ethnicity emerges as *an aesthetic embodied in both the "impurities" of neighborhood life and a transnational vision of Zionism's and Judaism's trope of sacrifice and suffering, the akedah*. Whereas Nassar's novel is all about occlusion and camouflage, Swissa's narrative engages in a highly ironic, parodizing and disruptive dialogue with the symbols and tropes that support Jewish and Israeli life. The aura of purity attached to Zionism and Judaism, and the awe attached to the story of the binding of Isaac, morph into impure, contaminated ornaments and symbols, transformed by the material economy and the social climate of the Ir Ganim neighborhoods.

Akud was written while Swissa lived in Paris, published in 1990 and won the Bernstein Prize for young writers. The prominent Ashkenazi critic and literary scholar Menahem Peri chose to publish *Akud* in the prestigious collection *Siman K'riah* affiliated with the publisher *Kibbutz Ha'Meuhad*. *Akud* sold quite well in the initial months of its publication (Gover, 1994, Hirschfeld 1991). Thus, Swissa did receive institutional support for his novel and even received some very favorable reviews. Yet the accolades were short-lived. Swissa's formidable command of literary Hebrew was unquestionable, but critics had mixed reviews of his work's highly idiosyncratic use of the Hebrew language.

Arguably, the more relatable qualities of the characters or themes in the work, and its staggering linguistic complexity, took a backseat to Israel's polarized ethnic politics. As a non-Ashkenazi, Mizrahi author –even more specifically as a result of his Moroccan identity— Swissa's writing was marked as that of an "ethnic other" from the very beginning. This "otherness," which conjured up both racial and class associations, led to a particular reactionary distaste for the "decorative excesses" of Swissa's language, a mostly Ashkenazi desire to dictate how Swissa should "realistically" write about the Moroccan urban poor.

Many critics, including prominent ones such as Ariel Hirschfeld (1991) and Batya Gur (1991), found the associative imagery and extravagance of the Hebrew out of place and tedious. The reviews, thus, were often colored by an implicitly, sometimes even explicitly, racialized scholarly lens shaped by assumptions about the social world portrayed in his fiction. Everything from his linguistic choices to the subject matter to his subversive stance vis-à-vis Israel's hegemonic Zionist narrative evoked passionate responses. Swissa was deplored for engaging in "Amazonian flowery rhetoric" (Hirschfeld, 1991) or for "downplaying the violence of life in Ir Ganim" (Sarna, 1991), praised for "showing how the life of Moroccans almost reduced them to

animals" (Hirschfeld, 1991) or for "exposing the sensual maternal ways of Moroccan mothers in a manner unthinkable in an Ashkenazi context" (Orian cited in Gover, 1994). Much of the writing on *Akud* explicitly or implicitly racialized the author, his writing style or the subject matter and thus reduced the conversation to a vicious cycle of ethnic conflict common in a polarized society like Israel. The strategic quality of Swissa's startling approach to Hebrew narrative, its harsh brand of irony and its relationship to psychologies of distress suffered by the lower classes, remained a marginal topic in the critical literature with the important exceptions of Yerach Gover (1994) and Gil Hochberg (2007).[7]

Swissa could not, in Israeli society, be appreciated or critiqued with any semblance of political neutrality. He became the Moroccan representing all Moroccans, though he was focusing on a few families in the neighborhoods of Ir Ganim in Jerusalem, and on his own personal memories. Language became social context and nothing more to many critics, with some important exceptions (Gotking, 1991; Nissim, 1991; Shen, 1991). The artistry of Swissa's language and thematic choices, particularly his ability to shuttle between worlds of impurity and a language of religious transcendence, and his novel's startling and uncertain, transnational economy of death rooted in a revisioning of the *akedah*, received little attention.

Aestheticizing Impurity: Sacred Ritual and the Spatiality of Ir Ganim

Albert Swissa's aesthetics, what Gil Hochberg calls a "poetics of abjection" (2005 and 2007), accomplishes a contamination of Judaism's sense of the sacred and its rituals of purity. The deployment of religious symbols and musings occurs displaced by the grime, violence and distress of street and neighborhood. This aesthetics is held up by three pillars: emptying Jerusalem of its spiritual majesty by grounding the religious signs associated with it in the

materially neglected space of Ir Ganim; lending a poetic focus to the excretions of the body and exposing the profane underside of religious rituals of sanctification.

Jerusalem is Judaism's, and by extension Israel's, grandiose monument *par excellence*. The city has appeared as some form of spiritual monument in Yehuda Amichai's poetry, Amos Oz's *My Michael* (1972), David Grossman's *The Book of Intimate Grammar* (and countless other works of literature and cinema in a contemporary Zionist context. This tendency to take Jerusalem's spiritual meaning for granted follows a long Jewish tradition of unquestioned reverence for the holy city. When *Akud* was initially published in 1990, little to nothing had been written about the urban periphery of Jerusalem, especially the housing projects of the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, the setting in the novel was a culture shock to the establishment, as it tarnished Jerusalem's symbolic function as a spiritual center or, at the very least, as a stable location with complex psychological effects on Israel's citizens. The very concept of a symbolic and spiritually meaningful Jerusalem begins to fall apart in Swissa's narrative, as the text focuses on Ir Ganim and its surroundings dominate: its hills and valleys, the Yemeni agricultural settlements, Palestinian villages and the Christian Ein Karem all visible from a distance. The narrative mostly neglects the typical markers of Jerusalem, the city: Central Jerusalem and the Old City in particular. Bustling markets such as Mahane-Yehuda and bus stops –areas where those from the working class at the periphery of the city work and go to make purchases— replace the Wailing Wall, The Temple Mount and the specific streets in the Old City and downtown. Jerusalem becomes Ir Ganim, with all of the material limitations and psychological claustrophobia encompassed by the neighborhood.[8]

Ir Ganim is remote, despite the assertions of Moroccan Jewish relatives of the Sultans visiting from France that "you have no city in the world only Jerusalem that is not to be called remote" (40). Because Ir Ganim is not centrally located and is geographically cut off from the more well-known locations of Jerusalem, it epitomizes the definition of urban periphery. Just as Ir Ganim is physically separate from the city of Jerusalem -- the spiritual and cultural center of a nascent Jewish state—the residents of Ir Ganim, in Swissa's narrative world, are similarly cut off from the spiritual and cultural ethos of Zionism and transcendent allegories of Judaism as imagined by larger Israeli society. The residents of Ir Ganim must take public buses to encounter "larger Jerusalem" and do so largely in the context of work, haggling in the market and, in Ayush's case, aimless wandering and utter despair.

Swissa's "other Jerusalem" is a space of social exclusion, discrimination and acute distress. The setting functions as a spiritual, material and symbolic void saturated with meanings that fail to crystallize. This "mismatch" between the materiality of setting and linguistic register generates an effect throughout the novel: material grime pollutes even the most revered of symbols in the context of literary Hebrew, which cannot account for the impure settings of lofty religious practicum, material deprivation, joy and violence that all fuse in many of Israel's poor urban neighborhoods and housing projects. The narrator never leaves behind the monotony and devastation of spatial containment and confinement, always returning to stark delineations of the structural nature of discrimination and socio-economic distress encompassed in the space of Ir Ganim: "the dreaming heart requires another touch each time to be convinced with sorrow that the neighborhood is indeed real and not some replica built out of the need for bombing exercises from the air" (95).

Ir Ganim means "city of gardens" in Hebrew, a cruel irony considering that the primary markers of the setting have nothing to do with gardens. Gardens are an external sign of opulence, and "green space" serves to cleanse neighborhoods of pollutants. A lack of "green" –gardens, parks and so on—is a powerful sign of a polluted environment.[9] Ir Ganim, "The City of Gardens," is conceived of thus by the narrator. Ir Ganim is a noisy, chaotic and frantically polluted urban location, one neglected by government officials: "The mayor never arrived and no ceremony took place here" (268).

The difference between Ir Ganim and more privileged Jerusalem is evident with Beber's discomfort in the more posh neighborhood where Yvonne's orphanage is located. Upon arriving, "…his heart was beating wildly, as if he had crossed the border to a place where they speak another language and the people are called by strange names…" (55) Swissa quite literally describes more opulent sections of Jerusalem as almost another country, and part of the tremendous difference is gardens and quiet: "Each building had a well-tended garden in front enclosed by a double fence…It's too quiet here…a half a minute after you raise your black shadow…somebody'll suddenly pull you by the ear and ask what you're doing here…" (55). The quiet Jerusalem of gardens could not be more foreign, and even disconcerting, to the residents of Ir Ganim. In following a stereotype, but also chaotic conditions of life lacking in leisure, the predominantly Moroccan neighborhood comes across as loud, unruly and rowdy in comparison to the tranquility and quiet of more affluent neighborhoods in Jerusalem.

The distinction in decibel level comes across further in the reaction of Mrs. Druckman, head of Yvonne's orphanage to Beber's answers to her questions: "The words left his [Beber's] mouth increasing in volume, and the last of them sounded like a curse. Mrs. Druckman shivered under the blue shawl hanging from her shoulders…"(56) Ashkenazi society literally fears

Moroccan noise as a sound-based indication of wider forms of social violence, yet without acknowledging the structural violence that leads to the distinctions in the first place and the cultural assumptions and misreadings that impose a stigmatized, pathologized position on the lives of the Moroccan urban poor. A combination of Eurocentric racist discourse and systemic class and race-based discrimination against Moroccans leads to the vision of Moroccans as both noisy and dirty, a vision that Swissa does not correct but normalizes as a by-product of the pathologization of hegemonic Ashkenazi society.

The voices his novel gives rise to are not predominantly quiet, subdued voices conforming to Ashkenazi society, and the description of the neighborhood is not whitewashed, a defensive position common in the writing of some minority authors. Instead, Swissa finds an in-between space in the cruel and chaotic life, the hustle and bustle of urban poverty and Moroccan family obligation, to both loudly proclaim Moroccan voices and subjectivities and to drown in the terror of characters' silences. He also emphasizes the filthy material neglect and chaotic construction projects that characterize the outward appearance of Ir Ganim, without neglecting to reference the dignified daily work of Moroccan mothers in keeping their homes clean and presentable.

Nevertheless, Ir Ganim is a chaotic space of makeshift and frantic construction. Ir Ganim itself is a transient and miserable architectural structure, as it is full of hastily built concrete and prefabricated buildings: "Did he indeed love the home they had neither bought nor built, whose transience was the essence of its crafty nature, and that came from nowhere and led nowhere?" (168-69). Ir Ganim's transience and rootlessness are a space of diasporic uprooting and intense alienation of "exile in the Holy Land itself" (19), but one where spiritual symbolism and religious practicum still abound among its residents:

Beber knew that in the concrete colony…there were roads of excavation works all around, closing in on fields of scrubland…the streets to susceptible homes emerge, and further on from them the dim alleyways bend and reach the stairways molten unto the hill climbing up to the tall buildings, and inside of the buildings there are still more stairs that descend deeper inside them, and through the dark within sprawl the lengthy bomb shelters, and between the buildings –the polluted lots confined to an abyss, and in one of them, every Thursday at midnight, a group of survivors snatched from the wilderness gather at the decayed shack of the Sage and Priest Rabbi Jacob, and they remove a collection of books wrapped in a flowered handkerchief from the Holy Ark [in the synagogue] (66).

The chaotic neighborhood landscape does not preclude the persistence of religious traditions, community celebrations and rituals that come from Morocco. However, they take place in the disorder of displacement and economic and material deprivation, where the heavily Mizrahi residents of Ir Ganim must make use of bomb shelters and navigate winding, impoverished spaces of urban sprawl: "[Mr. Monsanegor] vanishing into *tromi* building 416, deep, deep inside the bomb-shelter-synagogue which had written on its entrance, in the blood of slaughtered chickens, 'Out of the depths I call you, O Lord.'" (95) The prefabricated structures or *tromiyim*, together with the many bomb shelters, give this muddled impression of intense sprawl, as if the construction of the neighborhood itself were being implicitly personified as the prime example of the larger distress of the tenants living in the public housing themselves.

Suburban Jerusalem becomes a space where Moroccan immigrants must adapt and translate localized cultural traditions into a foreign context, and thus the traditions transform and fade: "In the cauldron of the generation that founded the state, whole cultures melted into oblivion… vanished…life experiences, gestures, customs, sights, smells, sounds, languages, people—all among them the creatures of my childhood (Swissa in Alcalay, 1996: 190).[10] Sanctified religious practices, such as the hillula[11] and other gatherings of the faithful, must transition from more communal spaces in Morocco to alienating, claustrophobic spaces of discrimination and social stratification in the new country (Ben Ari and Bilu, 1997). Ir Ganim is

one such space that generates communal attachments out of necessity, creating a semi-incongruence between rituals and the area in which they are put into practice.

In a paradoxical manner, from a spiritual standpoint, Ir Ganim is simultaneously vast and vacuous. In spite of its all-consuming confinement of its residents, the neighborhood still remains ironically distant from any sense of permanence or coherent meaning. The description of the building of the neighborhood juxtaposes its material vastness and its spiritual emptiness:

> "…then the heights had been dug up, and they poured out row after row of concrete bomb shelters into the wide, deep pits and upon them…the huge levers of the cranes raised wall-door, wall-window, narrow-bridged hallways and stair after stair; enormous tenement blocks of the pale yellow color of beer sprung skyward and pierced the eyes of space, and then they settled men young and old, women and children, a great mob in almost the span of a day, family by family to the source of salvation from exile" (31).

In size, Ir Ganim has a monumental majesty that implies Kabbalistic infinity, Towers of Babel and divine-inspired eternity –the text itself ironically makes these connections. Yet the claustrophobic and grimy appearance of the concrete made with asbestos, combined with the constant presence of sewage, simultaneously empties the place of spiritual majesty. Only the characters themselves, as human beings, can enact sanctity and deploy sacred ritual; the space is only ironically imbued with that kind of mystique. In short, the setting is enormous, vast and enthralling in its magnitude, but hollow, empty, distant and estranging in its actual content. It is a hollow exilic space that does not provide the promise of salvation set forth by state ideology.

Halal (space) and *halul* (hollow, cavity), two words with the same root, and a breadth of different meanings, effectively describe the spatiality of Ir Ganim in Swissa's fictional rendering. They emphasize both hollow, empty space and expansive space open to exploration, a paradox of the expanse and its hollow underbelly. Swissa fills space with an excess of often empty, objects that refuse to go away: prefabricated buildings, stinky pieces of junk, leaking sewers, a maze of

wire and telephone poles. The appearance of the neighborhood in its totality is ultimately

described as wretched: "He [Ayush] peeked outside through the dark at the faint light of the

streetlamps, which wove a wretched shred of existence in the night" (113).

Ir Ganim, when considered in its entirety, causes a sense of estrangement to the

characters, rather than any sense of belonging. The human characters provide some elusive and

fleeting sense of meaning and community to the neighborhood in their responses to its

impoverished materiality; the neighborhood itself and its apartment homes, as material objects,

are not a coherent, communal space, and only become so through creative deployment of religion

and social bonds and affiliations of family, youth gangs and sexual desire.

The distinct spatiality and regional location remains one of the most powerful

demarcations of ethnic difference and one of the most rigid ways of consolidating and preserving

that separation. Albert Swissa's novel personifies that separation largely in the absence of what it

is separate from. Rather than a city of gardens, Ir Ganim is shown to be a neighborhood full of

concrete and buildings made from asbestos, shacks and prefabricated *tromiyim*, "a concrete

colony" (31) full of fences, vast construction works and vacant lots; dangerous boundaries

between tenement blocks and gang turf; sewage and drainpipes, hollows and potholes in roads;

unfinished staircases, leaking taps and cockroaches; expanses of "shaven valley," fallow fields

and winding trails, garnina fields and wild plants. The housing project occupies a distant,

adjacent no man's land (*shetah hefker*) cordoned off from larger Jerusalem, seeping with sewage,

construction materials and other filth that contaminate Jewish ritual, Jerusalem's spiritual

majesty, Zionism's redemptive myth and more fundamentally, the human body.

Albert Swissa's aesthetics of impurity is an aesthetics of scatology, male genitalia and sewage infused both with a mystifying language and more abysmal moments of emptiness. Excretions of the body and sewage pipes both exude a powerful mystique of embodiment and human practicum, and a powerlessness and entrapment in the material confines and cycle of games youth play within the space of Ir Ganim. Excrement and urine both dot the lonely landscape and inform the novel's poetics of the body. The anus and the phallus constitute the novel's mystifying representations of gender, the relationship between feminine and masculine energies in the male body and the novel's fairly schematic, yet still daring, queering of boyhood.[12]

The poetics of the body fuses with religious symbols from Jewish prayer, halakhah, Kabbalah and so on, while also retaining a jarring materiality. Though not a complete "mismatch," as bodily needs are a part of Jewish practicum, the fairly graphic engagement with urination, defecation and masturbation of "marginal youth" through religious language does create a stunning disjuncture in more conventional deployments of spiritual signifiers. The world of spirituality and the everyday world of contamination fuse together into one confounded picture, through mystical scenes of pollution and more mundane ones that gradually become blurred and integrated rather than counterposed.

Simultaneously, the gender expression and power relations of the male body are linked to the anatomical and sexual possibilities of the anus and male sex organs. In the context of Israeli literature of the time, Swissa's queering of young boys is fairly daring, even if by the standards of the critique of queer theory, it falls into binaries of phallus and anus, penetrator and penetrated, giver and receiver. A certain ambiguity results from his pairing of the anus with femininity and the phallus with masculinity, even as the prototypical gender conventions remain

intact, especially considering the young age of the protagonists.[13] A spiritual undertone also colors gender in Swissa, connected to the complementary notion of masculinity and femininity in Kabbalah's sefirot, except the two sides to gender are embodied in young male bodies.

The spiritual universe of Swissa's language does not occur without seemingly more secular interventions however. Some more mundanely described scenes remain attached to the practical functionality of bodies and the material appearance of neighborhood without projecting any spiritual meaning onto the objects and the bodies. Such episodes give a deceptive appearance of having no spiritual significance, yet the foundation of Swissa's novel has spiritual undertones that appear and fade intermittently from passage to passage, that insinuate themselves in whispers, sometimes screams and other times temporarily disappear.

Such a mundane scene occurs, for example, when Ayush's mother chides him one morning for not finding a sock and makes a bitter observation: "…as for her, he could just as well go without socks or shoelaces and everyone will think he's a poor man's son, since her children are like that any way, because though they try and strive they look like the pools of sewage on sanitation workers…" (157) Neighborhood, the human body and sewage figuratively merge in Swissa's novel, inevitably connected due to material limitations and its effect on social climate and the gritty materiality of the neighborhood further merges with spiritual signs and symbols from Judaism.

Sewage and the constant dirtiness of the neighborhood is the initial link that unifies the spiritual, material and bodily realms of contamination the novel advances. The equation of the human body's functionality and primal needs with sewage starts at the very beginning of the novel. Yet the seemingly realist description of drainpipes coincides with the father Mr. Pazuelo

reciting of the Nekavim blessing, a prayer over human waste: "Hollow metallic wails reached his ears from the drainpipes fixed to the shafts inside the tenement…His father was whispering the Nekavim blessing with a great sense of purpose…(9) The grounding of the relationship between filthy human waste and daily religious life occurs through several references to the Nekavim blessing throughout the novel, three already in the brief first section. The full prayer reads:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת
הָאָדָם בְּחָכְמָה וּבָרָא בוֹ נְקָבִים נְקָבִים חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים.
גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כִסֵּא כְבוֹדֶךָ שֶׁאִם יִפָּתֵחַ אֶחָד מֵהֶם
אוֹ יִסָּתֵם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי אֶפְשַׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמוֹד לְפָנֶיךָ אֲפִילוּ שָׁעָה אֶחָת.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהֹוָה רוֹפֵא כָל בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת.

(Blessed are You, O G-d, King of the Universe, Who formed man with wisdom and created in him many orifices and cavities. It is evidently known before Your Throne of Glory that if one were opened or another blocked it would be impossible to exist and stand before You for even a moment. Blessed are You, O G-d, Healer of all flesh and Doer of wonders)

The *Nekavim* blessing perhaps represents one of the starkest meeting points in Jewish prayer between polluting agents of the body and the Divine. Urine and excrement –and by figurative extension, all of the excretions through the bodies openings, whether holes or pores in the skin— are at one and the same time instances of release of toxins, bodily pollution, and manifestations of divine miracle. In its traditional signification, the prayer is read as praise for divine designs of the body that have made the expulsion of polluting toxins possible, a necessary bodily operation for the continued survival of humanity. In a sense, the toxins themselves are mystified as symbols of anatomical functionality, rather than as dirty objects of defilement or pollution. Even though the prayer speaks of "hollow" cavities (*halulim*), it clearly emphasizes the Consecration of the Holy Name (*Kiddush HaShem*) over the Desecration of the Holy Name (*Hilul HaShem*), the latter of which shares a root with the word for "cavity."[14]

Swissa's choice to call the prayer the *Nekavim* blessing rather than *Asher yatzar*,[15] as many Jewish communities do, points to the centrality of the body over divine symbolism. Giving the name *Asher yatzar* --the Hebrew words mean "He who created"-- emphasizes the creation of God as a transcendent order that perfected the human anatomy for even the most profane of acts. *Nekavim* refers to the orifices in the human body that allow for the disposal of human waste, an image of the practice itself.[16] In short, Swissa's vision of Jewish practicum, as this prayer is a common part of daily life, tips the scale over to the necessities of the human body and pollutes the sacred aura that literally "whitewashes" human excretions.

Swissa's novel implicitly shifts the attention from anatomical functionality to the toxins themselves: urine, excrement and semen. The text returns constantly to peeing, masturbation, sweat, bleeding, vomit and other excretions from the body as acts of transient, yet crucial importance. He displaces the divine mystique of the quotidian, portraying defecation, urination and masturbation as largely voluntary responses and assertions of agency within the psychological distress and the claustrophobia of the urban periphery.

The immediate struggles and needs of the neighborhood youth materialize through the temporary relief achieved through the perpetuation of daily pollution of the body, whether scatological, sexual or by other forms of secretion. Swissa's novel returns again and again to sewage and human waste. "Then he [Ayush] thought of how the world was full of filth and dirtiness, of the sewage flowing under the buildings and the sewers bursting out like tiny, bastardly volcanoes…" (96). Human waste and sewage are agents of pollution of Jewish symbolism, and also serve as a connecting point between pollutants and human agents polluted by them in the so-called "city of gardens." Furthermore, there are powerful sexual connotations to the contamination, particularly a fixation on the anus and phallus of different youth.

The text is full of anility in its imagery: pipes, toilets, filthy sewage, mud, hollow holes, vacuous expanses, children defecating, the admiring, touching and penetration of bottoms (Hirschfeld, 1991). "One need not say that it [Ir Ganim] was protected against defecation or from the rusty iron protruding from the concrete or from misshapen pieces of junk…" (101) Defecation takes on an importance of semi-mystical proportions, particularly in the first section. Yohai repeatedly refers to the joy he takes in "defecating" in lofty terms, associating it with the meditative walks of the mystic Rabbi Nahman of Breslau: "He needed to defecate, and really liked to defecate in vacant lots…no one was able to bother him when he would…tell himself stories, while stroking his member in an almost involuntary motion…"(15). For Yohai, defecating in "private" open spaces provides an outlet for meditation, release and a physical feeling of wholeness. What is ritually unclean and a sign of impurity, in fact, allows for a temporary relief of the general sense of distress that governs many encounters in Ir Ganim and most importantly for my purposes here, becomes part of the novel's mystical and lofty poetics.

The focus upon the bottoms of Yohai, Beber, Yvonne and Ayush not only creates a corporeal and sexualized poetics, it also hints at the presence of the scatological throughout the novel together with images of the neighborhood. The novel repeatedly returns to anility in describing sewage, but also in referencing the anuses of several characters by the words "bottom" and "rear." Early on in the novel, the "tip of his [Yohai's] heels [are] brushing up against his bottom" (9) The focus on bottoms and sewage is not coincidental; it gives expression to the novel's scatological imagery, which evokes the pollution of the neighborhood environment, which in turn extends to the boundaries of purity in Jewish religion and Hebrew fiction. It also hints at the lower body as a locus of desire through which one may "live from below."[17]

This anility further projects a queered and "dirty" sexuality to the young adolescent protagonists, especially in Beber's encounters with Yvonne and Ayush. In the following scene between Beber and his cousin/secret half-sister Yvonne, Beber schemes as to how he should approach her sexually:

> What if he put the bottom of his foot right by her cheek or on her chest, and his other foot between her buttocks? …right when he thought of sitting with his bottom on her bottom he was drawn to the idea, and immediately another thought came and told him to tap his bottom on hers and make the noises that endear babies to their mothers…her bottom is even more recognizable than his mother's…the hillocks of flesh…protrude much more than the arch in her upper back, and they offer some kind of balance to her belly jutting out in front; they rise on their own upon her legs in a landslide (67-68).

This scene not only is both infantile and sensual, it shows the prevalence of anility in many of the novel's sexual interactions. Beber speaks of placing "his bottom on Yvonne's bottom," not exclusively of his arousal as a result of the shape of her rear. He wishes to mimic the behavior of mothers with their babies and to mutually tap each other's behinds one against the other. This "queered" male sexuality in which the anus is present hints at a sexual stage among young boys that might precede the deceptively hyper-masculine form of socialization that only seems to more fully crystallize later.

After five years, Beber seems to have grown more "masculine" in this regard. He reappears with a young lady, their hands on each other's bottoms as they walk. He then takes his hand and brashly grabs her bottom: "His eye blinked the moment his hand defiantly mashed the pair of buttocks of the young woman with great force, and his thumb sunk deeper inside until it disappeared in the slit between them" (77). This display of machismo may be for mere show, or may involve a new form of socialization: the exact significance remains unclear.

Beber's assertion of masculine bravado, however, is proven to also have a secret "queer" source in a relationship he cultivated with Ayush in Part 3, which takes place four years earlier than the above scene:

> "The scarred, rough palm of the criminal's hand gripped the entirety of Ayush's small bottom…Sultan pulled him in a motion that was violent, yet to his great astonishment also kind of heart…and ordered him not to move. Ayush did not move. The hand too, that was indeed firmly squeezing his rear, did not move. Meanwhile everything's fine, Ayush calmed himself down, he was even shocked to feel a strange pleasure in his bottom gripped by such a rough hand" (131)

This encounter between Beber and Ayush casts doubt on the heteronormativity of Beber's masculinity and the stability of constructs of masculinity for either Beber or Ayush. While Ayush clearly assumes a more passive, anal and "feminized" role in the encounter, his sex remains male. The firm squeezing of his rear parallels the mashing of woman's buttocks at the end of Part 2 and blurs the dividing lines between female and male energy much more starkly divided in the sefirot of Kabbalah. Yet there is a further gender complexity to these encounters:

> "He [Beber] would fill his pockets with sunflower seeds and seasonal fruits and seduce Ayush…he would speak to him in a woman's tongue. That pretty boy criminal and ladies man in his legendary misdeeds suddenly became tender, sensitive and seductive. He would ask Ayush to take off his clothes and Ayush, who was curious to see what would come of this, undressed eagerly…Then he penetrated Ayush between the thighs with his blazing member (134).

At one and the same time, Beber speaks "a woman's tongue," is tender and sensitive and seems to violently penetrate Ayush. While not uncommon as a means of the seduction, the character of Beber displays multiple dimensions of his sexuality with Yvonne, Ayush and an unnamed woman when he has grown further into adulthood. He shifts like a chameleon between childish, ladies' man, sensitive, vulnerable and brute. While gender prototypes may remain largely intact in many instances, Swissa's portrayal of childhood sexuality eludes simplistic divides between masculine and feminine and the narrator tinges formative sexual experiences with ambiguity and

emotional ambivalence. The narrative perspective further does not project the discourse of abuse onto scenes that involve elements of abuse by their very nature, choosing to leave sexual encounters as uncertain in language as they might be experienced through the mind of a child.

Nevertheless, the larger point remains a connection between the anus, human excretion and sexuality, as well as sewage and setting. The sexual stimulation and penetration of Ayush's anus by Beber, Beber's wish to brush his bottom up against Yvonne's and Yohai's fixation on the act of defecation all speak in different ways to a mostly implicit textual relationship – sometimes explicit—between excrement and human and/or architectural anatomy. The space of Ir Ganim, the bodies of the youth and feces exist in a triangular relationship that constitutes space, body and pollutant together. The anus symbolizes many different things: the source of contamination; a queering of child sexuality; and a secret passageway into the economy of pollution both in Ir Ganim and more literally on the bodies of the children. It involves an implicit femininization of the male body, as its orifices are referred to as *nekavim* in the blessing –a word that both means penetration and female.

The male phallus, on the other hand, asserts a powerful mystique of masculinity.[18] David Ben Shushan's and Yohai's punishment of Muijo invokes the unspoken power and horror of the phallus: ""so shall Muijo be punished and he shall swear by my dick" (12-13). In a world of the powerless, the phallus becomes one of the most significant signifiers of elusive power, sexualized and gendered to the extreme. Swearing by God is replaced by swearing on the phallus, both blasphemy and a reflection of the gendered nature of power.

The persecution of Ayush by a youth gang in Part 3, shows the phallus to be a powerful, yet comical-looking weapon:

> "I'm talking to you, can't you hear?" he [Ayush] suddenly heard Coco shriek at him, wildly waving his sex organ at him as if it were an angry creature…There were seven organs dangling over him, lit by the candlelight of a tin can. Now he noticed that Coco's organ was indeed shaped like an angry face with a long nose. In speaking to him he moved it around like a puppet. (245)

The gang members, in this scene, literally brandish their phalluses as weapons, before beating Ayush brutally and leaving him behind. Again, Ayush is rendered in a feminized role as receiver of the phallus, albeit a visual reception rather than a penetrative anal one. The phallus is one of the rare exhibitors of power for extremely disempowered, discriminated and disenfranchised male adolescent characters. Gang violence, in *Akud*, is intimately tied to the uses to which the phallus may be put. Masculinity, and by extension power, centers around the phallus in Swissa even as the text performs a queering of the young boy protagonists via the anus. Yet both phallus and anus hold their own particular mystical significance in relationship to the energy of the universe, the Nekavim blessing, the politics of gender, etc.

The descriptions and metaphorical usage of the phallus is not limited to gang violence, youth play and masturbation as the phallus is omnipresent. Gersha's weakness and death-like existence takes shape partially through a description of his phallus and even Yvonne's own neck is described as a "male sex organ" (121) While women's breasts and behinds make common appearances in *Akud*, the female private area, even when it appears, does so mostly by side-references, and mostly in the context of the male gaze (i.e., the elderly Gersha inadvertently staring at Yvonne or young boys staring at women). The phallus, on the other hand, becomes a mystical signifier of power, resistance and the abuse of other characters, akin to the Kabbalstic *yesod* or foundation of the infinity of life through "the male sex organ." Albert Swissa's fixation on the phallus both involves an assertion of masculine power or patriarchy and an evocation of

the foundational role of the male sex organ in the functioning of the universe, and in the smaller universe of the boys his novels imagines and describes.

This Kabbalistic referentiality is more explicitly revealed in Ayush's reflection on the purpose of his *yesod*, the Kabbalistic euphemism for the phallus, one of the important sephirot that explain the organization of the universe. The reflection occurs immediately following a sexual encounter with Beber, in fact within the same paragraph: "Now Ayush understood once and for all that that little face down there, that holy covenant, that little *yesod* that he had …beyond all that it does in the elevated world of the heavens, was pointed in this world at females" (134). This Kabbalistic statement ironically follows Ayush's sexual encounters with Beber Sultan in which the *yesod* is used for males rather than females. In Swissa's narrative universe, males figuratively transform into females and females into males according to different behaviors, and thus gender both follows a conventional mold and breaks out of that mold through different role reversals and relationships to male anatomy.

In following this mystical attachment to phallus, David Ben Shushan's attempt to pee in the opening narrative to Chapter 6, Part 3, takes on such mystical importance, assuming the role of a spiritual mission: "David Ben Shushan…took out his peepee…But how can I pee…when everyone is watching me…David Ben Shushan raged…His burning member…failed him and bent over offended like a wrinkled mushroom (255). In this case, Ben Shushan's inability to pee induces a sense of powerlessness even as he has assumed the role of gang leader. The domestic space of home with his mother, on the other hand, does not deny him dominance over his sex organ: "In his home he and his mother are the only ones. There he pees as much as usual and he wants. But with his friends it seems that there is no 'as much as usual and he wants.' So his member goes limp like the tail of a kite" (255). Here, control over the excretions coming from

the phallus at least symbolically inscribe control over the character's own lives and domination over rivals or adversaries in the neighborhood.

Masturbation and the release of semen too express and expose some elusive sense of power. Masturbation, though considered a great sin in the Jewish tradition, resurfaces in passages concerning Yohai, Beber or Ayush, as a practice that provides transient, but intense pleasure. Masturbation and ejaculation give a sense of relief and release at best, or result in a feeling of sexual frustration at worst, but always seems to relate back to establishing some sense of control over a disturbing reality.

Early in the book, Yohai contemplates how "natural" it is to have "his hand wedged deep between his thighs" (9). Beber thinks about his semen in detail, emphasizing how much pleasure it can bring him, while also looking at it from the Jewish halakhic perspective that as he is a "deaf, little fool" (63) not responsible for his actions and does not yet have a "true seed" (63-64). Ayush and the fellow boys of his neighborhood are unable to reach the elusive destination that "the hand of fate seeks" in spite of "frequent and frantic masturbation" (98). The act of masturbation is an abundantly present possibility for self-expression, release and discovery of the body, yet also pleasure's highly exhaustible dead end. In terms of power, it reappears constantly as a transient quest for power that never fully satisfies its goal.

In the last section, more than a cause of pleasure or a sense of empowerment, masturbation is a repetitive, redundant cycle of desire that ends in emptiness, despair and loneliness. Ayush, in one instance, has an erect, but numb, penis and the act of masturbation, like many of the activities or possibilities of the neighborhood, has lost its charm. At one point, after

masturbation and the presence of a numb erection, Ayush even throws himself up against the wall out of frustration:

> His rubbing hand grew weary and all life force departed from it. His lust intensified even more in the blinding darkness, and with great rage he thrust his lower body against the concrete wall…The same seed that had begun to flow a few months ago flowed right then in his pants and continued in a warm, burning stream of urine. Ayush remained joined in an embrace to the concrete post and his hardened member hurt. He stood for a few moments in a sort of negation of self like perpetually solid concrete…(101)

Masturbation, urination and defecation all point to a paradoxical commingling of relief and distress, and are repeatedly sought after for relief from the overwhelming social distress suffered in the space of Ir Ganim. Yet while they may provide temporary relief, both the desire for relief and its material effects –excrement, urine, semen and erections—play perfectly into the larger world of distress that so aptly characterizes the confinement in their environs. The wretched appearance of Ir Ganim reeks of excrement and urine, masturbation transforms from an agitated, restless act of curiosity in the earlier parts to an act of despair for Ayush that emphasizes loneliness and depression, and becomes a "negation of self" rather than an affirmation.

Swissa's novel fosters an artful aesthetic of excretion that instills mystical meaning into the body's responses to material, social and economic distress and their relationship to the mind or soul of the youth protagonists. As the children are mostly boys, but queered boys, this gesture ultimately means that the novel is marked by both anility and phalluses; as the children are mostly poor, the novel descends into extreme forms of material deprivation, spatial encroachment and psychological distress that are embodied through gang violence and child's play, aimless wandering through the streets of Jerusalem and detachment from inadequate schooling, orphanages and other Ashkenazi-run institutions.

When Yohai leaves Jerusalem for a religious yeshiva in the city of Bnei Brak, his father

sends him with his prized valise from his years working as a dentist. The scene that follows

embodies the ostensibly mystifying act of consecrating objects in the context of Jewish religion.

Mrs. Pazuelo, in referring to the valise, says "that which was profane will now be holy" (*ma

she'hayah l'hol yiheyeh 'akhshav l'kodesh*, 17). Mr. Pazuelo replies with the formulaic

construction that in the consecration of objects they increase in holiness, and by implication, also

the possessor of the object also becomes holier: "we ascend in holiness" (*ma'alin b'kodesh*, 17).

While this poignant encounter is highly moving, it occurs in the context of Yohai's punishment

for peeing in the mouth of a young boy from the housing project, Muijo, by decree of the gang

leader David Ben Shushan. The decree itself was a profane act of consecration that mimicked

Abraham's "swearing in" of his slave Eliezer. The consecration would not even occur if not for

the brutal violence of youth gang culture in the neighborhood and thus, from the start, the

religious ritual is literally contaminated by urine and intense psychological unrest.

In Swissa's fictional Ir Ganim, social distress more broadly contaminates the often idyllic

reverence for the divine, the imagined purity of transcendent signification and the resulting

spiritual ascent. The religious practices reserved for imagined moments of tranquility and

wholeness give way to an unsettling emotional bombardment of disturbance and despair.

Religion cannot resolve this inner conflict of the psyche, nor can it provide a symbolic world to

reconcile the contradictions of daily life and push Ir Ganim's youth back from the brink. Instead,

religious ritual itself gets caught in the whirlwind of anguish and agitation that seize hold of the

neighborhood residents. Calm is a desperate need rather than a virtue or object of more measured

and restrained enjoyment. Transcendence and its enchantments are an elusive object to hold in

the hand, to grip to one's chest, and not let go at any cost. Body and mind respond impredictably

to this immanent impulse to rein in transcendence, all of which creates a rich portrait of variation in sensory response to social climate and of relentless internal emotional struggles.

Therefore, Swissa's text itself makes an opposite gesture from the consecration of the valise: the most profane and mundane, filthy and polluted practices inundate the Holy Name and Divine Presence. In this sense, a more accurate description of the movement of rituals of consecration in the text would be the following statements: "what is holy becomes profane" (*ha'kodesh na'aseh hol*) and "holiness descends" (*ha'kodesh yored*). Swissa's engagement of sacred referents defies the sanctity of the mold of consecration; consecration, in a sense, is the mechanical Jewish meta-narrative that neutralizes a lively act of sacrilege, that by its ordinary, redundant and grimy nature defiles the purity of divine transcendence. Swissa's characters deploy transcendent symbolism strategically and craftily, even as the language and spirit of the symbols may tower above the natural world in their imagination. The narrative of *Akud* does not dismantle the transcendent language of Jewish practice, but it does displace and disrupt the context of ritual signification. The symbols are relevant *for what they do as much as for what they signify*, and what they do has irrevocably shifted to accommodate the immanent whims and desires of neighborhood children.

The child characters mimic religious traditional practices –Midrashic interpretation, Halakhic proscriptions, rituals of consecration through prayer, *tefillin* and so on—but do so in ironic or transgressive contexts of displacement. This kind of displacement of mystifying moments of religion to the most mundane child experiences repeatedly occurs throughout the novel. Children make their own interpretations of sanctified religious practices, transforming their meaning, purpose and the uses to which they are put. Ayush's explanation of sin is a case in point: "See, he [Ayush] thought while standing there, in a time of distress you can do nothing but

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hold fast to sin, and then the soul is shocked and roused to come back in repentance, and then it is purified and able to sin once again" (101). Ayush's sophisticated reasoning related to sin runs contrary to Jewish tradition, but makes sense of an often senseless concept in a climate of distress, doubt and anguish.[19] Questioning or reappropriation of religious interpretations and rituals occurs throughout the novel to various degrees in the use of Rashi's Midrash to jump Muijo back into a gang; and Beber's halakhic explanation of his lack of responsibility for his actions and the state of his semen as he pursues and sneaks up on his cousin Yvonne at night. The entirety of *Akud* displaces and disrupts the whitewashing of religious rites, rituals and practicum, bringing them into material contact with a space and with human bodies that literally contaminate its normative signification.

One of the most stunning displacements of religious ritual signification occurs when Ayush takes a blond female doll with which he has fallen in love, and with whom he speaks, and turns it into a male by tearing off its clothes and cutting its hair. Initially called Madein Englander due to the label "Made in England,"when he transforms the doll into his faithful companion, "the little man," Ayush utters a blasphemous and religiously charged phrase: *hadran 'alakh, Meideen Englander, hadran 'alakh v'ish me'ishaj lukkah* (188) which loosely translates as "unto you we shall return, Meideen Englander, unto you we shall return, and woman from man shall be taken." *Hadran alach* is a ritualized statement uttered upon completing the study of a Talmudic tractate. Ayush's doll's transition from female to male stands in for the Talmud, one of Judaism's holiest legal books that any learned Jew must study in depth. A relationship of madness and hallucination –Ayush hears voices from the doll—of sexual perversion and racial pathology –Ayush fantasizes about producing a new species both black and blond through a union with the doll—and gender confusion –Ayush, in a powerful scene, mixes female and male

pronouns and verb conjugations in speaking of the doll[20]—pollutes words that customarily mark a sanctified religious rite of the utmost importance.

Similarly, the *piyutim* or Moroccan Sephardic liturgy become the chant of brutally violent gang members as they psychologically and physically devastate Ayush's brother Imo. "*El Norah Alilah*," one of the most important liturgical songs from Yom Kippur, which imposes a fear of God, transforms into something utterly different in the hands of the neighborhood youth. It becomes the chant of torment, the destruction of thatches for the sukkah and of seemingly senseless and brutal violence. Ayush aptly notes this displacement: "Was not singing holy songs out of place one of the standard customs of the boorish?" (203). The myths of sanctity attached to the songs have vanished, and while singing the holy words of "*El Norah Alilah*," one of the boys from the gang "poops in the middle" and "bursts into laughter" (204). Rather than a fear of God, the liturgy's fear and awe shift from a sanctified context to a profane one: the cruel child's play and physical violence the gang inflicts on Imo and other neighborhood boys.

Swissa dazzles and astonishes the Israeli reader with his more extreme and utterly profane displacements of Jewish ritual. While in traditional rituals of Judaism, transcendent signification often suspends the materiality of the mundane and profane in favor of symbolic exaltation, Swissa's text suspends the symbolic exaltation, grounding the symbols through a highly material and corporeal interaction with daily life. In short, the text engages in a double movement: the demystification of the symbolism of Jewish ritual by grounding it in material space; and the demonstration of Jewish ritual as a resource of resistance and immanent mystification (not transcendent signification) in the harsh, grimy context of Ir Ganim.

Imagining a Migrant Akedah

The tried and true allegory of nationalist sacrifice in Israeli literature, the *akedah* (binding of Isaac), morphs in Swissa's novel into a highly ambivalent and ironic trope of great weight, but "ambiguous meaning" (Hochberg, 2007).[21] The most obvious reference to the myth is found in the title *Akud* itself, which means "bound," the passive form of the Hebrew word *akedah*. According to Jewish practicum, the reading of the *akedah* torah portion corresponds to the cycle of the beginning of the year, the High Holy Days or "days of dread" (*yamim nora'im*) of Rosh Hashanah, followed later by the hefty Day of Repentance, Yom Kippur. The character Ayush, the most developed of the child protagonists, has his Bar Mitzvah (the sanctified ritual that marks a young Jewish boy's passage into adulthood) scheduled at that precise turning point in the Jewish calendar.

Albert Swissa's text constructs a highly original narrative *akedah* that drastically differs from the deployments of the trope in the Israeli or Hebrew fiction that preceded his novel. The *akedah*, or trope of the binding of Isaac, no longer becomes a traceable symbolic determinant of death, suffering or agony. National allegory drops from the narrative equation, whereas the particular interactions of space and affect with immigrant and ethnic identification take center stage. Symbolism and interpretative possibilities, culturally static and solemn in much Israeli fiction on the *akedah*, are more than displaced: they become radically unstable. The relationship between Isaac, Ishmael and Abraham becomes dreadfully confused; the persistence of memory and Kabbalistic, figurative suicide breach the physical and figurative boundaries between life and death in the trope of sacrifice. Swissa's attack on Israeli narratives on the agony of sacrifice is multi-pronged: the persistence of memory even as it dies; the break-down of patriarchal authority and its narrative codes and sacrifice as personal redemption.

In stark contrast to the more conventional allegorical deployment of the *akedah* in Israeli fiction, the signifiers and signified –that is the character assuming the role of Isaac and that assuming the role of Abraham, normally a father and his son—do not coherently fit into a mold of signification in Swissa's novel. There are multiple father-son relations, multiple authorities and relations of power, and each character enacts and suggests a multiple, diffuse, non-crystallizing type of symbolism. Yohai reveres his father, Mr. Pazuelo; Beber does not take Mr. Sultan into consideration all that much; and Ayush has a love-hate relationship to Mr. Monsanegor teetering between empathy and rage.

The silent obedience of Isaac walking with his father Abraham to Mount Moriah, and of sons going into battle to be sacrificed on the altar of nation in many pieces of literature, in *Akud* transforms into a trope of uncertain signification. Parents have no glorious inheritance to offer their children; they vainly struggle to keep their children out of trouble and connected to home. This attempt on the part of Moroccan Jewish fathers, and by extension the mothers, to control their sons largely proves futile, as Yohai, Beber and Ayush –though they have degrees of respect for their parents—are mostly raised by the Israeli street. Each finds a way to survive outside of the overbearing, yet socially weakened domestic space of Moroccan Jewish homes: they drift out of home; run away from school; retreat from the world, or take refuge in a world of crime.

The novel radically destabilizes the patriarchal symbolism of the Jewish family, largely centered on the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, and the implicit exclusion of Ishmael. The characters themselves traverse multiple symbolic worlds, and the children in particular blur the lines of kinship of Judaism and Islam embodied in the figures and mythical sacrifices of Isaac and Ishmael. *Akud* is a novel of filial revenge against already emasculated and weakened patriarchs; the narrative reveals the mythology of the *akedah* to be full of dread, without a shred

of a doubt, but also exposes the pact with God and nation to be a cruel farce. The stark and grim

realities of the Israeli street, intergenerational discord, fading melancholic memories and the

cavernous abyss that reappears constantly in Ir Ganim elude any glorification of agony and

sacrifice. Swissa's narrative is materially grounded, mystically immanent, a ruin of symbols and

linguistic ornaments and viciously ironic. In this context of ironic humor, repressed rage and

imminent despair is where his particular *akedah* develops, and where the symbolism begins to

break down.

The fathers in *Akud*, Mr. Pazuelo, Mr. Sultan and Mr. Monsanegor, do not stand in

exclusively for Abraham, nor do their sons neatly stand in for Isaac; rather, their own fatherhood

and sense of authority has suffered figurative castration at the hands of the institutions of the

State and remains in constant confrontation with the childhood of their sons Yohai, Beber and

Ayush. Mr. Pazuelo, the father who most approximates the figure of Abraham, does earn the

respect and reverence of his son Yohai when in his presence: "His father did not cease surprising

Yohai. His movements were so gathered in, so humble and personal, so much so that his every

gesture was like a precious rarity…" (19) This moment of admiration occurs as Yohai and his

father head to Bnei Brak, in a scene that loosely parallels the biblical trip to Mount Moriah.

Yet while Yohai seems to exhibit the passive reverence of Isaac for his father Abraham,

he feels a similar reverence and a deeper love for his companion in the neighborhood gang,

David Ben Shushan, that Ayush imagines as a parallel to the Biblical bond between David and

Jonathan: "Here I am joined to him like David was to Jonathan, like a plug to a socket, and I

shall send forth his kite like an arrow of peace to his heart"…(122) In Biblical intertext, Yohai

simultaneously embodies a young Isaac and David, yet in the novel he is of course Yohai, named

after Shimeon Bar Yohai, the mythical author of the Holy Zohar. Further, Yohai questions the

veracity of the dominant Jewish narratives of the *akedah* from the outset of the novel, and in relationship to Zionist meta-narrative occupies a no man's land that cannot assimilate its laws, language and symbols.

Mr. Pazuelo acutely senses this relentless agitation in his sons, especially Yohai: "they are not alright" and "did not grow up like his brothers, uncles and ancestors" (18). The younger generation has become unpredictable: "he [Mr. Pazuelo] thought how strange his children were. They were unlike any creature he had ever met in his life. He could not fathom what went on in their heads. The thought that they were capable of anything was shocking to him… (14). Even the most obvious Abraham-Isaac pairing traverses multiple symbolic and social worlds, such that nothing remains of this aspect of the *akedah* other than broken father-son relationships torn between love, senses of abandonment and the undermining of a once functional system of authority. Some sons "beat their own parents" (19) and many wander the streets aimlessly free like vagrants, evidenced by the recurring scenes of the protagonists roaming the streets far from the clutches of parental supervision. Abrahamic authority generative of Isaac's passivity simply does not function within this Moroccan Israeli context, whether to private familial or to public national ends. Beber and Ayush take revenge –for what is not exactly clear—or exploit the weakness of the novel's emasculated patriarchs as a means of self-affirmation.

Mr. Sultan, a very macho version of a father, feels keenly aware of this humiliation of his authority: "His curiosity grew at the sobering moment of his feelings of guilt regarding the atrophied and depleted muscles of his fatherhood" (74) and "like in the gang rape of a virgin girl he imagined that he could hear the wanton voices piercing the timid and flaccid shame of his Maghrebian generation that was so effeminate and so ready"… (74) Fathers, in the narrative world of *Akud*, have been stripped of their patriarchal inheritance, and thus feel emasculated.

Ironically, the social role of Moroccan mothers has seemed to remain more readily intact than that of fathers: one of passionate maternal love, scolding of children and of ambivalent domestic obedience to patriarchal authority. The patriarchal ethos of the fathers in *Akud* stays alive mostly by means of containing, battling and attempting to rule over their wives, as demonstrated in the following scene between Mr and Mrs. Monsanegor. Instead of scolding his sons for their perceived misbehavior that led to him destroying his favorite chair, Mr. Monsanegor enacts his patriarchal power over his wife: ""The broom!" he suddenly said full of guile…His wife looked at him in shock, puzzled."Sweep!" he ordered, delighted. "Sweep everything! Everything, everything! *Yallah*, right now!" (110).

Their children, on the other hand, tend to elude their control; fathers lack the immediate tools to grapple with the children's "Israeli reality" as experienced in the neighborhood streets. Their sons transform into "blessed orphans" as the title of Part 2 of the novel implies, right before their eyes. Further, their Abrahamic standing as patriarchs carrying out God's (or the nation's) will has ultimately collapsed, and thus the conventional mode of signification of the *akedah* has also collapsed.

In opposition to the facile father-son national sacrificial totem that a conventional presentation of the *akedah* hails, the Moroccan Jewish fathers in *Akud* lack the authority and status to be able to sacrifice their children in the first place. The children suffer an acute distress and tacit sense of discrimination that renders obedience to parental authority in daily life useless and impractical. In a sense, as Yerach Gover reads the novel, the cohesion of the entire community has been sacrificed to a Zionist ideal. Swissa does hint at this loosely communal side to the anguish of sacrifice: *"*Soon he could make out from the many prefabricated walls the same sight so widespread in Ir Ganim; the image of a father, bowed forward like a sickle, chasing after

the image of his son, also leaning forward along the mountainside already awash in shadow…" (92) This quote generalizes the father-son confrontations in the three families to the larger social environment of Ir Ganim and also makes a national allegory in passing: the bowed father looks like the sickle. The sickle, the symbol of the labor of the kibbutznik pioneer who, according to myth, gave everything for the new nation, is deployed here with irony rather than as an overt allegory. The image is not repeated in the novel; instead, it serves to underscore the incessant absurdity of father-son battles in the context of the Israeli society of Moroccan Jewish migrants: "someone must put an end to this useless war between fathers and sons" (96).

Yet this is far from the end or totality of the *akedah* trope in Swissa. In a manner of speaking, the sons in *Akud* –particularly Beber and Ayush—yield the authority and control over their fathers. In an existential sense, these two sons have the ability to redeem and/or destroy family, and though a sense of dread, rupture and despair marks the interactions of fathers and sons, there is no primordial ethos of sacrifice. More than sacrificing sons or fathers, the children compel their fathers to resign to their orphanhood; the fathers remain alive but ultimately give up their parental hold on the children due to the sudden shift in social codes and structures the Moroccan Jewish community has undergone. Beber is referred to as Mr. Sultan's redemption: "Was this son of his not his savior, the heir to his flesh and to the childhood that he never had? He shut his eyes with great intent and murmured: he will be a blessed orphan" (77). Orphanhood with a living father recalls the travails of Ishmael's expulsion from the Abrahamic family in the Hebrew Bible. In this narrative aspect, the Moroccan Jewish sons who are the protagonists of the novel mirror some essence of Ishmael's social condition in the Bible more than simply rekindling heated debates surrounding Isaac. Yet the deployment of the *akedah* does not solely

involve a transformation of Israeli sons from the figure of Isaac to Ishmael, and the orphanhood

does not exclusively apply to an Ishmaelite prototype within the Jew.

Ayush, for his part, fosters his own sense of orphanhood between Isaac and Ishmael. He

eventually flees home and undermines the waning authority and internal structure of the

Monsanegor family. Initially, however, he plays games with his father, running away only to

allow his father to catch him:

> "[Ayush]…perseveres by the periodic raising of his elbows back behind him,
> and…runs away from his father like a sinner… with the passing of the disgraceful
> chase, he will bring the benefits of honor unto his father both by the strike of his
> hand and by the *mitzvah* of educating his children" (92-93).

Ayush feels the need to engage in a theatrical simulation of the *akedah* by means of a chase, in

which he simultaneously asserts his individuality and allows his father to symbolically assert his

authority: "But now he must slow down his steps, lag behind as well, in an affected and clever

manner of course…he must stop and ask innocently as Isaac: "Where is the lamb for the burnt-

offering, father?"" (93) The *akedah* becomes a futile game of cat and mouse in which the son

appears to deceive and outsmart the father. He appeases his father through clever, deceitful

empathy. The unfolding of the trope depends almost entirely on Ayush's choices and his father is

helpless and meek: "With taut muscles…he [Mr. Monsanegor] was bending with all his body

weight against his son, defeated and drifting forward with feeble, non-resistant limbs" (94).

As Ayush's Bar Mitzvah approaches, and the pressures to move into Jewish adulthood

and follow adult rules mount, he grows more and more hostile to this absurd play of authority.

Ayush rebels against all of the authorities in his life; he does not do the bidding of

schoolteachers, refuses to cut his hair and resists the formative rite of transition into adulthood,

the Bar Mitzvah: "That morning life was on the brink. It had all begun with a raging argument

between Ayush, his mother and father…over the need for a haircut. Ayush said that if a Nazirite Bar Mitzvah groom was not respectable then he would give up being a groom" (151). Sons have the power –Yohai only partially, by turning to a youth gang; Beber by becoming a criminal and orphan; and Ayush by challenging authority—to not only undermine their fathers, but destroy their already weakened position as patriarchs within Israeli society.

The *korban* (victim or sacrifice) in the novel's father-son relations is neither traceable or consistent: Yohai lets himself be led to Bnei Brak by his father, but then runs away, only to return to David Ben Shushan years down the line; Beber does not even take his father into consideration, while his father remains much more concerned with the meaning of Beber for his fatherhood; Ayush simulates the *akedah* to appease his father, violently rebels against the proscriptions of social and religious institutions such as family, school, the Bar Mitzvah, etc. Yet later, he passively enters a dark storeroom, accepting his father's punishment for his misbehavior at school: "But he, upon staring at his mother, brothers and sisters who stood watching all that was going on, simply dashed into the storeroom with such devotion that he seemed to be throwing himself into a fiery furnace to sanctify some inconceivable love" (167). Authority in the world of *Akud* is plural and disconnected, shifting from parental to filial to institutional in varying combinations that do not lend themselves primarily to a national allegorical plane of signification.

The engagement with the *akedah* not only manifests as a dismantling of symbolism, but as an ambiguous, uncertain instance of introspection and questioning of the foundation of the story itself, by both Yohai and Ayush. Already on the first page of the book, Yohai cannot stop wondering "what did Isaac think on the morning of the binding?" (9) On the second page he remembers his father singing the prayer of the binding last Rosh Hashanah, moved to the point

of his voice breaking; Yohai further reflects upon how "Abraham is the whole story of the binding," and how he "does not believe the explanation of teachers of how Isaac felt about being bound and further wonders what Isaac thought when being bound" (10). This open question of Isaac's silenced perspective, which Swissa's narrative explores but never explicitly answers, in his own words "gave birth to the creativity in bound" (Swissa in Alcalay, 1996).

Isaac's feelings are ineffable, as he rarely speaks. The Biblical account of the story, and the rabbinic homilies, from the very beginning of the text, are the objects of Yohai's –and by extension, the narrator's—suspicion. Ayush similarly wonders about the binding and the banishing of Ishmael: "the wicked behavior of Sarah…towards the poor, forsaken boy Ishmael, and the shame of Abraham…for almost making a human sacrifice and treating Isaac and Sarah so cruelly…" (113) The horror of the binding, the relationship between Isaac and Abraham, and the implicit role of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, is the object of horrifying silence that *Akud* perceives and expresses, but yet does not interpret. Swissa's work seeks to imagine the impact of the silence and the impetus of child fantasies of breaking through the denial to an unattainable, quasi-imperceptible and amorphous object: one of the key elements being, in Swissa's own estimation, the silenced relationship between Isaac and Ishmael (Swissa, 2012).[22]

The Moroccan youth display the Biblical traits of both Isaac and Ishmael, at times silently obedient in the presence of their father, but Beber and Ayush are most often unruly and rebellious. *Akud*, thus, gives figurative voice to both Isaac and Ishmael, as Moroccan Jewish youth in the Pazuelo, Sultan and Monsanegor families occupy an in-between space between the two siblings as simultaneously Jewish descendants of Abraham, and having heritage from an "Ishmaelite" or Muslim part of the world. Biblical archetypes of a passive, silent Isaac or a caricature of the rebellious, unruly Ishmael are nowhere to be found in the text of *Akud*. The text

jumbles and muddles Isaacs, Abrahams and Ishmaels in an environment of self-declared orphans drifting in and out of home, being raised largely by the codes of the street and other extra-familial spaces such as Yohai's involvement in a gang, Beber's life of crime and Ayush's interactions with an elderly Ashkenazi Holocaust survivor named Gersha.

Freud's extremely famous "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), long ago became a paragon for the imagination of memory and trauma. A melancholic attachment to the objects of memory pervades the third part of Swissa's book. However, in the case of *Akud*, the mourning of an object fuses with the symbolic world of the binding and Isaac, Ishmael and Abraham. Instead of passive mourning, the memory is a living demon that haunts the inside of the character Ayush. Memory itself resembles a character or leads Ayush through a disassociative path of madness, and that path itself is the *akedah*.

The *akedah*, in *Akud*, is ultimately the binding and sacrifice of the self on the altar of an Ishmaelite Moroccan memory that Ayush cannot forget or from which he cannot emotionally detach himself: "One thought had begun to rack his brain long ago and disrupt his life; one faint cry, weary and desperate, separated him from the Muslim boy that he could have become" (84). A moment of unalterable reversal occurred when migrating from Morocco: Ayush's nanny almost kidnapped him, leading him to the Muslim medina before his mother called him back to the boat to Marseilles on route to Israel. In a mere eight pages at the opening of Part 3, there are three lengthy and substantive references to this memory connected to three different spaces: Morocco itself, the neighborhood movie theater and Ir Ganim the neighborhood.

While the memory is distant and faint, the images of the Moroccan Muslim nanny seem vivid. Ayush compares the remembrance of his nanny to remembering the exodus from Egypt, an obligation from generation to generation, even after the experience has long passed, (84):

> …he remembered the numbered, critical steps that still remained at the corner alley of the shaded, deserted mellah at the gold-plated sunset hour in North Africa, the steps liable to separate him from his parents forever were it not for that random, critical turning of the head and that hesitant yet desperate cry. He could remember the mud houses of the alley yellow in the sun, and the coarse wooden shutters sealed shut and painted bright blue and green, and finally the side of the alley cut off by a black shadow in which he skipped after his Muslim nanny while dressed in a white caftan…When his father would tell him the story in a sweet voice and take him away from Islam to Judaism, he would be reminded of the meat in the cooking pot –his tiny, tender palm inside it touching the warm, dry hand that was rough and tattooed and belonged to the beautiful woman; he was reminded of her strong smell, and the sweetness offered from her breasts…Ayush felt he could only remember that smell and encounter it again when he crawled through the dark recesses of a boulder or when he embraced a dead, rotting tree trunk at the edge of the sewer; he remembered the waves in her black, embroidered dress that would crash onto his cheeks and bring the smoky fragrance of twigs to his nose; he vividly remembered the familiar touch of her velvet…Was it not just one step that remained before they would vanish from the mellah into the medina? The nanny had already almost turned away from the alley, and only the train of her dress he gripped with his tiny fist was still flapping in the wind… (84-85)

The fragments of memory that Ayush can capture he holds onto with all his might. He transfers the smell he believes he can so vividly remember to daily spaces within the neighborhood such as a boulder and a tree nearby a sewer. His attachment to the memory of his Muslim nanny is an attachment to an alternative possibility that never materialized: that he might live the life of a Moroccan Muslim. One step, and he could have lived a different life. This concept of a step separating him from another life helps explain Ayush's obsession with counting his steps when he goes outside to play: "he went back over it four or five times before returning home weary and disenchanted, because he could not rid himself of the fear that he had missed a step, and he would be sentenced…to spend the rest of his days in search of that one step" (102). That moment

in time, that reversal in destiny and the memory of it all together constitute the transnational

akedah so particular to Swissa's story and embodied in the psychology of the character of

Ayush. The sacrifice of the self, body and mind, to a hypothetical that could have happened but

did not, a pathological and gripping attachment to a memory and a story that will not go away.

Ayush's multiple departures from Israeli reality –imagining himself to be a Muslim,

animating a doll into a human and dwelling within the storyworld of Westerns and war movies—

all connect to this mournful object of memory in Morocco, which permeates his conciousness

and unconscious alike. It even impacts his own friends' state of mind, as evident in the following

scene at the movie theater:

> "…between the whistling of gunshots and the groan of horses heading into battle, between the cracking of sunflower seeds that was already deafening and the rolling of bottles, slamming of chairs and whistles of excited spectators thirsty for blood, a cry erupted from the depths of Ir Ganim, a hair-raising cry of "A-y-u-sh," that rose and lifted its despair through the wind and over the hills straight to him, and even to his friends who already despaired as a result of his foolish imagination…until he could no longer hold back and would get up and dash to the front of the dark theater… (88)

This deceptively direct scene actually exposes, in my estimation, the psychic link between

Ayush's attachment to the movies and his attachment to the memory of his nanny and the

attempted kidnapping. Both are escapist storyworlds that lend an excitement and emotional

intensity to the glum and dark world of Ir Ganim and counter the imposed transition to an Israeli

Jewish identity from a Judeo-Islamic Moroccan one.

The following scene in Ir Ganim further demonstrates the transformation of a daily and

mundane life of urban poverty into one of powerful imagination:

> Ayush also loved to lick chips of ice, but he more greatly desired to observe the apprentices of the ice and watermelon vendors up close…When Ayush would talk to them, they would look straight into his eyes and go silent. He was drawn to

their silence, to what was not said and maybe was lost even to them…Ayush felt that something in their silent character was mocking him, mocking the very cry that had wrested him from the life of an Arab apprentice that he could have lived (87-88).

In this scene, Ayush goes even further with his imagination of becoming a Muslim or an Arab. His fascination with the Arab apprentices of the vendors in his neighborhood does not occur disinterestedly: they represent a manifestation of the possibility in his past of transforming into an Arab Muslim. In this case, Ayush imagines a profession he could have adopted had he remained in Morocco in the Muslim medina. The apprentices in his neighborhood become examples in the flesh of what might have been and everything Arab and Muslim calls back to him in response to his mother's call back to Judaism. These seemingly conflicting inclinations towards Islam and Judaism, brought out through an obsessive memory, further develop the complex Isaac-Ishmael dynamic at the core of youth protagonists in *Akud*, a dynamic at the heart of the novel's vision, transformation and adaptation of the theme of sacrifice.

The meaning of this memory becomes hazy, but Ayush's attachment to it does not fade, as it recurs throughout the novel at different points. Ayush gazes longingly upon the Palestinian villages Ein Haniya and Batir: "the pleasant proximity of the Arab villages at the mountainside…the terrain shrouded in the yellow dust of the moonlight, the glow of the low stone houses…and the irrigated farmland and vineyards sinking into green shadow." (93). His attachment both to Islam and Palestinian Arab villages reappears at a parent teacher meeting: "with the deep-set countenance of a Muslim boy trapped at a Jewish parent night, thinking frightened thoughts on their annoying custom to conspire..." (165) and "Ayush sat beneath them, and thought of the long, hot years that he made between the breasts of the beautiful Muslim woman, of being a bell around the necks of flocks of sheep in the olive groves of Ein Haniya"

(166). Ayush yearns for Islam, some imagined vision of what it might be, what it could be and this thought follows him everywhere.

Ayush even compares his own sinful, personal thoughts to the possibility of becoming Muslim:

> All of these secret thoughts are for him like the Muslim boy that he could have become, like the little shortcut he had already taken across the medina, his soft palm absorbed in the jumbled tattooed writing on the hand of the Arab nanny –all of which had planted an incomprehensible, ancient hatred for Israel in him, God protect us" (114).

This quote is a rare place where the narrator explicitly links an inner feeling of hatred for Israel to this memory of Morocco. This larger conflict of place –between the reality of Israel and imagination and/or memory of Morocco—far surpasses idealization and nostalgia in its complexity. The pull between these places extends to a more profound sense of longing related to the meaning of place, the "transient" and "makeshift" Ir Ganim and the alluring, yet distant pull of memory and Morocco.

Ultimately, Ayush, and by extension Yohai, Beber and even the minor characters and gang members, long to become someone else and dwell in another place (Swissa, 2012), anything but the cruel and despairing reality of Ir Ganim. This longing has the last word in the work, expressed in the final sentence of the novel: "They are a source of longing to us for the very places and very distant people we were or we could have been, which we never knew or we no longer know" (270). Ayush's obsession with the Muslim boy he could have become in Morocco underscores the bitter conflict present in the novel between an Israeli *akedah* --the attempt to sacrifice memory for the new homeland, the binding of Moroccan migrants to Israeli society and its norms instead of "what could have been" in Morocco—and a Moroccan *akedah*, an utterly impractical and manic attachment to what is no more and has already passed. This

conflict of the migrant, this inner struggle ends up favoring the Moroccan *akedah* in Ayush's case, but to his detriment and leads to his madness. No amount of strength can negate the fact that memories fade, time passes away and geography and history go through transitions. Thus, to remain attached to fading memory and bygone times –in a manner that is oddly reminiscent of the symbols of Jewish diaspora—is to sacrifice the self to an impossibility.

The permanence of memory, however, is shaky at best and lives in constant risk of death, dissolution and disappearance. As Part 3 of the novel moves along, the persistence of memory is called into question, further complicating Ayush's attachment to an object of mourning. Larger memory, not only of Morocco but of childhood too, appears to live on a constant death bed, fading and returning only to fade again, dying multiple deaths: "Like the scene on a movie screen or a deceptive memory…the events charged through the recesses of his [Ayush's] brain…They were clear when considered on their own but shrouded in fog in combination…" (126). Ayush is always reminded of the past, but when he turns thirteen, the age a Jewish boy transitions to adulthood, he claims to have forgotten almost everything: "…Today he turned thirteen, and he had already forgotten all that happened to him since he turned five, not to mention before then…he only remembered two…resounding slaps to the cheek…the events came to him in a haze, like the embryos from scrambled eggs…(222).

Part 3 is aptly entitled, "The Futile Efforts of a Fading Memory" (*Maamatz Kozev Shel Zikkaron Holekh ve'Nishkah*) and this recurring theme of memory in its death throes that stubbornly refuses to die fuses with a narrative of neighborhood, such that both an unattainable fantasy for an object of loss and the spatial enclosure of a neighborhood prison encapsulate Moroccan Jewish ethnicity. Time and space are catalysts for an agonizing sacrifice of a mysterious unknown –life that existed once in Morocco and life outside of the confines of Ir

Ganim and a stubborn attachment and sacrifice of the self to that unknown. Memory itself as a melancholic object of sacrifice and as sacrificer, rather than simply the bodies of human agents, adds a rich layer of signification to Swissa's deployment of the *akedah* trope.

Akud drastically expands upon the parameters for imagining the *akedah*, but the text does not follow the counter-current of rebellion against nationalist-personal sacrifice that emerged previously in the 1980s (see Feldman, 2010). The layers of meaning of the religious context remain intact and are subject to intense Talmudic questioning while the symbolism becomes diffuse. To acknowledge the "ambiguity of the trope" in the text, correctly noted by Hochberg (2007, 99), thoroughly enriches the reading process and avoids compartmentalizing the thematics of the book too narrowly. The temptation of many critics has been to pin down Swissa's use of the *akedah* to one textual dynamic. Whether seeing the *akedah* in the novel as "intergenerational agony between fathers and sons" (Feldman, 2010), "the oppressive sacrifice of community to an ideal" (Gover, 1994) or "the failed transition between childhood and adulthood" (Peri in Swissa, 1990), most readings of *Akud* have avoided uncovering and engaging the multiplicity of interconnected *akedahs* present within the text and none of the critics seem to have considered memory's role in the deployment of the common trope. Most of the critics have noticed a dimension of Swissa's literary *akedah* and attempted to stabilize the text's approach by reading uniform symbolism into the text. The *akedah*, in Swissa's work, is not simply a relationship between allegorical human symbols and either God or the nation, it is an internal mental struggle over attachments, memory, despair and sanity.

In a world of confused symbols, sudden historical change and a tidal wave of emotions such as that of Ir Ganim, there is little room for calm, clarity and understanding. Distress, noise, hustle and bustle dominate the space. Who is Isaac and who is Ishmael? What purpose is there

behind the encounters the characters have with each other? The only constants are linked to the architectural anatomy of Ir Ganim: the spiral of Costa Rica street and the various manifestations of an abyss that appears and reappears at will, taunting Ayush in all of its death-like gloom.

The agony of sacrifice, in Swissa's novel, manifests in a frantic, restless language whose only relief is truly an end to the sacrifice. Sacrifice manifests, as mentioned before, in two conflicting ways: resignation to the monotonous, dreary oppression of urban poverty and resistance by sacrificing the self to impossibilities. The only way the ongoing sacrifice can come to an end is by a more literal sacrifice of the body.

This crucial component of the Israeli version of the *akedah*, the completion of sacrifice, occurs in an ironically displaced context of self-annihilation in the Moroccan *akedah* that is *Akud*. Abraham does not sacrifice Isaac or banish Ishmael. Isaac, discovering the rebellious Ishmael within himself, takes the task of sacrifice onto himself as a sort of personal redemption that neither expresses an allegiance to family, God or the Israeli State. The allegiance is to memory. Suicide ultimately comes as a form of surrender to despair that is liberating and resists the Israeli brand of the *akedah*. As Israeli reality overtakes memory, as memories of Morocco are engulfed in the neighborhood abyss, Ayush considers his fear and taking drastic action to escape the abyss: "The abyss below rested in great darkness, prey to non-existent things; he was fearful of the abyss, and thus he would immediately yearn for the distant and mute screen, for now he was viewing immense landscapes even more distant" (100) and "He had one more day to do something that might change everything" (118).

Early on, Ayush already explicitly contemplates suicide upon reflecting on the wretched existence in the neighborhood: "all the things to which Ayush was headed on the days and nights

leading up to the celebration of his Bar Mitzvah caused him terror too great to bear and he felt a

strong urge to throw himself down the kiln in which nothing ever burned" (101).

Only much later does his urge become a reality, but in an oddly spiritual and meta-textual

fashion. The merkavah literature in Kabbalah of chariots ascending to heaven becomes

children's race carts "plunging down into infinity," ascending through infinite descent. The

shapeless, formless, sourceless *ein sof* (Kabbalistic infinity) becomes the spiraling, never-ending

Costa Rica Street at the heart of Ir Ganim's puzzling inner labyrinth. Ir Ganim assimilates

Kabbalah's complexity instead of ascribing facile simplicity to the symbols, similar to the anti-

formulaic transformation the text performs on the binding trope. Yet the transcendent, ecstatic,

enraptured strands of Kabbalah face quite a reckoning before the materiality of class politics and

spatial containment of urban peripheries.

Even more importantly, however, the void or abyss that engulfs neighborhood space

symbolizes the void or abyss into which past memories sink, fade, disappear. The mystery of the

object of memory and its hidden majesty are what Ayush seeks, another place outside of the

confines of Ir Ganim, and Zionist and Jewish visions of history. Ir Ganim is the space in which

the memories are hidden, "the urn in which their secrets are concealed" (93). Only near the end

of the novel does Ayush realize that the void lurking between the tenement blocks can be

explained, or find spiritual plenitude, in the infinity of Costa Rica Street:

> Now the boy was free to stand at the crossroads of the three sections of Ir Ganim
> and wonder…whether it was true that the never-ending Costa Rica Street spun
> around infinitely in a complete circle while also hopelessly descending…in which
> direction did the street go? Because the street did not return at all to here, to the
> place the sad boy stood wondering, even though this point was where it began and
> where it ought to end and begin again (262).

Costa Rica Street comes to stand for the beginning and end of time, life and the world, for the very existence of Ayush. Thus, rolling down its slope does not simply mean suicide or self-destruction, but to surrender to the infinite void of Ir Ganim he can no longer resist by means of imagination and social interface. Ayush is trapped by Ir Ganim, even as he tries to run away, and only hurling himself down into its infinity and its void can free him from that trap.

For this reason, Ayush's suicide is not an act of despair, but a paradoxical gesture of hope: "…now he would push and understand everything…His foot stretched out like a released spring and launched him down the slope…charging and stealing his way in the wind across the never-ending infinity of Costa Rica Street…" (268). Suicide is the only figurative escape from the relentless distress, empty loneliness and emotional void to which the neighborhood subjects its residents. The suicide is one of the only moments of unadulterated joy and tranquility for the pensive, unsettled character of Ayush. Death means freedom, cognitive understanding, the rapture of Kabbalistic infinity and ascent through descent, a moment of spiritual growth through a mundane and profane vehicle: one of the race carts of the neighborhood youth. The more vivid instances of death occur in the midst of life in the neighborhood; Ayush's suicide ironically involves a figurative rebirth, while the monotony and entrapment of the space of Ir Ganim is the true death.

His actual suicide ironically evokes Kabbalah, which serves as a means to suspend or annul the finality of death. Ayush does not literally die, but rather disappears from the text. He dies a narrative death, but not a physical death, and spiritually, he ascends. The novel does not conclude with his "death," but instead turns back to memory, related through the imaginary mouth of the doll or "little man," the companion to Ayush's madness:

>…every one of these things, are they not unequivocal testimony to other, very distant places where people must long for us without knowing us at all, because they were left by all the ones who came here to our places? They are a source of longing to us for the very places and very distant people we were or we could have been, which we never knew or we no longer know. (270)

The different elements of the *akedah* in the Jewish tradition: the patriarchal family contract and pure blood line of Jewish genealogy; the silence and obedience of Isaac are all challenged by Swissa's vision. Two primary elements of the Israeli *akedah*, the national sacrifice and the finality of literal or figurative death as a condition of being and/or national existence transform in *Akud* into a much more ambiguous mixture of the precarious survival of memory of the migrant, rebellious sons of an immigrant generation and redemptive Kabbalistic suicide.

Swissa's novel elaborates a Moroccan migrant akedah that does not buy into the discourse of Israeli nativity. The neighborhood of Ir Ganim is a chaotic, makeshift and transient location that does not provide a national stage of sacrifice. The agony and sacrifice turns back to Morocco, to Isaac's half-brother Ishmael, to a Judeo-Islamic social fabric that is no more after the dramatic migrations and geo-political shifts that came in the wake of the Zionist movement and the decolonization of the Arab world. Swissa's novel demands a new interpretation of Jewish religion, and will accept nothing but a transnational geography and psychology of sacrifice that looks elsewhere, breathes elsewhere, longs elsewhere, outside of the boundaries of Zionism and Israeli nationhood.

Akud as a novel is a pollutant. In a similar manner to the excrement, urine, junk and sewage that pollute the space of Ir Ganim, *Akud* itself pollutes multiple worlds: Zionist allegories and myths; Judaism's allegories and myths and the place of both in Israeli literature. The text is a marvelously constructed, aesthetically charged ode to the dignity of human survival and religious ritual in the midst of contamination. *Akud* dignifies the despair of poverty and the horrors of

discrimination by making them visible and palpable, but even more importantly, by mapping them in a peculiarly elevated language of Kabbalah, rabbinic syntax, high modernist Hebrew onto the exclusionary and discriminatory institutions of Israeli literature. The novel disturbs the separation between worlds of prestige and denigration, filling a whitewashed world of Ashkenazi purity with "Moroccan impurities" and forcing the *akedah* trope outside of the borders of Israeli nationhood to a memorialized and distant Morocco, from Jewish interpretations to a Judeo-Islamic vision of kinship.

Albert Swissa's take on Moroccan ethnicity is all about memory, class subjugation and insanity. The narration in *Akud* interweaves all of these themes together through daring displacements of the more common usage of different Hebrew language registers. Again, in the radical innovation of language and its interaction with Arab ethnicity and diaspora, the gesture performed by Swissa approximates Nassar and Naqqash. Nevertheless, the details of the aesthetic gestures of each author diverge immensely from one another, as do their aesthetic and thematic stances in relationship to each Arab ethnicity that they portray. Samir Naqqash, the writer explored in the final chapter, poses the complexity of social identity through folklore and different dialectal language registers that only make a brief appearance in Swissa and remain altogether absent from Nassar.

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[1] This accusation of decorative language, when Swissa deploys a tremendously layered and rich variation of literary Hebrew, is one of the most markedly racist takes on Swissa's novel. Razya Ben Gurion's (1991) comparison of Swissa's Orientalist rhetoric to Saddam Hussein's political speeches was particularly heinous.

[2] The opposition drawn between beauty and Moroccanness in Israeli society is powerfully discussed in Henriette Dahan-Kalev's essay "You're So Pretty –You Don't Look Moroccan" (2001).

[3] While living in Paris between 1982 and 1997, Albert Swissa studied corporeal mime under the Master Etienne Decroux. This style of mime radically diverged from the pantomime gestural emphasis on the face and the hands. Corporeal Mime put an emphasis on the control and thoughtful movements of the trunk and limbs of the body, a kind of body movement that appears repeatedly throughout Swissa's novel.

[4] The evidence attesting to regional divides and the ghettoization of Mizrahim is abundant and the persistence of inequality is statistically undeniable. Yet Swissa's text provides a fictional take on the mindset and perspective of residents from the inside, some of whom do not consciously think of institutional discrimination. The psychological complexity of his characters defies sociological and political analysis.

[5] This idea about the saturation and excess of Swissa's language in contrast to a more minimalist, measured use of Hebrew in literature of the time, is drawn from a colloquium of which I was the primary organizer and which took place at the University of Michigan Ann-Arbor on March 28th, 2012. The event was titled "Re-reading the Binding of Isaac and Israeli Society in Albert Swissa's Aqud." Albert Swissa gave a keynote address titled "Bound Together: My (Isaac's) Longing for Ishmael" after a series of talks by the following professors in addition to myself: Gil Anidjar, Gil Hochberg, Anton Shammas and Ruth Tsoffar.

[6] All translations of the novel unless, otherwise stated, are mine. This chapter also turned into a translation project that culminated in a complete manuscript of Swissa's novel translated into English. I cannot do justice in this note to the difficulties of translating Swissa's poetics and vocabulary charged with religious symbols and imagery, a wealth of extravagant and bizarre word choices, a few passages of untranslated Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Berber and an array of other challenges. However, the task of translating Swissa provided a window into the playfulness of the language and the staggering complexity of the novel's different themes. Much of the ability to perform such a close reading of the text owes itself to the act of translation, even though Swissa's text, like so many, is largely untranslatable.

[7] Gover and Hochberg both focus on the class politics in Swissa, but from two highly distinct angles: Gover gives a mostly sociological reading of the text that uses social context to read the novel; Hochberg reads through an exploration of Albert Swissa's language and thematic choices, a much more exclusively close reading than Gover's.

[8] Albert Swissa grew up in the neighborhood of Ir Ganim in real life, and therefore there is a biographical element to his fiction. Ir Ganim is a set of three interconnected neighborhoods in Western Jerusalem on the periphery, akin to a small slum.

[9] The correlation between the lack of green of gardens and parks and pollution was pointed out to me in a conversation with Kathryn Conlon (Personal Communication).

[10] Swissa's interview with Ammiel Alcalay was a watershed in providing a rich biographical context to his literary work, and understanding his take on Moroccan Jewish heritage and its uprooting upon arrival in the newly formed State of Israel.

[11] Hillula is pilgrimage to the tombs of holy figures, great tzadiks and rabbis, from the Moroccan Jewish community.

[12] For analysis of queer politics and Israeli culture see Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (2004) and Oren Segal's dissertation *Imagining Independence Park* (2012)

[13] Swissa's novel definitely queers child sexuality, and most markedly the sexuality of boys. In this sense, its transgressions of gender binaries and norms are significant. However, it does not move beyond the polarized gender

roles and symbolism of different parts of the male anatomy, and in this sense, it falls short of a more radical positioning in relationship to sex itself.

[14] *Kiddush Hashem* does not only mean to consecrate or sanctify God's name, it also refers to Judaism's sense of martyrdom or self-sacrifice for one's faith. In the context of the State of Israel, the term has been applied to those who have died in wars.

[15] This question of naming was raised to me in a conversation with Nick Block (Personal Communication).

[16] The word *nekavim*, which means apertures or orifices, shares the same root (n-k-v) with the Hebrew word for female *nekeyva*. The verb *nakav* means to puncture or to pierce. Swissa, in some manner could be said to be at least partially feminizing the space of narrative through his repeated allusion to this concept. Yet his repeated references to male sexual organs coexist with a feminizing impulse; his text blurs and queers gender through its vocabulary while at the same time acknowledging relations of power and divisions that shape gender.

[17] This concept of "living from below" comes from the conception of history in Ruth Tsoffar's book *The Stains of Culture* (2005). The upper and lower realms have great spiritual significance in Judaism in relationship to God's transcendence and presence in mundane aspects of life.

[18] The only adolescent female character who asserts any comparable form of power is Yvonne, and the means by which she asserts her power is by enticing male characters through her own body. In other words, she captures an elusive feminine power by means of controlling the arousal of the phallus, an act of female resistance that, while it does have meaning, reinscribes the phallus as the bodily locus of power for the characters.

[19] Ayush's reasoning in this instance runs directly contrary to Judaism's more idyllic vision of avoiding sin and impurity. Yet all human beings sin and this reality means that more than cleansing themselves of their sins, Yom Kippur, the Day of Repentance, offers the opportunity to repent in order to be able to sin anew the following year. Ayush's interpretation is a brilliant reversal of the conventions of Judaism's takes on sin.

[20] Israeli poet Yona Wallach played with gender conjugations and constructs in the Hebrew language long before Swissa and she interrogated gender in a less male-centric manner. Swissa's experiment need not be taken lightly however, particularly considering its interrogation of Mizrahi and Moroccan masculinities.

[21] For a complex take on the *akedah* in Israeli literature, see: Ruth Tsoffar, "'A Land that Devours its People:' Mizrahi Writing from the Gut," Body & Society, Vol. 12 (2): 25-55, 2006.

[22] For other takes in Israeli literature on Isaac and Ishmael, see Yitzhak Laor's poem, Ha'Metumtam Ha'Zeh Yitzhak (This Fool, Isaac, 1985) and Sami Shalom Chetrit's "Hey Jeep, Hey Jeep".

Chapter 3:Judeo-Iraqi Dialect and Folklore in Two Samir Naqqash Short Stories

Samir Naqqash's prose, like both Swissa and Nassar in Hebrew and Portuguese, radically tests the boundaries of modern literary Arabic through various methods of experimentation. As his body of work includes, in total, more than a dozen pieces of literature including short story collections, novels and plays, this chapter will not attempt to give an overarching analysis of the entirety of his writing. Most importantly, in contrast to Swissa and Nassar, Naqqash's literary experiments constantly deploy the ethno-cultural markers that Nassar obscures and Swissa more moderately integrates into his literary aesthetic. Naqqash's literary aesthetic, particularly in his "Iraqi themed works," is an engagement with ethnic markers, two of particular importance to this chapter: folklore and Iraqi dialects.

Naqqash succeeds at transforming folklore and dialect into markers of both ethnic identity and a metaphysical angst that derives from displacement and other causes of anguish such as aging, betrayal and lost love. Folklore and dialect, in particular, undergo narrative modification that frame them as signifiers of displacement, as they are among the Judeo-Iraqi cultural markers displaced by migration history, by the dramatic exodus of Jews from Iraq. This chapter will argue that Naqqash indeed deploys both folklore and dialect as tools to express the disintegration of Iraqi Jewish community, of the self and of language itself. Markers of rootedness transform into markers of displacement by virtue of their rarity and experimental function in Arabic literature. In his case, folklore and dialect, while they may often be seen as indicators of cultural permanence and stability, actually become aesthetic markers of the

opposite: radical instability, rupture and displacement. In using such "ethnically marked" linguistic resources, Naqqash weaves a paradox of displaced roots as floating signifiers of uprootedness and an overall state of perplexity and human suffering.

I will address two key short stories in this chapter, *Tantal* and *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*, because they epitomize Samir Naqqash's larger literary project: the deployment of ethno-cultural markers as indicators of a larger narrative displacement and collapse in language that mirrors the collapse in community and of the self reflected in a first-person narrator of *Tantal* or the stream-of consciousness narration of two main characters in *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*. Naqqash's literature involves a radical transformation of the view of Judeo-Iraqi folklore and dialect as stable instances of cultural affiliation –an act of reification—, into signifiers of disruptive potential, that generate a sort of textual schizophrenia (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 1987).

Naqqash's unorthodox use of cultural emblems to destabilize and deconstruct makes a powerful contribution to debates surrounding cultural and/or ethnic "authenticity," which remains an important subject for the writing of authors from marginalized cultures. One of the methods of claiming an authentic representation of ethnicity often involves the deployment of ethno-cultural markers of place, language, gastronomy and other rituals and traditions to "vividly" portray memories of the past and their continuation in the present. As previously discussed in both the Nassar and Swissa chapters, ethno-cultural markers are narratively malleable and need not constitute a seemingly stable montage of images to represent Brazilian Arab or Mizrahi Arab ethnicity. Like Nassar and Swissa, Naqqash narratively manipulates even the most localized ethno-cultural markers –dialectal language and folklore—to project a message. Unlike them, his narrative strategy involves a conceptual reversal: the manipulation of

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discourse and language of roots for the purposes of expressing a radical sense of displacement and disintegration.

The richness and singularity of Naqqash's work, therefore, lies in the beautiful tension between vivid, culturally situated language, themes and vocabulary and the abstracted notions of human suffering and emotional collapse that they bring to life. Samir Naqqash's writings neither reify human pain nor do they divorce it from culture and circumstance. They ground individual pain in vivid scenery, dialectal language, communal affiliations and Iraqi Jewish folklore. At the same time, his work resists a synthesis or a unified portrait of ethnic affiliation, in contrast to some writers who risk drowning in exoticism and in an ethnic tableaux that provides an essentialized picture of Baghdad or larger Iraq. Samir Naqqash explores a diasporic void[1] of memory, cultural disappearance and a violent process of assimilation. In short, his writing exposes the internal schizophrenia of attachment and incessant reconstruction of the past without a sense of security in its permanence, coherence and intelligibility. Both steadfast and fragile, his characters hold onto their memories of Iraq and Iraqi Jewish culture, yet continuously fail –and purposefully so-- to render them contemporary objects.

Considering the emotional trauma that lies behind the inner struggles of his characters, the temptation of equating Samir Naqqash's individual pain with figments of his imagination is understandable. Yet one must not deny him the agency of the fictive and the imaginary, of blurring reality and fiction through imaginative faculties (see Iser, 1993) and creating something that projects itself as authentic and real, but remains fictive and imagined. Samir Naqqash cultivates a fictional-imaginary metaphysics of pain, of the collapse of the body and the self and larger community as a narrative project and a means of literary innovation. Other writers may project their biography more clearly than he: Naqqash's imagination and prolific oeuvre goes

much further, producing a philosophical paradox of the relationship between roots and rootlessness, and its implications for broader human questions of being in the world.

Much of the secondary literature on Samir Naqqash, nevertheless, has tended to confuse the story of the author with his fiction, seeing the two as equivalents (Hajjar, in Neuwirth, Pflitsch and Winckler, 2010; Huzzayin, 2012) when they have a much looser, complex set of entanglements. This tendency to blur the line between author and narrator, between real life and fiction, has a long history in literary criticism and a shorter, more particular history in the case of Israel's Iraqi Jewish intellectuals and writers. Much of the significance of Iraqi Jewish intellectual identity in Israel lies in the mystique of the exile of Iraqi Jewish intellectuals, activists, poets and prose writers in the newly formed State of Israel.

Iraqi Jewish Identity in Israel: The Trope of the Exiled Male Intellectual

While negative stereotypes have existed for the longest time about Iraqi Jewish immigrants in Israeli society, for the purposes of this chapter a more revered figure deserves attention: the exiled male intellectual. Scholars have called the displacement of Iraqi Jews, "exile from exile" (Berg 1996), "invisible exile" (Ben-Dor, 2006) and seen it as part of a "double diaspora" (Schwartz, 2010, 2012). The list of intellectuals who fit this category in Israel is quite long: Shimon Ballas; Sami Michael; Reuven Snir; Eli Amir; Yehouda Shenhav; David Semah, Anwar Shaul, Ishak Bar Moshe, etc. Important counter-examples exist to this model particularly among Iraqi Jewish women, such as the pioneering scholar Ella Shohat, the poet Amira Hess, the social activist Tikva Levi, etc. Other male Iraqi writers do not fit the trope so clearly such as Ronny Someck, Almog Behar and many others. Yet a mystique continues to surround the idea of a second Babylonian exile and, more specifically, the male intellectuals of that exile.

Iraqi Jewish intellectual life in Israel has at least partially hinged upon a glorification or, at the very least, fixation on the concept of exile. Samir Naqqash only superficially fits into this culture: he was born in Iraq and continued to write about it after arriving in Israel. Two crucial caveats make him something of an outsider: he refused to participate in the hegemonic Hebrew language culture of other Iraqi intellectuals in Israel and he created an Arabic language literature with few parallels as far as technique and level of language. Naqqash wrote, thought and lived as an Iraqi Arab intellectual in Arabic even as society pressured him to move in another direction. Naqqash did not embrace exile as a condition, he obstinately resisted its seeming inevitability through his art.

In fact, the very tension and ethos at the heart of Samir Naqqash's literature is steadfast resistance against historical fact: a refusal to even remotely accept the tenets of geopolitical transformation and change. This resistance occurs, of course, in full knowledge of the impact of displacement on Iraqi Jews and thus he cultivates an impossible Arabic-language, literary dream. Unlike many of his peers who elaborated a Hebrew language exile within the Holy Land, Naqqash cultivated a personal sense of isolation, a continuation of his burgeoning intellectual life in the Arabic language as an adolescent in Iraq. Naqqash's life and work was an aesthetic of denial, a productive denial from a literary standpoint that led to the creation of absolutely singular Arabic language literature from a fascinating, albeit extreme, vantage point. When speaking of memory the adjective "obstinate" often comes into use; in the case of Samir Naqqash, memories were not simply memories of a bygone way of life that vaguely continued in exile, they were sparks of fantasy that fed his literary persona until his death.

Naqqash's biography sheds some light on his own individual experience of uprooting. He was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1938. When he left at the age of 13 for Israel, he suffered a

traumatic disembodiment of sorts, from which he could never fully return, a mental disassociation of leaving his homeland behind so drastically and suddenly. Arguably, for much of his life, at least in his mode of writing and imagining literary characters, Naqqash never sought to create an emotional distance between himself and that disassociation. That disassociation became the catalyst for literary creativity, a characteristic that not only distinguishes him from other Iraqi Jewish authors, but from a great many world authors and cosmopolitans who try to create distance as a means to literarily imagine trauma.

Naqqash never really felt at home in Israel, though some claim, without providing any supporting evidence, that late in life he had begun to "resign himself with some happiness" to the way of life in "his new country" (Moreh, 2004). In any case, Naqqash attempted, together with one of his cousins, to cross the border into Lebanon shortly after arriving in Israel, only to be detained both by Lebanese and Israeli authorities (see Alcalay, 1996) a subject he wrote about in his novel *al-Rijs* (*The Abomination*, 1987). While living in the Israeli town of Petah Tiqvah, Naqqash's thoughts, literary imagination and inner reality remained foreign to domestic Israeli life, a counter-reality that imagined multiple Iraqi Jewish landscapes across national boundaries. Nevertheless, he did touch on Israeli issues in novels and short stories, particularly discrimination against Iraqis and other Mizrahim. His life was one of constant tension between maintaining a distinct Arab Iraqi identity and being absorbed into larger Israeli culture. All the while, he cultivated the perspective of an Iraqi Jewish cosmopolitan with his travels to Iran, India and Turkey, and his friendships across Europe and in Egypt. He became close to Naguib Mahfouz who famously said that Naqqash "was one of the greatest living artists writing in Arabic." (Livneh, 2004). Samir Naqqash prematurely and tragically passed away in Israel in 2004.

His decision to write in Arabic immediately deprived him of the institutional support that other Iraqi authors such as Sami Michael, Shimon Ballas and Eli Amir received in the newly-founded state. Utterly confined to a second-class literary status, Naqqash was able to produce 14 works from his isolated outcast condition, including plays, short story collections and novels. Early on in his career he had to publish his own works and give copies of them as gifts to Arabs he met in the streets. His isolation only seemed to fuel his prolific literary genius (Alcalay, 1996). Naqqash, in spite of the rapid geopolitical shifts of the times, was able to remain an authentically Iraqi Arab artist who happened to be Jewish. Naqqash's writings kept the vanishing world of a fading culture alive, and often documented cultural history and folklore of Iraqi Jewry en route to extinction. This literary reality came in great contrast to other Mizrahi authors like Albert Swissa, who remains tied to his Moroccan memories but has clearly adopted the language of Hebrew modernist culture, and participates in larger Israeli culture --even if as an ethnic Moroccan. Naqqash, almost miraculously, and at great cost to his emotional and mental health, preserved an earlier Iraq in his writing and inside of himself, an identity that the Israeli state sought to erase with its policies of absorption and assimilation and its harshly anti-Arab social, cultural and political stance.

Naqqash also throws the entire category of cosmopolitanism into disarray. He lived his life as an Iraqi cosmopolitan --the vision of the cosmopolitan, even according to the elite category of the European Enlightenment, existed in Naqqash's Baghdad among a specific social class to which he belonged. The major difference is that, in addition to knowledge of multiple European cultures, elite Baghdadis participated in Iraq's own plural, non-Western social fabric composed of the urbanity of Baghdad and the rich port culture of Basra; the mixture of Shia and Sunni Muslims, Jews and Christians, religious secular and communist; ethnic Iraqis of multiple

religions, Kurds, Turkmens, Circassians and much more (see Bashkin, 2009). In his early adolescence Naqqash read Sartre, Madame Curie and countless Western classics, and even later composed, all by himself, an Arabic-language manuscript translation of Hamlet (see Alcalay 1996). Naqqash simultaneously developed the consciousness of an existentialist Iraqi-Arab intellectual of the 1950s and 60s, suffered the intense trauma of dislocation of the Iraqi Jews to Israel in the 1950s and wandered in an absurdist ghost-chase after Iraqi and Iraqi Jewish communities in Bombay, Tehran and Manchester, learning Farsi and some Hindi in the process (see Alcalay, 1996; Moreh, 2004 and Naqqash, March 2002 and October 2002). Naqqash's family circumstances and the irreversible change in Iraqi geopolitics limited his mobility, but he lived his life as a globetrotter, both physically and imaginatively. However, his was an Iraqi nationalist globetrotting that sought to imagine and revive Iraqi Jewish heritage both through fiction and his own personal encounters in exile.

Naqqash wore many hats during a short life. In addition to his prolific authorship of Arabic-language fiction, he studied and researched the presence of angels and demons in Baghdadi Jewish folklore for a dissertation, a literary theme he would return to in work after work. He was unable to complete his doctoral research and writing because no such expert on this Iraqi folklore existed in Israel, and Naqqash was never hired, in spite of his literary genius, as a professor at Israeli universities (Vigiser, n.d.). He also reluctantly dabbled in the Arabic translation of two Hebrew-language works by Iraqi compatriots Sami Michael and Shimon Ballas, *Victoria* (posthumously published, 2005) and the short story collection *Signs of Autumn* (1997) among other works. Naqqash was a true cosmopolitan and man of many trades, a situation not uncommon among Mizrahi authors shut out from the establishment, but he was also

a man with unrealizable dreams: that he would have a wide readership; eventually return to Iraq; and be more broadly accepted across the Arab world.

Though partially similar, Naqqash's literary works engaged in multiple forms of literary experimentation. Not only did they vary widely in genre –play, short story, novella, novel--, Naqqash tried many different aesthetic techniques to stretch the possibilities of modern Arabic literature. His use of colloquial dialects was one among many features including: Islamicizing Jewish themes by the use of religious Arabic expressions as on Yom Kippur in the story *The Day the World Conceived and Miscarried* (1980) and filling a largely Jewish themed story with Quranic echoes in *Prophecies of a Madman in an Accursed City* (1995); imbuing figures from Iraqi folklore with metaphysical meaning as in the story *Tantal* (1978); bringing visibility to other geographical locations of Iraqi Jews other than Iraq and Israel, such as India, Iran and England in many stories and in the novels *The Angel's Genitalia* (1991) and *Shlomo the Kurd and Me and Time* (2004); and extensively using Dadaism to give shape to a wide panorama of obsessions and anxieties of Iraqis of all religions, male and female in *Tenants and Cobwebs* (1986).

Though Naqqash's life was short, his literary life was long, rich and prolific. The extensive innovation he introduced into modern Arabic literature is largely underestimated and underemphasized. Largely due to his Jewish identity and his refusal to ignore murkier, problematic sides of that history in Iraq, Naqqash was unable to find a place in either the Israeli or Arab literary establishment. His writing on the "pogrom" of Iraqi Jews, or *Farhud* of 1941 in many stories and novels, and his direct confrontation of the Jewish exodus from Iraq in the novella *Me, Them and Schizophrenia* (1978) as well as *Tenants and Cobwebs* (1986), did not earn him great popularity in the larger Arab world. Nevertheless, he was not completely shut out

of the scene of Arab literary intellectuals, as he had extensive ties with Egyptians and Iraqi expatriates.

Samir Naqqash's quite unique contribution to Arabic language literature and to world literature involved, on the one hand, the innovation of the wide application of existentialism on a global scale. Naqqash enriched existentialist philosophy with extremely vivid modes of literary abstraction that drew on the treasures of Iraqi folklore and dialect and Iraqi Jewish myth and religious practice. He did not simply transpose the general pessimism of Sartre and others onto an Iraqi Jewish landscape, letting his own cultural background dissolve into the philosophy. Instead, Naqqash engaged in an interplay between Western existentialism –already filtered through the Arabic translation of Sartre—and the frequent appearance of angels and demons in the traditions of Baghdadi Jewish existence. The result was an amalgam of abstract metaphysical markers, some localized, specific and ethnic in nature and others of a deceptively generic philosophy. In Naqqash, existentialism was inseparable from an individual condition rooted in cultural practices, textualities, folklore and religion. While the extent of localized markers in his texts varied, they always played a significant role in his writings and infused his works with an ethnic metaphysics unique to his time and place, and completely unique in the whole of Arabic language literature. The emotional ruin and despondent character of his protagonists took shape through an ethnic form of textuality, returning repeatedly to angels and demons as rich sources of deterioration and destruction.

Naqqash further injected unique Iraqi dialects into many of his texts to destabilize their language through rupture, and to make leaps in register between Classical Arabic and more daily usage of Iraqi Arabic. Iraqi dialect required footnotes to translate Arabic into Arabic, further complicating the reading of his short stories and novels. This textual rupture served a specific

purpose beyond causing the reader difficulty and preserving Iraqi dialect in literary form: it produced a radical, fragmented and split textual aesthetic that mirrored the psychological state of many of Naqqash's characters. The schisms in language also occurred in the minds of his main characters, such that a foray through linguistics registers and footnotes was a figurative foray through disjointed thoughts, desires and disappointments.

Dialect and folklore, then, are the singular tools in Naqqash's vast literary project of negotiating the vividness and abstract in cultural memory and loss, the meeting points of concrete practices and abstract functions, concretizing modes of thought and abstracted reflection. Iraqi Jewish ethnicity itself, as thematized, imagined and obsessively repainted and revived by Naqqash the author, becomes a rich canvas of vivid colors on the level of language, but also of abstract and almost amorphous shapes on the level of thematic content.

'Tantal': The Displacement and Migration of a Figure from Iraqi Folklore

Tantal uses folklore as microcosm that encompasses rapid geopolitical change and displacement. The short story thematizes a common figure in Iraqi folklore shared by both Jews and Muslims: Tantal. Tantal refers to a shape-shifting hairy giant that appears in multiple forms to people, playing bawdy and dangerous tricks that make for exciting and entertaining stories with the passing of time (see Mustafa anthology, 2006). This figure has a centrality in Iraqi folklore that appears to supersede the less impactful presence of the jinn, at least for the narrator of the story. Tantal is a notorious shape-shifter who appears in multiple forms, and Naqqash manipulates this fact brilliantly as a means of reflection on geopolitical change, community belonging and individual angst.

Naqqash's story follows the appearance and reappearance of Tantal and the intermittent forgetting that comes in between. The work is divided into three major parts set in different historical periods and locations: the mansions of Sa'doon neighborhood in 1940s Baghdad; the tents and/or shacks of a transit camp in 1950s Israel; and the dreary apartment buildings, described as cubicles, in the same location in the 1970s. In the first part, family members retell encounters with Tantal, captivating the child narrator and filling him with curiosity; the second part relates the traumatic migration to Israel and the cruel life in a transit camp, and in this context rumors of Tantal appearing in one location spread through the camp; in the third and final part the narrator returns disillusioned from Iran, obsessed with seeing Tantal and encounters him at sea on the beach of Tel Aviv.

The story includes 39 footnotes, many translations of passages in Judeo-Iraqi and Muslim Iraqi dialects. This section of the chapter will focus on the presence of folklore in *Tantal*, and the question of dialect and footnotes will be the focus of the analysis of another story, *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*. The significance of the figure of Tantal itself will be the principal topic to dissect in my reading of the story.

The three parts of the story correspond to three main shifts that affect the cohesion of community, the narrator's individual lived experiences within that community and the figure of Tantal itself. The story develops by means of a double triangle of three temporalities/settings and three levels of symbolism of Tantal: shared folk humor, an object of fear and a dangerous obsession. Tantal's symbolism shifts radically according to temporality and setting, yet at one and the same time, the narrator's emotions and memories from childhood are reactivated anew each time Tantal resurfaces. In this sense, the levels of symbolism and the different temporalities bleed into one another even as they seem to remain starkly separate. Remembering Tantal means

remembering another time for the narrator, even as geo-political times render the earlier social practices surrounding Tantal obsolete.

Tantal as an Ambivalent Cultural Monument

The first section of the story introduces the communal practice of "folk humor" through storytelling: the transmission of stories about Tantal across generations in a Baghdadi community. However, from the beginning, the prose advances a vision of Tantal that is tremendously complex and ambivalent: the narrator is fascinated, fearful and obsessed with the figure even though he has not seen it. The tradition of storytelling that involves Tantal exposes the dynamic re-creation present in each new story and the many filters through which each story must pass to reach the narrator. Baghdad too, eludes the static, ossified visions of "Eastern tradition" that prevail in Orientalist fantasy: "Urban development has finally become a reality in the Sa'adoon neighborhood of al-Sibaq al-Qadeem." (Naqqash, trans. Mustafa, 2006).

The opening of the story situates the Baghdadi neighborhood in a period of transition and development. The "tradition" of storytelling seems to serve as glue for familial and community relations even as many of the material realities of life –kitchen appliances, heaters and coolers, etc.—seem to be changing to a more industrialized aesthetic indicative of Western influence. What remains in the narrator's neighborhood, then, is a fusion of "the new" and "the old," of Eastern Iraqi traditions and modern industrialized adaptations to encounters with the West under British colonialism:

> "The mansion had [combined] the old and the new, but it was the old that always fascinated me. Built-in oil heaters, and air conditioners in the rooms, had less charm than the bronze brazier during winter nights… Colored hand fans made of palm leaves were nicer and less noisy than the electric ones, which we always avoided anyway, fearing our fingers might be caught up in them, or that we might get a lethal electric shock. The tea brewed over the steaming samovar tasted better

> than that brewed on the electric stove, and bread from the tannur (mud oven) of Um Jameel the baker… made us forget, when biting into it, its scorching touch on our fingertips. So the sammoun bread oven, near the kitchen, remained deserted and neglected, used only in weddings and special occasions. (116).[2]

The story initially sets up seemingly binary oppositions between old and new, and East and West, pre-industrial and industrial. However, the real issue of importance in the opening to the story involves the relation between storytelling and the mystique of the "old." Storytelling seems to have no "Western" replacement and remains intact as a functioning autochthonous cultural practice. This in-betweenness between "East" and "West," tradition and modernity (i.e., urban development) temporarily dissolves. The fascinating hold and mystery of the cultural practice of storytelling over the minds of the children speaks to this attachment to an enjoyable cultural practice, to the folk humor surrounding the supernatural: "We couldn't care less for her [grandma's] convictions and scruples; all we wanted was endless storytelling" (118).

However, this dissolution of traditions and ways of life in transition is primarily illusory. The practice of storytelling and its relationship to formative cultural-communal and individual-psychological moments of growth and memory, in itself, requires modifications, transformations and social change. At the root of the "tradition" is dynamism and change, which is part of the mystique. Storytelling is a vibrant practice that constantly undergoes reinvention and displacement, even without the displacement and cultural reinventions of literal human migration. The travel of stories across generations, in itself, already transforms storytelling as is also the case with the retelling of the same stories by different persons.

The stories of Tantal, while alluding to "old ways of life" that captivate the children in the Baghdad home, do not have a stable significance or even unifying feature that holds them together. The stories themselves point to the overwhelming mysteries inherent in life and human

experience; they are each existential monuments subject to sudden change at the drop of a hat. Yet most of all, they are fascinating and fun to hear. The two main family members who activate this world of fantasy and obsession in the young narrator are his grandmother, "whose room [in the house] was a living monument to the old" (117) and his uncle who told stories when "in a good mood, preferably not when his losses at the horse races had upset him" (118).

Something about Tantal stands out from the story of the jinn and hints at some greater meaning, at least in the cryptic words of the narrator: "Tantal was not a myth, but a reality that the entire town perceived. Neither was he the jinn of the stories who always brought trouble. Tantal was fun, and with that fun came wisdom of unusual depth" (118). Two things stand out in this quote: the collective humor and fun that community apprehends upon hearing stories of Tantal; and the supposed wisdom each individual can absorb upon hearing a story about Tantal, encountering Tantal or relaying a story to someone else. Each one of these practices of storytelling performs both a collective function of "bringing together" and an individual experience of processing, fearing and remembering Tantal. As demonstrated by the narrator's words, folk humor poses as a collective cultural practice and builds community, but at its very core, it penetrates the minds of individuals who are divided and differentiated according to their own idiosyncrasies.

While the narrator appears to belong to the community –to family in Baghdad and later in Israel—the relationship between the narrator and Tantal is largely individualized, even if filtered through community and family. The "I" of the first-person narration brings an individual perspective to bear on a supposedly "collective experience" of viewing Tantal, telling stories of Tantal and listening to those same stories. We are only really able to grasp the significance of the

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stories of Tantal in the beginning through the mysterious words of the narrator, who insists on the "wisdom" that Tantal involves.

Tantal is a story that ultimately retells the utility and wisdom of the folk character in retrospect, long after the mystique and usefulness of the "Tantal of old" have passed. In distinguishing between story and novel in his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin observes:

> [the story] contains openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or a maxim. In every case, the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing (86).

Tantal, in the insistent words of the narrator of the story, has some mysterious, covert usefulness that the entire Baghdad neighborhood seems to perceive. Yet the Baghdad of the 1940s already has a fragile relationship to traditions of storytelling: Tantal seems to remain a constant presence and a crucial marker of stability in the folk literature and culture of Iraqi Jewry (Moreh, 1981). The first part of Naqqash's story deceptively buys into the myth of unity that the folk humor of Tantal propagates, while at the same time hinting and foreshadowing at its delicate tenability. This fragility of stories becomes more acute in the second part, when the Baghdadi Jewish community from the first part moves to the wretched shacks of a transit camp.

The stories themselves, as portrayed in the beginning, produce a sense of fascination, obsession and the lingering question of "why would Tantal appear to some and not to others?" (121). As there are three main time periods in which Tantal appears, there are also three main acts initially connected to Tantal: the actual viewing of Tantal or surreal encounter; the telling of the story of his appearance; and listening to the story. The intermingling of these three modes of communication of sight, speech and hearing in varying combinations –some never see Tantal but

listen to stories; others retell stories they have heard without having seen him; some see him and tell the direct stories of their encounters—constitute a tripartite structure of fascination that cannot fully unify community as the relationship of each individual to Tantal is different.

Yet while in Baghdad, a common interest in the stories of Tantal seems to connect all the residents of the Sa'doon neighborhood. The practice of storytelling –at least according to the framing of the narrative—touches all of the characters in the first phase of life covered by the short story. Nevertheless, the fragility and transience of storytelling means that Tantal too, has a fragile existence, for those who –like the narrator—encounter him only through stories. Even for those who tell the stories themselves, Tantal has a surreal, dream-like quality:

> [My uncle] became used to Tantal's practical jokes and knew that their ordeal usually left only a passing memory. "Dreams," he would say, "dreams that you remember, and that's all… Nothing you could capture. " I did not understand. But my spirit was agitated, overwhelmed by fertile thoughts. My soul was filled with effervescent fantasies, along the lines of dreams being reality and reality being a dream (120-21).

Tantal, while also simply standing in for fun, dangerous and outlandish encounters, also only remains an elusive memory, a phantom, a dream and an open question. This open question, stated directly, but never answered from the story's beginning to its end, hints at the fleeting nature of human memory, the imperfection of human storytelling and the ambiguities and mystique present in the human obsessions, desires and fascinations that the stories provoke.

The main character, for his part, is overtaken with fear and neurosis regarding the sighting of Tantal:

> I became obsessed with seeing Tantal, an obsession that had its share of fear. I asked my soul: will you be able to handle seeing Tantal? But my soul could not handle the answer. From that day on, I started to become reclusive and somehow lost interest in the tales of lesser jinn. What took hold of my imagination was the impossible. But why would seeing Tantal count as impossible?" (121).

Implicit in this final question is another question: how can the first-person narrator know Tantal without seeing him? How does his uncle know Tantal when the appearances of the giant are so transient and so dream-like? The sense of community around Tantal is based on a figment of the imagination, whose reality, for most of those participating in the culture, requires active imagining and identification with stories they have not experienced. This process of participation is largely a process of individuation and individual belonging, even as it poses as communal. This paradox is at the heart of Tantal: what is the precise relationship of folklore to individual and community?

Memory is one answer. In order to remember Tantal, and have his fascination reactivated, the narrator must forget. The story plays with forgetfulness and its relationship to memory. Tantal, as much as a figure from folklore, in the context of the short story, is a childhood memory that undergoes metamorphoses with the aging of the main character. With each life experience, the narrator seems to temporarily forget Tantal only to remember once more at a later juncture: "The nastiest of all human afflictions—forgetfulness. But in order to survive, we often rely on forgetfulness, we often impose it on ourselves. In the hubbub of life's exactitudes, I forgot Tantal." (121) In order to go on living and progress in school, the main character temporarily forgets –or more accurately neglects to think of—Tantal. In a manner that mimics Tantal's own whimsical appearances and disappearances, the human memory and its relationship to the folkloric figure drifts between a presence and an absence.

The narrator remembers Tantal years later when a Muslim cotton carder tells a story of Tantal to the narrator's uncle's wife. In this case, Tantal rather than a black cat or woman, appears under the guise of a donkey with an enormous erect phallus, trying to penetrate or "ride"

the carder (122), producing a hilarity and explosive laughter for the female listener.[3]

Immediately following the story, the narrator reveals some very insightful feelings about Tantal:

> "It made little difference whether he was describing what had really happened to him or was simply making it up. The important thing was that Tantal had come back, and the two years in between had made me more reflective and appreciative of good stories. Tantal. An elusive mischief with a thousand shapes. A truth and a lie, and the rash impulse to see him sprang a thousand monstrous heads and a thousand octopoid tentacles. "I have to see it," I told myself. But once again, life and forgetfulness put a damper on that impetuous urge (123).

Tantal's shape-shifting is not simply the literal occupation of different forms. It involves a shuffling between truth and lie, reality and the imagination. Tantal is the mischief and tricks present in the human mind: the different shapes memories take; the reinvention and reinterpretation of moments in time; the sudden and jarring transitions from one period of life to another, etc. Even as Tantal initially stands in as a localized figure grounded in the "traditions" of a Baghdadi neighborhood, his mischief is shown to accommodate all of the whims present in human existence. Tantal, thus, simultaneously stands in for the local tradition with deep ties to place, and also has the potential to explain or express much more abstract metaphysical concepts such as human memory, forgetfulness, pain, laughter, dreams and fear .

Tantal, the Refugee

Tantal undergoes a radical displacement in the second part of the story. As the figure of Tantal can only be related through the filter of human transmission, it becomes indicative of the refugee status, the traumatic shock the Iraqi Jewish community experienced upon migration to Israel. There the Baghdadi Jews, almost overnight, move from mansions to transit camp tents, in communities lacking sufficient water and infrastructure:

> "One day we closed our eyes and then opened them, and the world had collapsed …The first night I slept on the floor of the tent, feverishly tossing and turning and

ceaselessly stung by nightmares and thorns. Big reddish ants feasted on my body as well. At age twelve, I felt I had become an old man. It happened over night." (123)

The question then becomes: how does this utter descent into the misery of poverty, figurative aging and social discrimination affect the human dimensions to the viewing of Tantal? Naqqash's story shows the centrality of human experience, the socially situated elements to the lore of Tantal. In Baghdad as in Israel, Iraqi Jewish community exists. Yet in the Israel of the story *Tantal*, the threads of community –familial, economic, cultural—have at least partially collapsed, and along with them, so has the interest in storytelling. This shift becomes evident in the narrator's reaction to the grandmother wish to tell a story in the transit camp: "I resisted and freed myself from her embrace. Then I laughed cynically because I had grown up—become old indeed—and stories of the jinn could no longer entertain me" (123). Tantal and the jinn, in classic cyclical fashion of forgetfulness, disappear from the narrator's life in the initial time spent in the camp: "we forgot the old life and started to get used to the new oppressive routine" (124). As already cited in Benjamin, once Baghdadi Jews reach Israeli transit camps, "the communicability of experience" –i.e., the utility of Tantal as a means of communication of experience—has entered a decline. Stories no longer have the same "mystique of the old" as before; the communicability of folk humor through near-death encounters with the "giant" no longer makes practical sense with "the oppressive routine" of the transit camp.

However, after the community begins to build tiny shops which turn into a modest market, suddenly the lore of Tantal resurfaces, in a dramatically displaced fashion. It is again the narrator's uncle who relays the story: "Do you mean you don't know? Tantal has moved from Baghdad and is just across from here. Just after the bridge when you come from the market." (125). Interestingly enough, Tantal appears in one place only in the transit camp. It does not

appear in diverse locations, nor does the narrator share colorful stories of Tantal's mischief. The narrative silence regarding Tantal helps to demonstrate the radical shift from the context of a ritualized tradition of storytelling within families and among neighborhood residents, to a frantic sense of panic overtaking displaced refugees living in a transit camp. Tantal is no longer fun; Tantal is a sign of displacement and dispossession.

The uncle responds harshly to the narrator's light-hearted tone about Tantal's mischief: "What are you talking about?...This is not Baghdad. Who has the courage anymore?...Such stories are scary now. We are half-dead, and if we see things like that now, we'll be done with." (125). Tantal's cultural symbolism shifts according to time, place, the status of community and the implications of all of these factors for a given individual. In the transit camps of Israel, Tantal's patterns of appearance and the meaning attributed to those appearances mirrors "the way of life." In this sense, folklore can be understood as undergoing fluctuations according to variations in life style and quality of life, as having a largely contingent form of meaning-making. For this reason, Tantal can no longer stand for the same paradoxical mischief, destructive, near-death encounters once retold as if they were harmless. Life in the transit camp involves a social, cultural and economic death for the Iraqi Jewish community, and thus, in this case, Tantal forebodes an existential death, the effects of which different members of the community all feel. Tantal stands for the cruel tricks of the Israeli State that have led to emotional ruin, institutional discrimination and socio-economic decline. Tantal is a refugee along with the Baghdadi Jews, displaced from its world of meaning, appearing in the midst of a "oppressive daily routine."

Yet in characteristic fashion, this new, terrifying Tantal is no less paradoxical and complex. This transformed version of Tantal, who has migrated from Baghdad to Israel like Iraqi

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Jews themselves, does stand for communal devastation in the second part of the story. Yet Tantal also produces a sense of belonging and a shared lore among the transit camp's residents. Tantal and speaking about Tantal becomes a mode of survival for the residents of the camp on the one hand, and Tantal's reappearance reactivates the narrator's memories, fears and obsession to see it:

> In no time the entire camp was talking about Tantal, and many stated that they had seen him across the bridge next to my uncle's tent. I started to go to the tent at night and to leave late, hoping to see Tantal. When I approached the bridge, my heart would start pounding, and real fear would overwhelm me. (125)

The complexities of Tantal withstand the devastation of migration. They survive intact: the interrelationship between appearance, storytelling and listening to stories –visual, oral, aural— remains essentially the same. The meaning is what changes; Tantal as a metatextual object of curiosity transforms each time an appearance occurs and stories are told and heard. However, the drastic change that has transpired upon migrating to Israel dictates that the meaning of Tantal stories no longer transform according to his shape-shifting, his particular mischief and its possible implications. The fear of Tantal prevails over the playfulness of the mischief, such that the folklore no longer has the same "mystique of storytelling" attached to it; the viewing of Tantal becomes a rumor that spreads through the camp, no less captivating, but more loosely related to the former ceremonious custom of storytelling.

Notably, the stories of Tantal shift from more vivid accounts of Tantal's creative mischief, to repeated, haunting appearances by the bridge that have a more abstracted metaphysical significance. Tantal becomes the object of gossip or rumor; a curiosity that gives life to the camp's "walking dead;" and a revival of what the narrator has forgotten for a second time from his childhood. That the narration does not include extended accounts of Tantal's

appearance in Israel is not random nor a coincidence; this narrative choice underscores that

Tantal's significance has a contingent relationship to the human beings viewing him, speaking of

him and listening about him whose current conditions condition folklore's production of

meaning. Tantal too undergoes a process of migration, conceptual, metaphysical and

geographical, from Baghdad's al-Sa'doon neighborhood to an Israeli transit camp. At the same

time, the earlier version of Tantal lives on in the narrator's imagination, as does his desire to see

and experience for himself what he has only heard through stories.

Tantal and Individual Anguish

The third part of the story shifts from community almost exclusively to the individual.

Tantal becomes a perplexing symbol of a desire that remains intact even after life has devastated

the narrator. After failed loves and travels through six countries, the narrator, now thirty years

old, finally returns to the camp in its new form:

> The camp had become a humble but horrific suburb. The tents were gone, true,
> but the ugliness remained in the semblance of modernization that had replaced
> them. The important thing for me was to find my life. When I entered our cubicle
> I lost all hope" (126).

In this context of individual hopelessness, a renewed desire to see Tantal emerges. Again, Tantal

seems to hold the key to some mystery of human life, more specifically the secret to the

narrator's life.[4] The narrator's former obsession with Tantal reaches its climax.

The narrative has come full circle. Initially, stories of Tantal formed part of a communal

tradition with a fearful impact on an individual child; then that fear was generalized to

community in the wake of radical uprooting and dislocation; then the narrator, upon returning

from abroad to Israel, stakes his hopes on the viewing of Tantal. The consistency between all of

these meanings of Tantal is narrative perspective: the narrator never totally abandons his

fascination and/or fear of Tantal and the supposed "wisdom" its appearances impart to the viewer. In his desperate search for meaning in his life, and with the failure of love, travel, family and stories to provide that meaning, Tantal becomes a majestic purpose in its own right and for its own sake: "Whatever we do, Tantal is our only certainty…Everything else is an illusion…Perhaps I'll never see him, but I started to feel he has become part of my life" (128). Here the "we" and the "I" that represented community and individual have become blurred and disconnected as the narrator has aged and traveled, pronouns redeployed in a tone of delirium and a frantic hope for meaning in the midst of a hopeless, meaningless life. The scale has tipped over from ethnic and communal affiliation to a more abstract metaphysical mode of signification.

In this third transformation-iteration of the figure of Tantal, Tantal explicitly becomes much more broadly applicable than a localized ethnic marker, a fearful shape-shifter or a sign of community belonging. In this instance, folklore crosses the line from metaphysical symbolism into a metaphysical state of being. Tantal also moves from more simple appearances --a giant man, a donkey, a black cat—to a more charged metaphysically symbolic form, dissolving inside the entire ocean[5]:

> "I looked for the hand and saw it –a giant hand that came from the direction of the deep waters…The hand lured me in and I approached. It lured me in again, but the gap between us widened, and the hand fled me, it fled me relentlessly. I screamed, out of breath: "Where are you leading me?"…I caught a glimpse of his face with the last threads of light. A giant. Of a dark complexion. Its teeth out. Laughing or grinning or mocking." (129)

The dramatic appearance of Tantal in a moment of near-death human vulnerability has undergone two major shifts: the massiveness of the sea and its waves, which have a more clear metaphysical significance of the dangerous draws and pulls of fate and life, do not generally figure in the stories of Tantal in Baghdad; the appearance does not happen ostensibly at random,

but rather immediately following the narrator's assertion that "Tantal is our only certainty" (128). All of these changes, however, more than reflecting a change in the form of Tantal himself, occur do to the narrator's shift in idea regarding the figure as a symbol of all the potential for meaning that his depressing life may have. Tantal stands in for a desperate need to escape disillusionment and experience life-affirming excitement. Yet the story, in Naqqash's pessimistic vein, does not provide an outlet for this desire.

The climax of the story concludes with an attempt, through the projection of the voice of the narrator, to affirm the significance of the viewing of Tantal: "It's Tantal…I saw Tantal," I shouted with all the strength I had…A weak echo came back, "It's Tantal…I saw Tantal." (129). The much anticipated viewing of Tantal follows with an anti-climax: the appearance of Tantal only leaves a weak echo in its wake. Tantal's mischief is still mischief, and the narrator is left with the same emptiness and the surreal, dream-like memory his uncle had described at the beginning. His search for life through Tantal proves utterly futile. Tantal's secret seems to involve the elusiveness of human existence, all of the mysterious shapes into which it can transform to play tricks on the minds of human agents, and the fragility of human bodies and emotions throughout the entire process.

Tantal, an ingenious story of human growth and devastation, breaks down the binary divide between vivid ethnic markers and abstract philosophical concepts, fusing Iraqi folklore and precepts from Sartre's existentialism. Metaphysics of life and death confront an ambiguous folkloric figure that traverses multiple times and spaces, circulates between multiple eyes, mouths and ears and transforms radically from one space to another in terms of meaning. These changes in meaning serve a specific narrative function: the utter unraveling of folkloric myths

that form part of an Orientalist and self-Orientalizing ethnic tableaux that seeks meaning in local colors, scents and "picturesque" scenes in and of themselves.

Samir Naqqash envisions Judeo-Iraqi and larger Iraqi folklore as a muddled mixture of abstracted metaphysical ideas/ideals; vivid stories and oral depictions; mediations of individuality within the realm of collectively presented experiences; and contingent iterations and transformations of the same figure according to who views Tantal, who tells the story, who listens and what socio-historical circumstances prevail at any given time. Folklore, in *Tantal*, reflects social and cultural displacement of Iraqi Jewish community; remains an individual fascination for the first-person narrator even as meanings and the stories narrated are displaced; and serves the larger narrative purpose of the story itself: the dissolution of community, individual and Tantal himself in a tripartite pattern of movement –a tradition of storytelling in Baghdad; a rumor of sightings in an Israeli transit camp; and a lingering hope to give life meaning in the wake of disillusionment and return to Israel.

Depending on the point of view through which one views these iterations of Tantal, particularly its relationship to individual or community, the story *Tantal* is radically different. Tantal's appearances and the stories told about them, on the one hand, establish the gradual dissolution of community structures as the shared experiences of storytelling become a fearful rumor and then an individual obsession. Yet from the perspective of the narrator, the complexities of Tantal retain a consistency: an object of fascination that is invisible and only indirectly narrated by second, third or even fourth parties; and an object of wisdom with some secret knowledge to bestow on the viewer.

'The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried': Dialect and Disintegration

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The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried is a stream-of-consciousness tour de force that all occurs in the span of a Yom Kippur service in an Iraqi Jewish synagogue in Bombay, India on Monday evening, October 12, 1959.[6] Two main characters, seated next to each other in the pews, sort through their feelings of restlessness and despair. Ishak Aida, an elderly and impoverished Iraqi Jew, is concerned with the immorality and hypocrisy of many present in the temple on the holiest day of the Jewish year while secretly fostering homosexual desires for the young man seated on his other side.[7] Shaul Hillel, the second protagonist from a more affluent section of the city, suffers from medical infertility and fears that his wife Habiba's "miracle pregnancy" may be the result of a betrayal on the part of his friend Ezra Saleh. This paranoia builds to a fever pitch with Shaul Hillel's mental and emotional disintegration at the conclusion to the story.

The Day the World was Conceived and Miscarried engages in a radical experiment with language, translation and readership. While set in a consistent location, a neighborhood Iraqi synagogue in Bombay, India, the narration itself reveals what I will be calling, for lack of a better term, a "practical, lived cosmopolitanism." The story effortlessly fluctuates between a high register of Classical Arabic and intermittent interventions of Judeo-Iraqi dialect, a plethora of cultural concepts and words drawn from six other languages in addition to the two Arabics: Hebrew, Hindi, Turkish, Persian, English and Urdu. In this sense, a total of at least eight languages make their way into a 46 page story. This saturation of cultures, languages and references requires the insertion of multiple footnotes into the story, 99 to be exact.[8]

The cultural references extend into both slums and rich Iraqi Jewish neighborhoods both in Baghdad and Bombay, a classic Urdu film, 19th century liturgical and classical Iraqi Jewish music, a childhood game in Iraq, explanations of Jewish ritual and religious custom, landmarks

in Bombay and curses from Iraqi Jewish dialect among other examples. In short, the story extends from cosmopolitan into cultural overload and generates, by virtue of an abundance of footnotes (some extremely detailed, one even explains the pronunciation of the Urdu title of a famous 1959 film), a highly distinct economy of reading. The text demands an openness to rupture, to the crushing of human will, to intense disintegration of characters, language and text. The final words of the text, after all, referring to the emotionally overwhelmed Shaul Hillel as he goes mad, say: "He listens and melts away….and melts away…melts away…melts away" (Naqqash, 1980: 56).

The rich language employed in *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* defies synthesis and the limited scope of the section of this chapter engaging the short story. This piece of the chapter will focus on the stunning overload of dialect, footnotes and cultural referents and their interaction with the overall disorder with the story. These seemingly coincidental choices that Samir Naqqash makes in crafting the narration have very real effects on the economy of reading and the narrative aesthetic that results. Naqqash, quite simply, creates an experience of reading and a narrative aesthetic in modern Arabic without direct precedents or successors. The complexity of his referentiality does not occur, however, without complications and a serious alienation of some of his readership.

Some of Samir Naqqash's literary work outright transgresses the narrative frameworks, assumptions and hegemonic modes of writing in Classical Arabic in modern Arabic literature. Doubly marginalized as an Iraqi writer –Iraqi visibility is present, but nowhere near dominant in Arabic language fiction—and further as an Iraqi Jew writing in Arabic, his literature only further chooses the path of marginalization in the style of writing and themes explored. The story *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* is a powerful case in point, as it explores the Iraqi

Jewish community in Bombay on Yom Kippur. Samir Naqqash's travels to India, Iran, Turkey and England all made a significant impact on his literary career, opening a space for the exploration of actual geographies virtually invisible in the larger world of Arabic language literature. The cultural exchange between India and Iraq, the hefty rituals that accompany the Day of Atonement, the peculiarities of Iraqi Jewish neighborhoods in Bombay and a host of other subjects force their way into Naqqash's trailblazing prose.[9]

Samir Naqqash's use of footnotes creates a typographical or visual pattern, like a "two-story house" with a Modern Standard Arabic foundation and a second floor of Iraqi dialect.[10] The difference between Naqqash's house and any house is that his house wobbles. The footnotes do not take place within a linear text, as *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* jumps wildly between the stream-of-consciousness narration of two main characters and the text's specific cultural references and vagaries into dialect do not follow a consistent pattern. The footnotes both split the text into separate visual segments, and add to the larger vertigo of the characters' speech and state of mind. The footnotes and sheer number of passages in dialect become an interruption to the narration, a jarring interruption that creates a feeling of disruption, disturbance and unease in the reader. This unease parallels the unease of the two main characters, Ishak Aida and Shaul Hillel.

Early on in the story, the footnotes make a strong appearance. By the bottom of the third page, seven footnotes, one of a long passage in Judeo-Iraqi dialect, have already taken up space. Regardless of Samir Naqqash's conscious intent, the presence of four footnotes on the brief first page alone sets the tone for the entire story: *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* will be a story of constant explanatory and dialectal interruptions, a maze of references, random thoughts of characters and footnotes at the bottom of many pages. These choices are not random:

Samir Naqqash could decide to simplify or at least standardize his language, but he actively opts for the opposite.

On the first page, Judeo-Iraqi pronunciation; a Hebrew word from Jewish ritual for the Holy Ark, *taivah*; Hindi words for "black horse," Kala Gora, referring to a statue of the Prince of Wales; and the Persian word for alley, *kuche* (the word used in Iraqi dialect) all make their way into the second paragraph: . In short, the influence of five different languages already peaks its way into the first page of a short story largely in a high, peculiar register of Classical Arabic. The second paragraph, which follows a reflection on "the purity of the color white" and "submission in fasting" (11), is where much of the cultural referents enter into play. The narrator lists neighborhoods in Bombay and the landmark Prince of Wales Statue, as Ishak Aida walks fatigued for an hour from a poor Iraqi Jewish section of Bombay to a more affluent one where the more respected *Knesset Eliahu* (literally, the synagogue of Elijah) is located.

Two lengthy footnotes among many stand out: one in dialect that extends across the bottom and top of separate pages and one on a classic Urdu movie the character Shaul Hillel bought from the socialist filmmaker at a hefty price. The footnote that extends for two pages comes in the context of 13 footnotes in a span of two pages. This abundance of references, all in the context of Ishak Aida's rant about the thief Abraham Shalom, creates a distinct economy of reading. Most Arabic readers must depend on footnotes and move between footnotes and original text to even be able to get through those two pages. Figurative phrases, including an Iraqi curse of two people dying in one day and the Hindi word *barber*, "it's all the same" precede the lengthier passage in dialect. Inner monologue and narrative structure are radically displaced by means of this multilingual gesture.

The passage in dialect roughly translates thus:

> It's as if the two of them are two peas in a pod. I wonder how I stayed with him in one room for all this time. How did I stay alive? Why then did my body get emaciated and my bones stick out?[11] *Yahwih* Ishak (*yahwih* is a word the bereaved recite over their dead while slapping their own faces). How could you bear all that? You deserve to have a *chayne* made for you (with the Persian *jim* and a *sukun* over the *ye*, funeral) and lots of slapping…Oh God's faithful! Abraham Shalom has made my hair gray. He has inflicted me with thousands of diseases. Of all the people I have seen in the world, I have not seen another as wicked as he[12]…In him all the vices of the world are concentrated. Whatever your heart desires. You see him as a fornicator, and so he is. You see him as a plunderer, and so he is. You see him as a thief, so he'll strip you of your clothes without you even noticing.[13] (26-27, footnote 30).

Ishak Aida's lament in dialect even leads to explanations of words in parentheses within the footnote. In this sense, there are footnotes within the footnote. Furthermore, the visual effect of a footnote extending from one page to another further destabilizes the process of reading. Footnotes overwhelm the text in parts of *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* and in other parts they disappear: the overall effect is an inconsistent and fractured economy of reading that weaves between dialect, local words, footnotes, stream of consciousness in Standard Arabic and combinations of all of these registers of language.

Most importantly, the presence of footnotes in the story has both a visuality and textuality that surpasses their more frequently explanatory functionality. The typographical visuality, due to the frequency of footnotes, becomes a repeated draw to the eye of the reader that as much as serving as a foundation for understanding dialect and obscure vocabulary, also transforms into a splitting of the text into composite parts which require significant maneuvering on the part of the reader. The footnotes lead to sensory overload and exhaustion, a state of figurative vertigo, a whirlwind of references and linguistic registers. The textuality is deeply connected to the visuality: the visuality of the footnotes, in fact, produces a split textuality that cannot completely

return to an illusion of totality. This powerful impact of footnotes follows the larger tendency of the text toward fragments, disintegration and the dissolution of a unified action, plot or language.

Another major effect of the footnotes on the reader is a general sense of distraction from what is happening in the primary text. These distractions parallel the larger theme of the story: the inevitable distraction of the "pious" main characters from their duties on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Both the primary text itself and its footnotes distract the reader from any stable sense of time, Jewish ritual or language. The general idea relates to the impact of the disorder of life on the supposed "orderliness" or "regularity" of religious ritual.

As Shaul Hillel`s mind wanders to his wife and the friend he suspects of impregnating her, he thinks of his own naïve good nature and an incident with his friend Ezra Saleh. An Urdu film, *Char Dil Char Raheen*, is an actual film from 1959. Shaul Hillel attempts to buy it only to be swindled by his friend and business partner, Ezra Saleh. The mention of the movie earns a lengthy footnote that includes both social context for the film and linguistic rules of Urdu pronunciation:

> In Urdu, the title means, 4 hearts and 4 paths. The J and H are one breathy letter pronounced driven by the pharynx whereas the H can be heard in the larynx. The N in raheen is the marker of the plural. It is not pronounced, but rather leads to the uttering of the Y after the closing and pressing of the larynx so that it will come from both the pharynx and the nose. And the film is based on a story by the famous leftist Indian writer, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and was also directed by him. It was shown for the first time in Bombay, at the time in which the story is set" (36, footnote 68).

The film is one of the most historically specific Indian cultural references in the short story. Ironically, the pronunciation of the title receives more attention than the film itself in the footnote. Why might Samir Naqqash have chosen to give a linguistics lesson during such an important part of his story? Again, the reason is less important than the effect: it distracts from the flow of the story. *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* is all about distractions:

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distractions from religious worship rooted in personal anxieties and despair. The cinematic

subject of this footnote is simultaneously a foray through popular history, a device for character

development and a metaphor for the walls that separate the characters from one another.[14] Yet

the primary effect is a distraction from the already fractured flow of the story; the footnotes are

both indications of multilingual cultural pluralism and aesthetically a distraction or further

rupture in the story's style of self-presentation.

Judeo-Iraqi dialect, in great contrast to many uses of dialect in Arabic fiction, does not

ground the narrative in the practicality of daily life or in familial intimacy. The use of dialect

appears spontaneous and occurs creatively, often in the form of a mental rant against or about

something, but sometimes in the form of particular vocabulary, curses or even figurative use of

language. In short, there is no stark separation between Judeo-Iraqi dialect and Modern Standard

Arabic as linguistic resources or even registers as dialect is not marked as "popular language" in

this particular story. Instead, dialect fuses into the story's Classical Arabic, and the disjuncture is

exclusively based on a lack of knowledge of the language and not on artificial linguistic

divisions drawn up by some linguists, anthropologists and other scholars between dialect and

standard. This gesture is quite a radical one, particularly considering the obscurity of components

of the dialect used in the story.

While Samir Naqqash himself may claim that he uses dialect primarily as a means to

realistically portray Iraqi characters (Naqqash, 2002), the effects of his choice extend beyond his

narrative intent and require a creative deployment of dialect that moves beyond the formulaic.[15]

The most glaring narrative use of dialect in *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*,

in following this vein, occurs by its interiorization and personalization, its transformation into an

individual possession or linguistic object through inner monologues. This approach to dialectal

variants as objects of personal creation demonstrates a quite distinct model to that advanced by the famous linguist Haim Blanc in his landmark work *Communal Dialects in Baghdad* (1964).[16] Neither Ishak Aida nor Shaul Hillel link words from Judeo-Iraqi dialect, in large part, to any communal sense of belonging or ancient Iraqi Jewish roots. Dialect serves a practical function on the level of internalized self-communication and a stylized function as a literary instrument of rupture in the larger narrative. These additional functions beyond familial intimacy and communal belonging demonstrate the often synthetic models and theorizing of dialect that exist in much of more traditional linguistics of minority and non-Western language communities.

Dialectal language, in fact, intrudes on the thoughts of the characters in a parallel manner to its intrusion on the larger text. The thoughts of the characters are not exclusively in dialect; the jumps into dialectal language can occur suddenly, at the beginning of the monologue, remain brief or even once extend for a full page. The stream of consciousness narrative consists of multiple layers of back-and-forth movements between characters, narration and monologue, present and past, the Yom Kippur service itself and internal thoughts, existentialist-inspired reflections on action and action itself, Standard Arabic and dialect. In short, *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* radically breaks down standard narrative structures, using dialectal language as one of the primary tools.

How does Samir Naqqash achieve this powerful innovation in Arabic language in this particular story? Specifically by exposing the possibility to narratively create and for his characters to create their own dialectal idiolect responding to their situations of distress in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Inserting dialect into inner monologues creates a radical disruption in the flow of an already disturbed and frantic narrative, hinting at his own characters' fragility and proximity to a nervous breakdown.

The insertion of dialect occurs mostly in the form of verbal rants charged with emotion. Already on the first page, Ishak Aida bursts in on the narrative as he walks for an hour, fatigued and in worn clothes, to the synagogue in a more affluent neighborhood. As the sun rises for the morning service and he approaches the synagogue, two sounds assault him: "the song of praise erupting from the booming crowd" (11) and the buzzing of a plane. In response, as he reaches his destination he blurts out: *awal wabā* (the first pestilence). This moment in the first paragraph, where Ishak Aida gives voice to the intensity of his despair and the uncleanliness of human sin and corruption, parallels the distractions in the middle of his walk. A sudden statement, followed by reflections on human purification, both by spiritual cleansing and of the body, it leads into the abrupt style of inner monologue to follow.

However, another extremely important detail, untranslatable outside of Arabic, occurs with the phrase *'awal wabā*. In the original text, a footnote is required as *wabā* is missing the glottal stop of the hamza in Standard Arabic, *wabā'*. This minor detail in pronunciation sets the stage for larger changes in detail in future monologues, where vocabulary, pronunciation, verb conjugation and so on all differ tremendously from Standard Arabic. The fixation throughout history on grammatical peculiarities of Classical Arabic, and the importance of the hamza in some of these considerations, means that Naqqash's choice to insert dialectal variants into a literary narrative creates a profound disruption of an already experimental Classical Arabic, steeped in existentialist metaphor and a somewhat arcane style. The layers of experimentation in Samir Naqqash's Arabic writing have a singularity without equal or match; his Arabic idiolect makes use of dialect as an aesthetic tool of disturbance of artificial boundaries between literary and oral speech, and monologue and dialogue as means of communication.

A more striking example of Judeo Iraqi dialect occurs on page 13 of the story (the third actual page), when Ishak Aida goes on a rant in dialect questioning his decision to come to the more affluent Knesset Eliahu (Elijah), reflecting on the divisions between rich and poor in the Iraqi Jewish community and the piety of the actions of those present. The passage roughly translates thus:

> Tell that to your mind. You had a temple in Byculla, so why did you make yourself suffer by walking mercilessly for an hour on your weary feet? All so you can see these thieves? And what's the meaning of all this? Is there shame in them being rich and us being poor? Is it conceivable that we could come on this day of all days and oppose the will of God?" (13)

Just as occurs with folklore in the story *Tantal*, dialect transforms in *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried* from a communal marker to an individual resource. The originality of Samir Naqqash's literary experiment exposes a deficit in the conception of dialectal language that seems to wish to view it through the lens of the communal to the detriment of a more personalized, individual interaction with language and community alike. Naqqash's writing demonstrates the inseparability of ethno-cultural markers from the personal, the individual and the idiosyncratic. His extensive use of dialect also shows that the human uses of dialect and even more importantly in a literary context, the conceptions of dialectal variants of language, are subject to the same agency and human creativity as a more standard literary and educated language. Literature chooses to make sparse use of complex dialects, but this glaring absence does not imply that dialect is less literary.

The passage above acquires a peculiar rhythm in Judeo-Iraqi dialect that differs significantly from the more standard Arabic that precedes it. Most significantly, I would argue that the intensity of the questions climaxes more naturally in dialect than in Classical Arabic for the following reason: the disjuncture between the two registers of language creates a rupture in

tone and intensity in the middle of the same inner monologue. The first two sentences of the inner monologue are in Standard Arabic. Suddenly, Ishak Aida bursts into Iraqi dialect, immediately following his assertion that the "blessing of approaching the Holy Ark has been stolen from him" (*Lan ataqarrab…Saraqū minnī tilk al-ni'mah*). Immediately following the lament in Standard Arabic, he asks the philosophical question of who is guilty, the murderer or the victim in Iraqi Arabic (*Leysh al-ṣūch min al-qātil, law min al-maqtūl?!*).

In addition to the sudden shift in language, the word for guilt is of Persian origin and not readily intelligible even to a skilled speaker of Standard Arabic with knowledge of Egyptian or Levantine dialect. Furthermore, the conceptual jump from losing a blessing to the figurative and philosophical question of guilt and murder does not follow a logical progression. In this sense, this instance of dialectal inner monologue performs two separate and suddenly destabilizing functions at once:the movement between partially –sometimes largely—unintelligible variants within the same language; and the conceptual leaps between loosely connected ideas in the fashion of much stream of consciousness narrative. These two elements create an aesthetic of linguistic and conceptual rupture in the monologues.

The conceptual and linguistic ruptures complement one another. In this sense, dialect works together with the unstable and uncertain tone of stream of consciousness to radically disrupt the reading process of the reader: *ma'taqulū āli'aqlak* (Tell that to your mind) Ishak Aida beckons to himself. But he also figuratively beckons to the reader to try to sort through all that is happening in the mind. As Ishak Aida beckons to himself to explain why he traveled all this way to a more affluent synagogue only to be surrounded by thieves opposing the will of God, he also implicitly asks us a parallel question: why has Samir Naqqash gone to all this trouble to include dialect in his story without making it more intelligible and to what benefit?

At the same time, the seemingly disorderly leap between questions and standardized literary language and dialectal speech provide an answer to the question by their own presence. The rupture, intensity and innovation of Samir Naqqash's language increases exponentially by means of the inclusion of dialect, whatever the difficulty it imposes on the reader. Thus, to ask the question why of Samir Naqqash's inclusion of dialect and footnote is more of a rhetorical question, as his narrative choice has very concrete effects that move beyond the why of the thing. Naqqash's story would lose an abundance of intensity, an aesthetic of rupture, such a great climax of despair if he did not include dialect to create a jarring narrative. To put it simply, Naqqash generates two parallel narrative worlds: that of the circumstances of his characters and the language they use to express those circumstances. Dialect is a key narrative technique in giving linguistic substance to the larger thematics of the story.

The inclusion of such obscure vocabulary to much of the Arabic language readership not only requires footnotes for explanation. It fosters a larger "break" in language itself, forcing estranging customs, expressions, histories from the margins to the center of the Arabic language itself. Yet moving the margins to the center does not change their status in more common expressions of language. For this reason, Naqqash must footnote, placing the margins back to the margins. In this sense, dialect and non-standard vocabulary follow a double movement: a defiant movement to the center of the text, a return to the margins of the page for explanation and finally an overall visibility due to its presence on both parts of the page.

Most visibly, Samir Naqqash stubbornly preserves a Hebrew ritual lexicon where Hebrew words, after being footnoted once, reappear and reemerge repeatedly, mimicking their presence in Judeo-Arabic language. In addition to the word for the Holy Ark, *taivah*, the following words all intrude upon Standard Arabic: *tallit*, the Jewish prayer shawl; *siddur*, the prayer book; *Birkat*

Ha'Gomel, the blessing for good health after travel or an illness; *amidah*, the central prayer of daily services and many more.

In the dramatic conclusion to the story, both Ishak Aida and Shaul Hillel cannot help but repeat the Hebrew words *Yerahem Ha'Shem* (God have mercy!), pleading for God's mercy at the climax of the service and their own personal despair. Jewish religiosity both intrudes upon Arabic through Hebrew root words and occasional phrases, and dissolves into Arabic through the Arabization of the liturgy. In this sense, the story fosters an ambivalent Judeo-Islamic mixture, where Judaism and Islam meet at certain points and depart from each other at others.

Ishak Aida's masterful use of dialect for philosophical reflection, also employs a sophisticated cultural lexicon to remember Baghdad and vividly express local elements of Iraqi culture. Upon catching sight of a prostitute in a red dress in the temple, he makes the following observations:

> There are twelve months in the year in which she does as she wishes, committing sins as plentiful as the hairs on her head, counting on the reoccurrence of Yom Kippur. She thinks God can be deceived. She seems to think she is playing a game of Tomma Khreiza with Him" (16).[17]

This quote demonstrates the rich possibilities for figurative language present in the use of dialect and local cultural references. The numerical comparison between sins and hairs on the head is one impressive example, but even more stunning is the equivalence drawn between an Iraqi child game and the prostitute Lulu's attempt to hid those sins from God.

Tomma Khreiza, according to Samir Naqqash's footnote:

> "is a common game played by the children of Iraq that involves burying beads in the ground. Whoever finds them among the players gets to keep them. It is a game of concealment, and the expression points to trickery and inconsistency in behavior, that she is playing this game with God in the view of Ishak Aida" (16)

This figurative use of dialect and cultural concepts represents one of Naqqash's most daring and impressive literary innovations. Tomma Khreiza, displaced from its original context as a playful and harmless game, becomes a metaphor for the attempt of sinners to hide their sins from the All-Knowing and All-Seeing God they profess to worship. The weight of engaging in a children's game with God, the disjuncture between actual behavior and the understanding of it by the culprit is even more acutely emphasized by referencing the local Tomma Khreiza. Furthermore, the metaphorical deployment of Tomma Khreiza among other phrases shows the malleability of dialectal language and its local referents. Ishak Aida is not telling the story of playing the game as a child or remembering his childhood; he chooses to evoke its larger symbolic world as a means to berate Lulu for her hypocrisy and human corruption.

While this one figurative use of a local children's game may seem simple, the repeated resorting to local words in figurative contexts actually creates a larger narrative trend to the story. Iraqi curses and sayings and local words all become examples of figurative literary language on numerous occasions. References abound of this kind throughout the short story: to an Iraqi word for dirtied water, *siyana* (18, footnote 16) used to curse; another curse whereby two people die in one day, *weihed sbah w-weihed el-mesa* "one during the day and one at night" (26, footnote 28);" *seibak as'ous*, a reference to the thin body of Lulu the prostitute using the metaphor of both a "thin wooden tube put in the urethra of a baby to urinate from" and "a bone mostly sticking out in the body" (16, footnote 11).

Moreover, Naqqash uses his lexicon for figurative language and the memories of Baghdad of his protagonist Ishak Aida. In this sense, a localized lexicon –in a similar manner to folklore—becomes a literary resource for metaphorical layers of language and shifts in temporality by means of memory. To localize does not mean solely to concretize, as the local can

be put to figurative and memorial use that far from clarifies language –it becomes metaphor-- or solidifies a setting –the reader is transported from Bombay to an earlier Baghdad.

The remembrance of religious and secular Baghdadi Jewish musical groups by Ishak Aida lends a powerful and vivid tone of memorialization to the narrative. Ishak Aida, in remembering his grandfather early on in the story, mentions different Iraqi maqams (Arabic scales), *al-birzawi, al-husseini* and *al-buslik* (21, footnote 21). Later, he brings the music of 19th century Baghdad back to his life in the mind, referencing both secular and religious traditions of the time and even the Abbasid period in an array of references that require three separate footnotes: *al-chālghiyāt*, "a musical group whose instruments were used in the period of the Abbasid caliphs, and the singing of the group was based on the traditional singing of that period, and those groups were led by musicians from the Jews of Baghdad" (36, footnote 62); *al-daqāqāt*, "the Jewish singing maids who would prepare the bride and escort her out in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century" (footnote 63) and *al-rouwzana*, *ʻafāki* and *zangūla*, "names of popular songs from Jewish folklore common in Baghdad in the 19th century" (footnote 64).

The evocation of words related to floors of the houses in the old style in Baghdad and the clothing worn by its Jews also provides a rich foray into the language of 19th century and early 20th century Baghdad. As Ishak Aida remembers "old Baghdad" he recalls the *ṭarār*, *nīm* and *kabishkān* (*kafishkān*) which were, respectively: "a rectangular hall or space" (in Persian style); a cellar and "a small upper room you climb up to by a ladder, or which was located on the second floor and resembled a storeroom and had a low roof that people could not access with their whole body" (31, footnote 49). Here, the footnotes and the evocative power of the words themselves create a whole world that intrudes upon the narrative, regardless of the familiarity of

the setting referenced. The standard Arabic words *īwān* and *sirdāb* in place of *ṭarār* and *nīm*

would not have the same narrative impact as they are generic and familiar.

Similarly, two footnotes reference three articles of clothing commonly worn by Jewish

men and women in older Baghdad, namely the *chītāyii*, *khayliyeh*and *bābūj* which were: "a rag

or piece of cloth that Iraqis would wrap around their heads, both men and women" (32, footnote

54); "a special veil for the face made of the hair of horse tails with small holes. It's in the shape

of a square bordered in cloth, used by the women of Baghdad, especially Jewish women, in the

19th century" and "women's shoes, that are open in the back, usually with a high heel" (46,

footnote 91). The footnotes referenced here, particularly the second one, seem to cause the

narrative to veer away from a fictional narrative to an anthropological recording of customs and

practices in 19th century Baghdad. Yet all of these gestures remain part of the fiction, part of the

process of reading and the larger aesthetic that the narrative style advances. This aesthetic is one

of rupture and defamiliarization, not one of intimacy and communal affiliation.

The larger question remains: what is the implication of these lexical and dialectal choices

for literary narrative itself? Samir Naqqash could make Iraqi Jewish and Indian culture more

legible by means of simplifying his style, by cutting down on the use of a local lexicon and

incorporating explanation into the original narrative structure by means of description of culture

rather than direct iteration. The lexicon Naqqash uses foreignizes his Arabic language text,

producing an estranging narrative effect that throws the stability of literary Arabic into radical

question. Furthermore, his narrative choices breach invisible taboos and boundaries imposed

upon the composition of Arabic fiction. The dividing lines between dialect and more Standard

and/or Classical Arabic are the most obvious, but dialect involves a daily cultural lexicon of

importance not simply limited to dialect but also pertinent to elements of the quotidian, i.e. social praxis and organization, and character development.

A Literary Archive of Knowledge[18]: Innovation and Commitment to Culture

Samir Naqqash attempts to fill the "diasporic void" left by a reality of displacement of dispossession of the Iraqi Jewish community. He saturates his literature with specific cultural references to folklore, dialect, architecture, clothing, food, music and other subjects. Yet on an aesthetic level, his writing endlessly seeks out innovative narrative techniques, drowning in its ellipses, fragmentation, complex linguistic constructions and defiance of literary genres in Arabic-language literature. Many have labeled his works as "post-modern" (Vigiser, n.d.), a fact indicative of the difficulty in categorizing them.

At one and the same time, Naqqash stores and replenishes an archive of knowledge of Iraqi-Jewish and larger Iraqi-Arab culture in his unique brand of writing and preserves a past history through the speech and struggles of his characters. On the other hand, his literary innovativeness eludes synthesis, such that the type of knowledge he builds is charged with ambiguity. Arguably, any reconstruction of the past and of a culture that has suffered displacement involves ambiguity and feelings of ambivalence, but Naqqash takes the ambiguity and ambivalence and creates an art of prose fiction out of them. His characters paint a portrait of disintegration of culture even as they deploy tools often used for its preservation or essentialization: folklore, dialect, customs, cultural objects.

Therefore, Samir Naqqash's "archive of knowledge," due to the passing of time and it being embroiled in the middle of non-linear, experimental narrative, becomes the narrative sign of its own displacement, disintegration and undoing. This paradox of both fullness and emptiness

is at the heart of the "diasporic void" that the writers of Arab diaspora in this dissertation engage

with their literary language and thematics. The "geographies of escape" that they elaborate as a

by-product of this self-perpetuating void can never fill its lacunae, as the compulsion to fill the

void only underlines the empty spaces in knowledge, daily lived experience, preservation of

tradition and any number of issues in diaspora. Samir Naqqash is perhaps the most dramatic

example of the literary compulsion to express diasporic attachments through language, as he

writes in his mother tongue and its dialectal variations. Yet Naqqash, Swissa and Nassar alike

fail to "escape" the void, and in the process, fill the pages of their literature with spellbinding

neurosis and steadfast attachment to fantasy that leads their characters down the road of self-

destruction to be sure, but also toward a possible rebirth.

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[1]The concept of a "diasporic void" was indicated to me through email communication with my dissertation advisor Ruth Tsoffar.

[2]The translations from *Tantal* are all modifications from Shakir Mustafa's 2006 translation in an anthology of Iraqi literature. The modifications were done largely with the generous assistance of my committee member and mentor, Anton Shammas.

[3]A significant component of the humor surrounding Tantal has a sexualized, bawdy side. The giant, by virtue of its size, implicitly has a larger phallus and sexual prowess that could emerge at any time.

[4]A very important intertext to the story *Tantal* is a short story written by Naguib Mahfouz in 1962 called ¨Zaabalawi.¨ The story follows the search of young protagonist for an elusive Islamic religious figure famous for curing ailments. Zaabalawi becomes the sole purpose in the narrator´s life in a similar manner to Tantal with the narrator of Samir Naqqash´s short story.

[5]This impulse to drown in the sea resembles the unnamed narrator`s desire to drown in the Nile in the famous novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), by Sudanese author Tayeb Salih.

[6]Naming the exact date, the holiest of holy days in Judaism, may be some sort of a nod to Joyce's *Ulysses*, which performs a similar act. As Samir Naqqash is an Arabic master of dialects and registers of language, he may be making a gesture to perhaps the greatest master of this art in English, James Joyce.

[7]The daring portrayal of homosexual desire of an elderly man for a youth, all of which is witnessed and sensed by the second main character on the holiest of days (Yom Kippur), in the holiest of places (a synagogue), can hardly be overstated.

[8]The saturation of footnotes in the story creates a form of vertigo in the reader that parallels the thematic tone that prevails in the story for the characters. In this sense, in addition to filling the story with references, Naqqash overwhelms it with referentiality when the story already overflows with jumps between different stream of consciousness perspectives, different periods of time and places.

[9] When published in 1980, the geographical reach of the most renowned Arabic language fiction had not moved, in large part, outside of the geography of nation and colonialism. The migration of Iraqi Jews from Baghdad to Bombay, in this sense, was a pioneering subject for exploration as it implicitly explored an alternative cosmopolitan geography without many parallels in Arabic language fiction.

[10] This idea of a "two-story house" comes from email correspondence with my committee member and mentor, Anton Shammas.

[11] The words "my body gets emaciated and my bones stick out" seem to paraphrase the lyrics of a famous song by the Iraqi Jewish musicians, the Kuwaiti Brothers (Saleh and Daoud al-Kuwaiti), entitled "ya nab3at el-rayhan." This is a further intertext to the story that does not appear in the footnotes. They were immensely popular in Baghdad in the 1940s, and in Israel in the 1950s. Dudu Tassa, the grandson of Daoud, performs it at this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUCxmAtt6lk The Arabic lyrics can be found at: http://shironet.mako.co.il/artist?type=lyrics&lang=1&prfid=1321&wrkid=30067 This information was pointed out to me by Anton Shammas by email correspondence.

[12] The word klippah means a husk or a shell, and in Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah, the word means evil.

[13] All translations of passages from *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*, unless otherwise stated, were completed by me with the assistance and corrections of committee member Anton Shammas.

[14] The quite elaborate story of the film partially concerns walls, as four characters are separated by mountains, unaware of the presence of each other across the natural divide. This, in the context of *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*, becomes a metaphor for the wall that separates Shaul Hillel and God, and arguably human individuals from each other as well as their Creator.

[15] Samir Naqqash's choice to include Iraqi dialects in his literary texts, even if intended as an affirmation of a cultural world and a nod to a more realistic portrayal of social life, cannot avoid a whole whirlwind of complex issues in being used in the context of literary Arabic. One of the primary issues is the radical disruption of the idea of linguistic continuity in Arabic-language fiction through the presence of obscure dialects that are dated. Authorial intent cannot negate the intensity of this narrative choice and its aesthetic effects on the reading of his literary texts.

[16] Haim Blanc`s work in Baghdadi linguistics demonstrates the distinctions and older roots of Baghdadi Jewish dialect. It does not account, however, for the likely modifications in speech for Baghdadi Jews who happened to settle in Bombay.

[17] Ishak Aida value judgments on the prostitute Lulu are framed through two main lenses: that of religious piety and morality, though his own sister, whose generosity and kindness Ishak greatly admired, was a madame of prostitutes; and the repressed homosexual desire Ishak Aida more generally experiences and which begins to bubble to the surface in his desire for a youth seated next to him in the synagogue, who cannot help but look at the beautiful Lulu. While this chapter does not explore issues of sexuality and religious morality in *The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*, this element of the story would be an important subject to explore for an article.

[18] The idea of an "archive of knowledge" refers to the archive of Iraqi-Jewish customs, folklore, dialect, etc. that the totality of Samir Naqqash's work generates. This "archive," however, cannot be processed outside of the literary context in which it emerges. This disjuncture between cultural knowledge and the medium in which it takes shape produces a fruitful reflection on the status of signifiers of a "vanishing culture" in literature and in diasporic communities.

Conclusion: Identity Crisis

My research into –and close reading of—the writings of Raduan Nassar, Albert Swissa and Samir Naqqash has exposed an identity crisis at the heart of diasporic ethnic literature of an experimental variety. Literature that engages in a daring linguistic experiment, posing both aesthetic and cultural difference at one and the same time, undermines narratives that envision culture and social identity as largely stable, permanent and clearly situated. This radical indeterminacy that aesthetic innovation expresses moves beyond "the beauty of language" aestheticism is so often associated with, into a disturbance of deceptively stable categories such as normality, identity and ethnicity. Ultimately, literature that destabilizes aesthetic and linguistic patterns of expression and trends in literary content further accomplishes a destabilization of social categories themselves.

Literary imagination has profound social implications, not so much because it enters a web of representations, but because it can activate and propagate utterly new worlds of identity that appear foreign or at least bizarre to many readers. The eccentricity of diaspora and ethnicity in Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash has profound significance for the ideas about Arabs that most widely circulate throughout different nations and societies, ideas which do effect the perspective of literary critics reviewing their works. Nassar's occlusion and camouflage of Levantine Arab identity exposes its invisibility in Brazilian society, evidenced by the misreading of literary critics of his culturally specific linguistic codes; Swissa's transgression of purist boundaries in Judaism and Zionism earned praise and critiques full of disgust, but extended studies of the

aesthetic qualities of his writing are few in number, which speaks to the relationship between Moroccanness and beauty in Israeli society; and the mystique of Naqqash's Baghdadi Jewish exile has overshadowed his literary innovation in discussion of his short stories, plays and novels.

Ethnicity and aesthetics tend to repel each other in conversation. This dissertation has sought to speak to different "aesthetics of ethnicity," filtered through the term diaspora and its relationship to place. The "politics of ethnic aesthetics" are a fractured politics, as discussions of cultural difference and aesthetics do not go hand in hand. However, each and every work of literature, experimental or more faithful to a formula or genre, has a "take on ethnicity." Narrative framing of ethnicity and its structural components are far from an evasion of identity politics; they are the soul of identity inside and outside of literature.

Literature's further ambiguity and ambivalence, considering its permissive relationship to truth and frequent infidelity and unreliability, means that the semblance of objectivity that may mark social discussions of race, ethnicity and immigration collapses within the framing of fiction. One might even argue that this collapse in literature means a collapse in meaning-making outside of literature as well. Far be it from me to make such a grandiose assertion; nevertheless, to pay attention to the imaginative world of literature leads to a profound questioning of the assumptions surrounding the category of ethnicity as well as others, and exposes the intersectionality of ethnicity and aesthetic iterations of it with other categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash alike play with multiple categories and their framing of ethnicity traverses other social identities: Nassar forces ethnicity into contact with religion, sexuality and a rural way of life; Swissa exposes the relationship between Moroccan Jewish ethnicity and urban poverty and its daily interactions with gender, sexuality,

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childhood and adulthood; in Naqqash's short stories he radically individualizes Iraqi Jewish ethnicity, creating idiosyncratic characters with varying class, gender and sexual identities.

The close reading of each of these texts further reveals the fine line between authorial agency and a romanticized vision of the author that ignores social structures. Structural determinism, on the other hand, retrospectively interprets everything in light of structural limitations. This approach leaves little room to consider aesthetic choices and their impact, as they are crushed by social structures. This dissertation, while remaining aware of the devastating impact of social structures of subjugation, has sought to focus on the effects of aesthetic choices and narrative framings of social identities, whether or not the choices or framing have occurred freely. Assessing the extent of an author's autonomy has proved much less appealing as a subject of research than an examination of their approach to ethnicity.

Ultimately, aesthetics and identity politics, narrative structure and narratives of ethnicity, must enter into conversation in order for literary study to effectively address aesthetic experiments that employ ethnic identity as a tool. Nassar, Swissa and Naqqash and countless other minority authors engage in aesthetic and formal innovation that demands aesthetic and formalist analysis. Yet at the same time, their cultural difference remains a preponderant factor in reading and understanding their texts. Perhaps by investigating and researching the writing of such authors, facile and artificial separations between aesthetics and cultural identity may finally be overcome. Aesthetics need not be a Eurocentric category by nature, because aesthetic challenges to narrative conventions are not an exclusively European phenomenon, but part and parcel of a great many literary figures, movements and languages.

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