

Eating Elsewhere: Food and Migration in the Contemporary Mediterranean

by

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“Food is life. Life is God and the food of the Mediterranean is God.”

Mediterranean Diary, Raffaele Nigro

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses the uses of food in contemporary Mediterranean literature and film, and the positioning of the culinary as an index of assimilation in the stories of Mediterranean migrants, refugees, and other dislocated persons. “Eating Elsewhere: Food and Migration in the Contemporary Mediterranean” builds on work from the field of food studies to develop a framework for writing about food from a literary, rather than anthropological or sociological perspective. Scholars of food studies have largely neglected literature, and literary analyses have rarely addressed food writing as more than an indicator of historical reality. This research brings together readings of contemporary cookbooks, novels, memoirs, and films in Italian, Arabic, French, and English to posit that the Mediterranean is a zone of proximate otherness, where polities maintain distinct local cultures even while honoring their common history as nodes in Mediterranean trade routes and empires. Food – the famous Mediterranean diet – is what Mediterranean societies profess to continue to share, but it is also a site where each culture stakes its claim to a unique heritage. I argue that within the space of the Mediterranean, food from these distinct yet connected regions stands as an object of irreducible otherness, alternately yearned after and abhorred.

Despite claims that from within the field of Mediterranean studies that the Mediterranean as a salient, meaningful regional perspective loses its interpretive power by the late modern period, I argue for the persistent relevance of a Mediterranean framework for understanding movement around the sea since World War II. Although its present configuration lacks cultural

and political unity, this work on food in migration narratives shows that the Mediterranean continues to serve as one of the world's crossroads, where the other is the neighbor, almost indistinguishable from the self. If the legal and physical hardships of migration reinforce the splits between North and South, and West and East, a Mediterranean perspective blurs these divisions, presenting an alternative to Eurocentric and area studies frameworks. In the modern and contemporary eras, the Mediterranean offers a way of disrupting the received geographies of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East in order to institute new possibilities for comparison. Building a theory of the contemporary Mediterranean encourages multi-directional readings which open new avenues for thinking through the possibilities and ramifications of intercultural contact in the current age.

Following an introduction to the methodological, historical, and theoretical stakes of Mediterranean studies and food studies, three chapters of this dissertation consider Mediterranean food culture through the lenses of memory and nostalgia in Claudia Roden's *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968) and Kamāl Raḥīm's *Days of the Diaspora* (2008), identification in Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2006) and Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* (2009), and hunger in Raffaele Nigro's *Mediterranean Diary*, Ḥanān al Shaykh's *Beirut Post* (1992, English translation published as *Beirut Blues*) and Muḥammad Shukrī's *For Bread Alone* (1973) The final body chapter marshals all of these concepts for a case study of Sephardi food in the Levant as depicted in Edgar Morin's *Vidal and His Family* (1989), and André Aciman's *Out of Egypt* (1994).

Keywords: Mediterranean studies, food studies, Sephardi Jewish studies, identity and identification, memory and nostalgia, hunger, migration, contemporary, comparative literature, narrative, film.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

If the Mediterranean was ever an entirely unified zone – culturally, politically, religiously, linguistically – that time is past. The Roman Empire is long gone; what lingua franca remains consists either of global English or ambivalent holdovers from the colonial period; Europe has separated itself forcefully from Africa and Asia along the maritime border between three continents that once were thought to meet in Jerusalem, *omphalos*, the navel of the world. The temptation for a scholar interested in considering the contemporary Mediterranean as a coherent area is to rely on a kind of historical cabotage to reify the sea’s mythologized unity. Skipping along the coast and backward through time, one may track the romantic, religious, and political links between Spain, France, and Italy, Italy’s shared position, with Greece, as the imagined foundation of the western world, Greece’s long entanglement with Turkey and Italian trade relations with the Levant, the old Ottoman Empire’s great embrace around the eastern and southern coasts, and come full circle via the Islamic conquests that crossed the water between Morocco and Spain. It is quite easy to do something similar with food, perhaps noting the diverse, but related, manifestations of Mediterranean flatbreads, or observing the similarities between the vegetable salads typical of so many Mediterranean locales. These culinary commonalities provide real evidence of a shared *something* in the Mediterranean, though they do not prove whether that “something” is anything more than soil chemistry and climate. Cabotage, after all, obsolesced with the advent of steamships and rail travel, to say nothing of the distances

now easily crossed by plane. In today's world, there is no reason to assume that Nice and Genoa are more strongly linked to one another than the former is to Paris and the latter to Rome. That is, signs of the continuance of a shared Mediterranean culture are valuable evidence of the ties that historically bound the sea, but they do not, in themselves, provide sufficient proof of *continued* bonds between contemporary Mediterranean societies.

As a scholar of literature and food culture, however, my interest is less in what definitively *is* than in what is *imagined to be*. Some years ago, on a research trip along Europe's Mediterranean coast, I encountered in Valencia a ubiquitous advertisement for new offerings from a popular fast food chain. It read, in English, "Mythical Mediterranean 'Bocadillos': The Best Sandwiches with the Most Authentic Mediterranean Taste." This advertisement raises a number of questions. First, why "mythical?" Is the Mediterranean itself understood as a mythical space, or is the adjective meant as an ecstatic description of the flavor of the *bocadillos*? Why put "bocadillos" in scare-quotes? What is an "authentic Mediterranean taste," and, given Spain's – and, especially, Valencia's – position in the Mediterranean zone, what distinguishes a Mediterranean taste from a Spanish one? Why compose an advertisement for Mediterranean authenticity in English, a non-Mediterranean language? And, not least, what are we to make of the sandwich featured in the advertisement, which appears to consist of a fried chicken cutlet, sliced tomatoes, mayonnaise or aioli, and lettuce on a demi baguette? I hesitate to attempt to describe shared Mediterranean flavors beyond well-rehearsed observations about olive oil, garlic, wine, fish, and fresh herbs and vegetables. Still, there is surely nothing uniquely or intrinsically Mediterranean about a fried chicken sandwich. What fascinates about this advertisement are the underlying assumptions that not only does "authentic Mediterranean taste" exist, it is immediately legible to passersby.

The same assumptions were among the official international pavilions making up the awkwardly named “Bio-Mediterraneum” cluster at the 2015 Universal Exposition in Milan, where organizers attempted to “recreate the colors, tastes, and aromas that are typical of Mediterranean countries and their cultures.”¹ The Bio-Mediterraneum cluster, in which Mediterranean nations were explicitly associated by virtue of their foodways while simultaneously expected to present unique national cuisines, reveals the doublethink at the core of our understanding of Mediterranean food: the famous Mediterranean diet is what Mediterranean societies continue to share in spite of their religious, political, and linguistic diversity, but it is also a site on which each culture powerfully stakes its claim to a unique heritage.² The Maltese pavilion in the cluster was designed as an ode to Maltese honey, but they had none available for sampling because, in the eleventh hour, the Italian government had prohibited the honey’s importation. A Maltese representative in the pavilion, clearly leery of causing a diplomatic incident, refused to speculate as to the reason for this Italian obstructionism, but was too irate to keep herself from muttering darkly about Malta’s proximity to Sicily. I was led to understand that the Italians did not want Maltese honey competing with their native – and very similar – product. But if Maltese honey is really so similar to the Italian variety, why would Malta have chosen to showcase honey at the Milan Expo in the first place?

If we take a few steps back from the intimacy of this example, the questions that drive this dissertation become visible. What do Mediterraneans think of the foods of their neighbors? How are their expectations of similarity and difference acted out in the culinary realm? What

¹ <http://www.expo2015.org/en/2015/10/24/cluster-bio-mediterraneo>

² Or, more precisely, continue to believe they share. Rising obesity rates as a result of increased consumption of red meat and processed foods might indicate otherwise. The “Mediterranean diet” is really a diet of poverty. See Alexandratos 2006.

roles does food play for those moving between Mediterranean locales? This last emerges with particular importance because if there is any “real,” objectively observable, unified Mediterranean area today beyond the “Mediterranean diet,” it exists in and by virtue of migrants’ paths across the sea, and the interactions between peoples, ingredients, and dishes which attend migration. I use the term “migrants” to describe a variety of types of movement chiefly because the majority of the stories I deal with in this project revolve around the necessity of settling in a new land, but also because the idea of migration suggests the weight with which all the travels and displacements I examine here are undertaken. Whether they are tourists or traders, immigrants or nomads, every figure I discuss over the following chapters engages seriously with the possibility of being elsewhere, and the question of what it means to the self to live amongst the other.

For this reason, with some important exceptions, my focus is narrowly on intra-Mediterranean migration. On the few occasions I deviate from this phenomenon it is for the purpose of illuminating high-level patterns of understanding the role of food in Mediterranean cultures, which are then elaborated or questioned in texts that fit within my central theme.³ I argue that within the intimately connected space of the Mediterranean, the foods of neighboring locales stand as objects of irreducible otherness, alternately yearned after and abhorred. Drawing on contemporary texts in Italian, Arabic, French, and English, I demonstrate that food is an agent of both assimilation and resistance for migrants wavering between old homelands and new host countries. The dishes they cook and consume express their attachments to memory, their desires

³ The exceptions are: in my first chapter, my discussion of Claudia Roden’s diasporic cookbooks, and an analysis of an Iranian character in the Algerian-Italian Amara Lakhous’ novel *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*; and, in my second chapter, a consideration of the role of the Russian immigrant “Emma” in Luca Guadagnino’s film *I Am Love*.

for the future, and the difficulty of the paths between those points. My research makes two broad interventions, the importance of which I describe in detail below. First, I argue for the relevance of a Mediterranean perspective in the contemporary period. Although its present configuration lacks both cultural and political unity, the Mediterranean continues to serve as one of the world's crossroads, where the other is the immediate neighbor, intimate with and, at times, almost indistinguishable from the self. Second, I demonstrate the value of a literary perspective on food studies, revealing the utility of theories that emerged in the social sciences for a consideration of the place of the culinary in literature, and vice versa.

Mediterranean Studies

The field of Mediterranean studies owes its existence to Fernand Braudel, whose magisterial *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) aimed to provide a complete description of the sea over the *longue durée*, with special focus on the late medieval through the early modern period. A substantial portion of the text is devoted to attempts to define the object of study, a body of water with uncertain borders and complex surrounding geography. First, Braudel states with some assurance that the Mediterranean “is, above all, a sea ringed by mountains.”⁴ But on observing the wide arc from Tunisia to the Sinai, where the Sahara more or less directly abuts the water, he formulates an idea of the Mediterranean zone as a series of isolated regions, “trying to make contact with one another. . . . [This] may make it easier to understand how it is that each Mediterranean province has been able to preserve its own irreducible character, its own violently regional flavor in the midst of such an

⁴ Ibid., 25.

extraordinary mixture of races, religions, customs, and civilizations.”⁵ In the end, Braudel seems to throw up his hands:

To meet the historian’s demands, however, the Mediterranean must be accepted as a wide zone, extending well beyond the shores of the sea in all directions. We might compare it to an electric or magnetic field, or more simply to a radiant centre whose light grows less as one moves away from it, without one’s being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade. For what boundaries can be marked when we are dealing . . . [with] men, whom no barriers or frontiers can stop?⁶

Like many Mediterranean thinkers, Braudel settles on a description of the sea based on a series of oppositions: contact and conflict at once, and a “historical or rather timeless character” that is shared in common among a group of highly differentiated cultures.⁷ These tensions come to the fore in the organization of Braudel’s text. Part I is devoted to the structure of the Mediterranean on a geological time scale (Braudel’s structural *longue durée*), characterized by slow cycles and repetitions. Part II narrows the focus to conjunctures over the few centuries of Braudel’s interest, and observes a broad array of societal changes in the late medieval and early modern periods. The final portion of the book operates on the human scale of individuals and events. This tripartite organization itself constitutes Braudel’s historiographical argument, that the immediate can only be understood within the distant, which itself must be contextualized “within the

⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁷ Ibid., 1239.

framework of a geographical study.”⁸ To understand any of the Mediterranean, one has to understand all of it.

In significant ways, Braudel continues to shape the field. Many of the Mediterranean’s major thinkers have been historians, and the majority of those who take a Mediterranean perspective, in any discipline, follow Braudel in marking the end of the Mediterranean world sometime in the early modern period.⁹ His most obvious heirs are Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, whose *The Corrupting Sea* (2000) has much in common with Braudel’s foundational work. Like Braudel, Horden and Purcell devote substantial effort to an attempt to define the Mediterranean zone, refining Braudel’s observation about isolated regions attempting to make contact by developing a micro-ecological approach to a Mediterranean characterized by “dense fragmentation:” the only commonality in the topography of Horden and Purcell’s Mediterranean lies in its extreme local irregularities.¹⁰ After discarding a number of unsatisfactory definitions, they make a move powerfully reminiscent of Braudel’s softly fading light, writing, “To borrow an evocative term from mathematics, the Mediterranean is a ‘fuzzy set.’ A certain vagueness should be of the essence in the way that it is conceived.”¹¹ Their uncertainty about the Mediterranean’s proper borders stems from its fundamentally liminal position. In geographical, political, and even linguistic terms the Mediterranean is constituted by being set between other territories.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Important exceptions to this trend can be found in the work of historians and anthropologists who use a Mediterranean framework as a way of troubling the norms of colonial and post-colonial studies. See, for example, Clancy-Smith 2011 and Borutta and Gekas 2012. I am leaving to one side, for the moment, works by Mediterranean authors that poetically argue for a unified, romantic Mediterranean identity persisting into the contemporary era. See, for example, Izzo 2013 and Matvejevic 1999.

¹⁰ Horden and Purcell, 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 45.

Beyond their careful historical work, Horden and Purcell are most useful in providing a clear rationale for scholarship that takes a Mediterranean perspective, based, first, on the history of the Mediterranean being envisioned as a coherent entity (the “interactionist approach”), and, second, on the scientific definition of the Mediterranean’s physical geography (the “ecologizing approach”).¹² While the second of these approaches is of limited utility in the present study, the first has some bearing on my own conception of the Mediterranean as an imagined space. I differ from Horden and Purcell, who describe the twentieth century Mediterranean as “disintegrated,” in my belief that the Mediterranean should *continue* to be envisaged as a coherent entity, in ways that go beyond fidelity to its older incarnations.¹³

What these grand histories of the Mediterranean lack is a deep analysis of what place, if any, remains for a Mediterranean perspective in the current era. Sharon Kinoshita observes in the recent Wiley Blackwell *Companion to Mediterranean History*, “As we approach the present, the Mediterranean, in the view of some historians, loses its power as a category of historical analysis.”¹⁴ In the same volume, Naor Ben-Yehoyada affirms, “There is a near consensus among historians that the Mediterranean they reconstruct from pre-modern times no longer exists . . . with the Mediterranean’s diminishing importance in a world system turned both national and global.”¹⁵ Ben-Yehoyada further finds that students of the late modern and contemporary Mediterranean are largely engaged in “Mediterraneanism” – studies of honor and shame, patronage, and cosmopolitanism, the bogeymen of anthropological arguments for the continuity

¹² Ibid., 10.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Horden and Kinoshita, 324.

¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

of Mediterranean culture in isolated locales around the sea.¹⁶ The major exception is found in David Abulafia's *The Great Sea*, an undertaking as immense as Braudel's and Horden and Purcell's, in which Abulafia covers the history of the Mediterranean from 22000 BCE through 2010 CE. Though much of Abulafia's attention is on the same periods that dominate his peers' work, the monograph's final section deals with what Abulafia calls "The Last Mediterranean, 1950-2010." The chapter begins:

The late twentieth century was one of the great periods of Mediterranean migration. . . . for example, British rule over Cyprus brought substantial Greek and Turkish communities to north London. Along with these migrants, their cuisines arrived: pizza became familiar in London in the 1970s, while Greek restaurants in Britain had a Cypriot flavor. Not surprisingly, the food of the south of Italy took a strong lead among Italian émigrés. . . . But the first stirrings of north European fascination with Mediterranean food could be felt in 1950, when Elizabeth David's *Book of Mediterranean Food* appeared.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 110. Indeed, most works on the contemporary Mediterranean come from the field of anthropology. To the extent these works bear the Mediterranean studies mantle, they do so either by deliberately treating isolated locations in the sea as synecdoches for the entire region, or, in many more cases, by virtue of being cited in the work of scholars who take a larger slice of the sea as their area of inquiry. These studies, narrowly focused projects on which comparative Mediterranean work might be built, constitute the anthropological manifestation of what Horden and Purcell call history "in" the Mediterranean, as opposed to history "of" the Mediterranean (9). Though it is probably unnecessary (and impossible) for every truly Mediterranean study to grapple with the unwieldy totality of the Mediterranean zone, as the body of work in Mediterranean studies grows it does seem that a true Mediterranean perspective is necessarily broader than that taken in narrowly targeted ethnographies. For major examples, see, Bahloul 1996 and Herzfeld 1985. For a review of anthropology on the subject, see Gilmore 1982. Herzfeld has long been associated with criticism of the Mediterranean idea. On the consequences of his and others' criticism for Mediterranean studies in the field of anthropology, and a review of later work, see Sant Cassia 2003. For a powerful explanation of the tropes of the anthropology of the Mediterranean, see also Sant Cassia 1991.

¹⁷ Abulafia, 628.

Although Abulafia is mainly describing a large exodus of impoverished Mediterraneans from the zone of the sea, as opposed to the intra-Mediterranean movement I am concerned with here, the pairing of migration and food in his description of the contemporary Mediterranean aligns with my central arguments for the continued utility of a Mediterranean perspective. First, that food culture is both a primary site on which diverse Mediterranean cultures stake their claims to uniqueness and the major area in which a shared Mediterranean culture survives. Second, that the routes of migrants, who carry with them the culinary practices through which they remember their pasts and imagine their presents, must be understood as the contemporary manifestation, however different from its predecessors, of the human movements that long ago created a cohesive Mediterranean space. Braudel himself, although he was thinking of an earlier Mediterranean, observed, “The Mediterranean has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow.”¹⁸ This undoubtedly remains correct in the contemporary period.

In the case of the migrant, these human movements have been increasingly obstructed since the advent of modernity. Iain Chambers writes, “The very right to travel, to journey, to migrate today increasingly runs up against the borders, confines, and controls of a profound ‘unfreedom’ that characterizes the modern world.”¹⁹ Ease of movement in the contemporary Mediterranean depends largely on one’s point of departure. Cruises and tourist routes remain open to privileged travelers, but true relocation, especially from south to north or east to west, is made arduous under the twin regimes of biopower and global security, especially as they are deployed by fortress Europe. In the introduction to a volume of essays on Mediterranean

¹⁸ Braudel, 276.

¹⁹ Chambers, 3.

migration, Russell King gloomily reflects, “Whilst not wanting to deny the *realpolitik* of a Eurocentric, anti-immigration rhetoric, it does contravene to a large extent both a deeper history of Mediterranean movement and identity and the experiences and aspirations of today’s migrants who want to be relatively free to ‘come and go’ within ‘their’ Mediterranean space.”²⁰ The Mediterranean, King suggests, is the equal and indivisible property of all who live along its shores. National frameworks intrude on this utopian vision. Of the migrant, Chambers writes, “suspended in the intersections of economic, political, and cultural dispossession, she carries borders within herself.”²¹ Chambers’ poetic formulation suggests that migration entails an ongoing negotiation between homelands and identifications. The migrant’s existence is a reminder of the Mediterranean’s nationalist disunity. Its militarily patrolled fragmentation presents a major reason for which historians have concluded that the Mediterranean no longer exists.

But this fragmentation is also the reason a Mediterranean perspective is now so necessary. If the legal and physical hardships of migration tend to reinforce the split between North and South, West and East, the Mediterranean demands a different model of the world. Chambers writes of an almost moral imperative: “To think along these oblique axes – from the eastern Mediterranean to North Africa, from the coast of Tunisia to Sicily, from the basin of the Senegal River to the walls of Valencia – is to deepen and disturb the cultural and historical mappings we have inherited.”²² That is, a Mediterranean perspective on the contemporary period provides an alternative to the Eurocentric ruts of comparison. The Mediterranean is no longer a received geography, but rather a way of disrupting the received geographies of Europe, North

²⁰ King, 9.

²¹ Chambers, 7.

²² Ibid., 136.

Africa, and the Middle East. Oblique axes take us outside colonial relationships and sneak around the routes of globalism, “to render proximate what is held apart.”²³ The Mediterranean institutes new possibilities for comparison.

Food Studies

Even more than Mediterranean studies, food studies is a young field. Marion Nestle – the voice behind the popular “Food Politics” blog and one of the discipline’s major shapers – dates its founding to the 1996 hire of Amy Bentley as NYU’s first food studies professor, though signs of its imminent emergence can be found as early as the first meeting of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, in 1981.²⁴ Naturally developing out of a spate of major works on food by social scientists in the late twentieth century, food studies was born of an alliance between cultural anthropologists, public policy experts, and nutrition scientists who wanted to move beyond isolated ethnographies and structural anthropology to consider food as a system.²⁵ In a state of the field report from 2010, Nestle writes, “From the start, we considered food studies to encompass foodways, gastronomy and culinary history, as well as discipline-based approaches to investigating critical social questions about food production or consumption.”²⁶ W. Alex McIntosh echoes Nestle’s sentiments, calling for an effort to “place food studies in a broader context of an intellectual movement towards cultural studies found in both the social sciences

²³ Ibid., 134.

²⁴ Nestle and McIntosh, 160. The NYU program now offers doctoral degrees in food studies as well as nutrition, master’s degrees in the same, and undergraduate programs in those areas as well as global public health.

²⁵ These anthropological studies of food include Douglas 1966, Lévi-Strauss 1975, and Mintz 1986.

²⁶ Nestle and McIntosh, 161.

(and particularly sociology) and the humanities.”²⁷ This welcoming interdisciplinary constitution is troubled, however, by the continued dominance of the field by social scientists – though it is unclear whether this is a function of a lack of interest on the part of scholars in the humanities or an air of inaccessibility within the existing centers of food studies research. Whatever the case, the pages of the major food studies journals (*Gastronomica*; *Food, Culture, and Society*; and *Food and Foodways*) are largely filled by the work of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and nutrition scientists, as are the faculties of food studies programs. In general, scholars of food have yet to turn to literature, and vice versa. On the few occasions they have done so, it has usually been to treat food as a simple metaphor or to accept literary descriptions of ingredients and dishes as a bald index of historical reality.²⁸

Major exceptions to this rule include the work of Sarah Sceats and Lorna Piatti-Farnell, who have offered powerful readings of food in literature that are rooted in both literary and food studies methodologies. Sceats’ work on contemporary women’s fiction tackles food from a variety of theoretical vantage points, with particular emphasis on psychoanalytic perspectives that inform notions of food “as currency or language and eating as an exchange.”²⁹ This theme is picked up by Piatti-Farnell, who “explore[s] how multiple incarnations of the literary engage with essential connections between the preparation and consumption of food, and the formation of individual and cultural identity.”³⁰ Piatti-Farnell moves fluidly between psychoanalytic perspectives, phenomenology, gender studies, socio-cultural anthropology, and cultural

²⁷ Ibid., 169.

²⁸ The former trend is exemplified in Hafez 1994. Hafez declines to analyze the functions of food within the texts he treats, instead cataloguing “the simple coding of culinary metaphors . . . [and] the uses of food in the titles of novels and collections of short stories” (257). The latter perspective, of food as index of history, is found in Van Gelder 2000.

²⁹ Sceats, 185.

³⁰ Piatti-Farnell, 1.

materialism to create a highly specialized theoretical apparatus for studying food in contemporary American fiction. Sceats and Piatti-Farnell provide effective models for drawing on a disparate collection of theoretical texts in constructing a multivalent analysis of food's literary operations. To these scholars, food studies offers an approach that, in Sceats' words, is "intended to reflect the complexity and importance of the subject . . . and to mirror the contradictory, integrative and associative functions of food itself."³¹

Granted the dearth of work on food and literature, it is unsurprising to find that what has been written on Mediterranean food and food culture follows the general trend in coming largely from the social sciences. Despite a surfeit of nutrition science articles on the so-called "Mediterranean diet" (to say nothing of journalistic fascination with it), the only book-length study on Mediterranean food culture is the historian Carol Helstosky's *Food Culture and the Mediterranean* (2009), which presents an overview of the foodstuffs and traditions of the region but does not make an argument about the cultures it surveys. Helstosky's *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy* (2004) persuasively argues that political developments influenced the evolution of modern and contemporary Italian food, but is limited to the peninsula. The same limitation applies to the anthropologist Carole Counihan's *Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Florence* (2004), which expertly traces the changes in Tuscan food culture over a thirty-year span. Eric Ball's important ethnographic article, "Greek Food After *Mousaka*: Cookbooks, 'Local' Culture, and the Cretan Diet" examines the use of scientific and ethnographic data by Cretan cookbook authors negotiating between "folkloric cultural continuity" and "international discourses of medical science and environmentalism," but

³¹ Sceats, 9.

is again limited to a single Mediterranean locale.³² Mediterranean foodways await a rigorously comparative study.

Beyond the cultural prominence currently enjoyed by the Mediterranean diet, the lack of scholarly attention paid to Mediterranean food in the humanities is surprising given the central position foodstuffs occupy in Mediterranean thought. One of Braudel's attempts to define the Mediterranean zone restricts it to the narrow climactic band in which the olive tree and the palm grove both flourish, and Horden and Purcell make an identical move with their inclusion of a map that defines the Mediterranean based on the borders of the same exemplars of Mediterranean vegetation.³³ These two trees, the olive and the date palm, situate food at the core of any ecological definition of the Mediterranean. As for the popular "Mediterranean diet," in a recent essay, Michael Herzfeld caustically describes it as "a fantasy of postmodern capitalism if ever there was one."³⁴ Herzfeld's opinion is supported by Braudel's own observation that diet throughout the historical Mediterranean would have been poor and precarious, derived from difficult and limited land.³⁵ "The Mediterranean was always on the verge of famine."³⁶ Again, Horden and Purcell concur, noting that if our imaginations insist on Mediterranean abundance, this idea likely derives from the fact that given the need to store food against the frequent and unpredictable occurrence of poor harvests, mere subsistence agriculture would have been suicidal.³⁷

³² Ball, 5.

³³ Braudel, 234; Horden and Purcell, 14.

³⁴ Horden and Kinoshita, 123.

³⁵ Braudel, 241-3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁷ Horden and Purcell, 272.

But whether Herzfeld's description is entirely true is beside the point.³⁸ What is of interest here is, given the fact that the Mediterranean diet is *imagined* to be real by actors both in and outside the contemporary Mediterranean, how Mediterranean literature reacts to the attendant idea of a shared culinary culture. The literary scholar Predrag Matvejevic succinctly observes, "The Mediterranean is inseparable from its discourse."³⁹ Chambers concurs: The Mediterranean, he explains, is a "'reality' that is imaginatively constructed: the political and poetical articulation of a shifting, desired object and a perpetually repressed realization."⁴⁰ What is objectively verifiable about Mediterranean food does not matter to this study as much as what has been written into reality. Matvejevic, contemplating the series of historical exchanges that introduced to the Mediterranean almost all of the plants we now associate with the sea, draws a line at the same olive that Braudel and Horden and Purcell marshal for definition: "I refuse to believe the assertion that the olive is not native to the area, that like the fig and the vine it was

³⁸ There are a few ways of approaching this question. First, I would observe, following Braudel and Horden and Purcell, that over the *longue durée* Mediterranean food production is characterized by cycles of abundance and scarcity. More immediately, however, I believe Herzfeld is referring to the ongoing fetishization of the Mediterranean diet as the secret to health and longevity, rooted in the work of the nutritionists Ancel and Margaret Keys in 1950s (see Nestle 1995 and Kashdan 2017). Beyond the undertones of cultural imperialism, the difficulty with the current use of the so-called Mediterranean diet lies in the fact that what is currently held up as healthy, natural, and pure largely reflects the traditional foods of Mediterranean poverty. The lack of processed foods and red meat in Mediterranean diets was a function not of a choice to live healthily, but of the unaffordability of those foods. All that said, it is undeniably true that traditional Mediterranean diets really did include lots of fresh herbs and vegetables, wheat, olive oil, and fresh seafood (as well as wine in certain areas, and sometimes – though no healthy Mediterranean cookbook will mention it – a fair amount of pork in the same regions). The issue lies in how we make use of this food culture, and whether we do so with proper respect to its originators and the circumstances of its origination.

³⁹ Matvejevic, 12.

⁴⁰ Chambers, 10.

brought here in ancient times, that it has not been Mediterranean forever.”⁴¹ For the Mediterranean is unimaginable without its food.

Movement in the Contemporary Mediterranean

The contemporary period of world history encompasses, hazily, all that which follows the modern period, itself generally thought of as concluding alongside World War II. The Mediterranean continues to confront the histories of the Second World War, European colonialism, and the Cold War, even as it navigates the great human flows that have emerged as a function of the new global order. The sea’s anxious politics reflect its divided attention; it is difficult to grapple with the problems of the twenty-first century when the twentieth remains so insistently present. It is my contention that post-colonial migration and the ongoing “migration crisis” should be understood as part of the same, broadly contemporary history of human movement across the sea. It is true that the links between colonizing and colonized nations continue to influence patterns of Mediterranean migration (e.g. Maghrebi migrants in France and Spain, Libyans in Italy), and equally true that the Mediterranean offers a crossing to those fleeing political or economic hardship farther afield (e.g. sub-Saharan migrants in southern Europe and movement westward out of the Balkan and Middle Eastern countries, including those that do not have Mediterranean borders). Viewing these as distinct phenomena, however, overlooks the stable role of the Mediterranean itself. The crucial difference characterizing the contemporary “migration crisis” is, above all, one of volume: more people are migrants today than at any other point in human history. Their treatment of the Sea itself, though, remains the same. The

⁴¹ Ibid., 54. For a concise history of Mediterranean vegetation see Squatriti in Horden and Kinoshita 2014.

Mediterranean remains a space of desire, a watery barrier that presents the possibility of its traverse.⁴²

The pertinent history begins with the conclusion of World War II and the subsequent, overlapping winding down of the colonial era and emergence of the Cold War world order. NATO's formation in 1949, with its inclusion of Italy as well as French and British Mediterranean colonial possessions, followed just three years later by the addition of Greece and Turkey to the alliance, established the Mediterranean as a "front line against Soviet expansion."⁴³ French colonies in North Africa and the British presence in Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus, with United States military support out of Libya, established a firm line of defense against Soviet ambitions in the Balkans.⁴⁴ This created an opportunity for Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, who skillfully played the US and the USSR against one another for funding for major infrastructure projects like the Aswan High Dam.⁴⁵ During the brief period when Egypt and Syria were joined under the banner of the United Arab Republic, the Soviet Union gained an enormous arc of influence through the Levant by virtue of its willingness to fund Nasser's ambitions, and its simultaneous attempts to assert itself in Yugoslavia and Albania.⁴⁶ The dissolution of the United Arab Republic and the gradual withdrawal of France and Great Britain from their Mediterranean colonies would turn this Mediterranean frontier into a kind of demilitarized zone at the nexus of

⁴² The Mediterranean has been a space of desire for much longer, but I am highlighting here the particular desire to cross it, rather than an older yearning to inhabit it, with a variety of motives. See, for example, Aldrich 2009 and Chard 1999.

⁴³ Abulafia, 620.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 618.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 619.

competing powers.⁴⁷ As empires receded, the Mediterranean was reconfigured as an empty space various types of travelers would soon begin to cross at will.

At the beginning of the contemporary period the post-war impoverishment of the European south was a major movement driver, with migrants from Spain, southern Italy, and Greece moving into more prosperous Northern Europe.⁴⁸ Soon, however, the wave of independence achieved by former colonial polities became the dominant mold of migration patterns. The 1948 founding of the state of Israel sparked anti-Jewish sentiment across the Arab Mediterranean, which in turn inspired the vast bulk of Mediterranean Jewry to rapidly resettle, within about a dozen years, in either Israel or France.⁴⁹ The French fully withdrew from Lebanon and Syria in 1946, the British and French departed Egypt following the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956, and France let go of Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and, finally, Algeria in 1962. This led naturally to the massive resettlement of French North Africans along the sea's northern shore, and, soon after, substantial Maghrebi emigration in the same direction.⁵⁰ Subsequently, a large "return" flow became visible, "as Mediterranean migrants, especially those who had been taken on as temporary 'guest-workers,' returned home. . . . Another [trend] was the development of new trans-Mediterranean migration flows eastwards to the oil-rich states of the Gulf and to Libya."⁵¹ This last continues to drive a flow of labor migration from the Arab Mediterranean to the Gulf.

⁴⁷ Those seeking richer detail on the end of the imperial period cannot do better than Jan Morris' *Pax Britannica* trilogy (1992).

⁴⁸ King, 2.

⁴⁹ Abulafia, 617.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 622. King, 4.

⁵¹ King, 3.

Russell King notes a number of major factors that influenced migration over the final two decades of the twentieth century, following the decline of the great powers. First among these was Southern Europe's emerging status as a kind of "'soft underbelly' facing many migrant source countries across the Mediterranean."⁵² These "underbelly" countries were similarly attractive to migrants moving west from formerly communist countries in Eastern Europe. During the same period the relationships between Western European nations and their former colonies, still visible in shared languages, continued to influence migration from the Maghreb and Italy's former African colonies into Spain, France, and Italy. Economic prosperity in Europe's south, largely a result of the success of the European Union in the 1980s and 1990s, created "openings for migrant workers" as well, especially as replacements for the Southern Europeans who had departed around the century's midpoint.⁵³ In the nineteen-nineties, "the Mediterranean began to be viewed as Europe's 'Rio Grande' – a liquid frontier separating the rich north (Europe) from the poor south (North Africa, the 'Third World') and temptingly open to migrants."⁵⁴ Like the US-Mexico border, the Mediterranean passage is "often only the final leg of journeys which began far away."⁵⁵ Ceuta, Lampedusa, Pantelleria, and Malta all became "favored entry points" for migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigeria.⁵⁶ Recently, large numbers of refugees from the Middle East have landed on the Greek islands of

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁴ King, 8. King continues, "I see a danger in the over-use of [the term 'Rio Grande']. It is, by nature, divisive and can too easily lead to a 'clash of civilizations' discourse."

⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁶ Abulafia, 629.

Samos and Lesbos, at the tail end of an existing route through Turkey.⁵⁷ Italy remains, however, the entry point for the overwhelming majority of migrants into Europe.⁵⁸

The so-called “migration crisis” of recent years is a question, above all, of volume.⁵⁹ Largely as a result of political and economic upheavals, there are more migrants and refugees now than ever before. The most numerous and visible of these are Syrians, fleeing a civil war that has lasted the better part of a decade. As of 15 February 2018, UNHCR has registered 5.5 million Syrian refugees, including over one million applications for asylum in Europe.⁶⁰ In 2017, 10.5 percent of migrants arriving in Europe via the Mediterranean Sea were Syrian. The other largest group, at 10.3 percent, was Nigerian, made up largely of those fleeing Boko Haram and the Nigerian army.⁶¹ The enormity of these numbers – each group consisted of over 18,000 people in 2017 alone – suggests the divergence of recent migration from previous patterns. While the Mediterranean Sea surely remains understood as a space to be crossed, the particularities of the Syrian situation, especially, must demand a rethinking of how Mediterranean populations understand their relationships with the Sea.⁶²

The other face of contemporary movement in the Mediterranean is that of mass tourism. These flows proceed along the ruts beaten by travelers on the Grand Tour route popular during the long nineteenth century. Abulafia explains, “What changed dramatically in the late twentieth century was the number and aims of the visitors, and the ease with which they could reach most

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Up to date statistics are available from UNHCR. See bibliography.

⁵⁹ The term “migration crisis” has been viewed with some skepticism, largely because it relocates the “crisis” as a European one, rather than centering the trauma of the migrants themselves.

⁶⁰ “Syria Regional Refugee Response,” UNHCR.

⁶¹ “Mediterranean Situation,” UNHCR.

⁶² See note 76 for more.

corners of the Mediterranean. Tourists replaced travelers,” as the demands of large numbers of vacationers reshaped the Mediterranean’s coasts.⁶³ In explaining this shift Abulafia alludes to the increasing accessibility of air travel, and particularly to the recent success of low-cost European carriers like Ryanair, which now faces competition from EasyJet, Transavia, Vueling, and others. While the Mediterranean has for centuries been a destination for travelers, the unprecedented numbers of contemporary visitors have helped tourism emerge as a significant driver of Mediterranean economies.⁶⁴ King observes that a multitude of “illegal or semi-illegal” immigrants are employed in the tourist sector. Participants in the two major varieties of movement through the contemporary Mediterranean must often meet one another as transients on opposite sides of the quintessentially transient spaces of hotels, cruise ships, and restaurants.⁶⁵

The inevitability of these meetings highlights the dichotomy between the different types of human movement that characterize today’s Mediterranean. Cruise ships present a troubling contrast with the vessels employed by desperate migrants, to say nothing of the differing accommodations enjoyed by tourists and refugees. Without suggesting a false equivalency, I maintain that these two manifestations of movement through the Mediterranean space are united by a similar understanding of the sea itself. Migrants and tourists share a conception of the Mediterranean as a space to be moved through, rather than an endpoint. Their travels reinforce the contemporary division between the sea’s European shore and its other coasts by making a transit zone of the Mediterranean. It is significant that the major unifying political project in the contemporary Mediterranean, the Union for the Mediterranean, is itself a European project. It includes all European Union states as equal members with Mediterranean nations, and its most

⁶³ Abulafia, 632.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 634.

⁶⁵ King, 10.

vocal advocate was Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, part of a transparent attempt to curry favor with Southern French minorities while deflecting Turkey's ambition of joining the European Union.⁶⁶ By virtue of its increasingly salient in-between quality, the Mediterranean has become a kind of non-place both for migrants who want to reach a farther destination and for tourists who use it as a temporary escape from temporal concerns.

This vacuity is, I believe, a manifestation of the attenuated meaning of the Mediterranean that I described in the story with which I began, of the "Mythical Mediterranean Bocadillos." My point is not that the history of the Mediterranean has entropically wound down to a state of meaninglessness, but rather that the Mediterranean can now be made to mean almost anything. These are not merely two ways of saying the same thing. I am making a vital distinction between the idea of a space without meaning and a space that has become, in a fundamental way, broadly available for meaning-making. Each migrant crossing the Mediterranean critically reshapes the sea in accordance with her desires. This dissertation therefore understands the contemporary Mediterranean as built out of the linked stories of many such migrants and travelers. The sea is constituted by the inextricable phenomena of post-colonial migration, refugee movement, tourism, and many other forms of travel in the Mediterranean zone. Mediterranean food, as the *bocadillo* example aptly demonstrates, is subject to the same manipulations. For migrants, navigating the various manifestations of Mediterranean cuisine is an intimate, bodily way of grappling with the unfolding history of movement through the sea. The major goal of this dissertation is to investigate what meanings they inscribe on this tempting, richly empty culinary space.

⁶⁶ Abulafia, 639.

Methodologies and Theoretical Frameworks

My conception of the Mediterranean as an imagined space is indebted to Horden and Purcell's interactionist approach, which suggests that a Mediterranean object exists simply by virtue of the long-standing assumption that the sea is, in some way, a single culture area. This discursive definition, elaborated further by Iain Chambers and Predrag Matvejevic, is entirely appropriate to a study of literature.⁶⁷ I have already described the Mediterranean perspective's utility for disrupting normal comparative binaries via what Chambers terms "oblique axes" of comparison.⁶⁸ In fidelity to this goal, I have mostly left aside texts that focus on post-colonial relationships, e.g. France and the Maghreb, Spain and Morocco, Italy and Libya or its other African colonies. My intention is to range freely through the Mediterranean space, juxtaposing works that speak to each other by virtue of subject matter and content, rather than reified histories of empire and colonization. These histories are, of course, present, real, and important, but they should not be the only bases on which comparison is attempted. The Mediterranean perspective encourages multi-directional readings which open new avenues for thinking through the possibilities and ramifications of intercultural contact in the contemporary era.

In service of the same Mediterranean perspective, the chapters are organized by theoretical arguments that transcend linguistic and national boundaries. As a consequence of this organization by argument, each chapter draws on a unique theoretical apparatus: memory studies in chapter two, identity and identification theory in chapter three, and theories of hunger in chapter four. Still, there are several strategies common to the whole, beyond the close reading

⁶⁷ See notes 39 and 40, but see also Herzfeld's objections at note 16.

⁶⁸ Chambers, 7.

necessarily at the core of any literary analysis.⁶⁹ Drawing inspiration from the multi-disciplinary literary analyses of Sarah Sceats and Lorna Piatti-Farnell, I engage theorists from a number of different fields in my discussions of food in literature. My understanding of the cultural role of the culinary is derived principally from Roland Barthes' essays on food. In "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," Barthes describes food as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.... [Food] constitutes an information; it signifies."⁷⁰ I therefore view the culinary as a kind of language – and Barthes himself suggests food may have a "grammar" – embedded in the already literary form of the texts I examine.⁷¹ Food is as freighted with meaning as words are; it is not to be understood simply as symbolic of 'something else,' but rather as a system of meaning in its own right.

In several essays in *Mythologies* (chiefly "Wine and Milk" and "Steak and Chips") Barthes explores the possible meanings of individual culinary objects. He writes of steak, for example, that it "is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength."⁷² From this analysis emerges Barthes' concept of "totem" foods, which contain, in themselves, the symbolic identities of entire nations. In this weighty role Barthes places wine for the French, "felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own" (though I think the Italians might argue), milk for the Dutch, tea for the Brits, and steak and frites again for the French.⁷³ Throughout this dissertation I am attentive to the emergence of

⁶⁹ I apply close readings to the written texts as well as to the few films I examine. As this project is more concerned with narrative than with form, I do not address at length the formal qualities of the several films I treat.

⁷⁰ Barthes 2013, 23.

⁷¹ Ibid., 22.

⁷² Barthes 1972, 62.

⁷³ Ibid., 58.

alternative totems, particularly as they arise in diaspora, and particularly when the same totem manifests in texts by different authors. The concept of totemicity may appear to reduce food to its symbolic value, but attentive readings of when, where, and with whom totem foods are consumed enrich my understanding of the culinary as an intricate system of meaning.

Finally, Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image" inspires attention to the place of the visual in the alimentary, which is of particular utility for my analyses of films. Echoing his own concept of totemicity, Barthes proposes that the visual assemblage presented by a particular Panzani advertisement signifies "*Italianicity*," a distilled essence of Italy embodied simultaneously in the image and in the food it depicts – much like the "Mediterranean-icity" which the *bocadillo* advertisement in Valencia reaches for. This reading, combined with what I draw from the other Barthes texts cited here, suggests to me a synesthetic experience of food, attentive to the continual entanglement of eating, seeing, and writing. Reading a text in which the culinary plays a major role is a kind of doubled consumption, of words alongside foods. As characters in a novel take sustenance into themselves, readers engage in secondary consumption of the same dishes, assimilating meaning out of the enticing combination of literature and food.

As I intimated in my story about the Mediterranean pavilion at Expo Milano, part of the complexity of discussing food in the Mediterranean stems from simultaneous, paradoxical visions of a broadly shared Mediterranean diet and unique national or ethnic foodways. The uneasiness of these competing conceptions necessarily comes to the fore for the Mediterranean migrant, who must at once expect both similarity and difference when moving through sea. My understanding of this experience is indebted to Derrida's description of growing up in Algeria in *Monolingualism of the Other*. He writes of being confronted with Arabic "as an alien language, a strange kind of alien language as the language of the other, but then of course, and this is the

strange and troubling part, the other as the nearest neighbor.”⁷⁴ This is the reality of intra-Mediterranean displacement: living among the other, but an other who is not totally unrecognizable to or dissimilar from the self. When two Mediterranean figures meet, each is the other’s the neighbor, proximate to and intimate with the self.

The concept of narrative links these varied perspectives together. On the macro level, stories are the shared driving concern of anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of literature, and cultural critics. This is true with regard to the object of study – the stories people tell about themselves and others – and with regard to a scholarly methodology inspired by the impulse to construct a coherent narrative out of a disparate array of primary and secondary sources. As I describe repeatedly throughout this project, consumption is itself a narrative process, a way of describing who a subject is or desires to be. The analysis of food requires precisely this storytelling perspective.

Food is never incidental. The Italian epigraph with which this dissertation begins might be complemented by an observation that the Egyptian dialect word for “bread,” *aīsh*, is also the Modern Standard Arabic word for “life,” having entered the dialect by way of the secondary meanings of “life:” livelihood, sustenance, bread (in much the same way that “bread” or “dough” can mean “money” in English). Without making overmuch of this etymology, I would like to suggest, explicitly, what one might already intuit: food’s place at the center of life makes it paradoxically easy to overlook, especially in the context of subjects of great importance, including migration. Eating is, in the end, a rather unremarkable experience, something shared by everyone. But this prosaic quality is what makes food culture – and, more narrowly, the patterns of any individual’s consumption habits – such an important heuristic for understanding

⁷⁴ Derrida, 37.

these stories of movement and displacement. I suggest focusing on the culinary center in order to reread the migrant experience through food, which remains fundamental no matter one's home, and in many cases contains the idea of "home" in itself. It should not be surprising, then, that while some of my sources are characterized by a deep and sustained focus on food, others are not, in any obvious sense, "about" the culinary. In these latter texts, I maintain the effectiveness of using passages and episodes that deal with food as an interpretive lens through which to understand migration stories. Similarly, while all of my sources come from Mediterranean authors, the texts themselves exhibit varying degrees of "Mediterranean-ness," and some more easily fit under narrower classificatory rubrics, such as those of Italian or North African literature. In this study, I read such texts with what we might call a "Mediterranean optic," highlighting certain of their dimensions in order to pursue the "oblique axes" of comparison which Chambers suggests.⁷⁵

One final note: My primary texts were selected from broad readings in contemporary Mediterranean literature, but there are fewer works in this study that deal with the ongoing migration and refugee crisis than I would have liked. This is largely a result of this project's concern with the desires, accommodations, and difficulties attendant on *being in* another place, rather than with the journeys migrants take to get there. These journeys have recently been the subject of several fascinating films – both documentary and fictional.⁷⁶ Their focus on the crossings themselves, however, seems to preclude much attention to food culture, with the

⁷⁵ Chambers, 136.

⁷⁶ For example: Augugliaro 2014, Carpignano 2015, Fedele 2014, Hendrikx 2016, Hristov 2016, and Rosi 2016.

exception of the hunger and privation often endured by migrants. These texts await attention in another project.

Outline of the Dissertation

As indicated above, each chapter of this dissertation engages a different theoretical problem in the representation or use of food in contemporary Mediterranean literature. The first of these is the relationship between food and memory, followed in chapter two by a discussion of food's role in practices of identification. Chapter three turns on the issue of hunger. The final chapter reflects on interactions between memory, identification, and hunger via a case study of the idea of "fusion" cuisine in Mediterranean Sephardi writing. My selection of texts was guided by Horden and Purcell's concept of the Mediterranean as a "fuzzy set." The sea and, indeed, the culinary, are not equally foregrounded in these works, nor do I think they need be. Instead, I have brought together works which turn differing lenses on similar questions in order to gain a truly Mediterranean perspective, which is to say a perspective that does not privilege any particular view of the Sea except that which emerges kaleidoscopically, from the juxtaposition of neighbor with neighbor. While honoring this "fuzzy set," this is in notable contradiction to Horden and Purcell's separation of history "in" the Mediterranean from history "of" the Mediterranean.⁷⁷ I have found it necessary to read literature both "in" and "of" the Mediterranean to gain a full understanding of how the dynamics of the culinary operate in stories of Mediterranean migration.

Chapter one, "Beyond Proust's Madeleine," is constructed as a response to Marcel Proust's suggestion in *In Search of Lost Time* that food – in this case, a madeleine dipped in tea –

⁷⁷ Horden and Purcell, 9.

can unlock forgotten memories. The madeleine episode, perhaps the most famous example of food in literature, has long dominated literary theories of the interplay between food and memory. Where Proust depicts this relationship as emerging from an accidental alignment of circumstances, I argue that Mediterranean migration stories show an active, deliberate use of food by migrants to maintain links with pasts they refuse to forget. Examining Claudia Roden's landmark cookbook, *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968, revised 2000), Kamāl Raḥīm's Arabic novel about Egyptians in Paris, *Days of the Diaspora* (2008), and an excerpt from Amara Lakhous' novel about encounters between immigrants and Italians in Rome, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2006), I show how migrants consume the foods of their memories as nostalgic totems, unassimilated fragments of resistance against ongoing processes of assimilation, or symbols for the outright rejection thereof.

My second chapter, "Eating to Become," begins with the observation that if a migrant or traveler can use the foods of memory to maintain an active link with the past, it follows that she may also use the foods of her new homeland to anchor herself in the present, or to pull herself into the future. This chapter returns to Amara Lakhous' novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2006), addressing the perspective of a second character whose story I juxtapose with Luca Guadagnino's dreamy Italian film, *I Am Love* (2009), which tells the story of a Russian woman who has married into a wealthy Milanese family. I argue that migrants who look to the future rather than the past use the foods of their new homelands in a zero-sum game of selfhood, deliberately attempting to erase their former selves as they create new identities. These characters employ food in the construction of new lives via intimate and personal processes of identification: active endeavors to remake themselves in, and in the image of, their new homelands.

My third chapter unpacks the multiple meanings of “Hunger.” The texts I focus on – the Italian journalist Raffaele Nigro’s account of his travels around the Mediterranean Sea, *Mediterranean Diary* (2001), Ḥanān al-Shaykh’s novel of the Lebanese Civil War, *Beirut Post* (1992), and the Moroccan Muḥammad Shukrī’s autobiographical novel, *For Bread Alone* (1973) – conceive of hunger as alimentary deprivation, but also as a neurotic overconsumption or insatiability. I argue that hunger in these texts is physical, but more than that it is a mental condition of uncertainty, a questing after resolution by characters who do not understand their own desires. They find new ways of being in the Mediterranean by travelling difficult, solitary paths through violence, poverty, and globalization. I employ an analysis of hunger as a valuable corrective to the assumption of idyllic Mediterranean plenty.

The fourth and final chapter, “Against Fusion,” is a case study of Sephardi Jewish communities in the Levant. This chapter explores the idea of culinary fusion through the lens of Sephardi food, which layers Italian, Balkan, Ottoman, Arab, and contemporary Israeli foodways over a Spanish core that continues to be the focus of Sephardi nostalgia. The primary texts I examine are *Vidal and His Family* (1989), in which the French philosopher Edgar Morin narrates his father’s journey from Salonica to Paris, and André Aciman’s memoir of his childhood in Alexandria, *Out of Egypt* (1994). I argue that the patterns of memory, identification, and hunger that in general characterize Mediterranean writing on food and migration illuminate, in these texts, a peculiarly Sephardi pattern of accretion. Languages, citizenships, and, of course, foods stack upon one another with every step of the Sephardi journey, as the pull of the past competes with that of the future.

In the dissertation’s conclusion I outline the further research avenues suggested by this project, and return to the interlinked interventions underlying it: to prove the relevance of a

Mediterranean perspective in the contemporary period and to demonstrate the analytic possibilities presented by marrying literary and food studies. Migration makes the core and the contradictions of Mediterranean food culture legible. In *A Book of Jewish Food*, Claudia Roden, whose work I examine at length in the following chapter, reproduces a quotation from a conference paper she delivered at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery in 1981. “There is,” she observes, “really no such thing as Jewish food. . . . Local regional food becomes Jewish when it travels with Jews to new homelands.”⁷⁸ Substituting “Mediterranean” for “Jewish” helps illuminate the paradox at the core of this study. There *is* such a thing as Mediterranean food, yet when it travels with a Mediterranean subject from one Mediterranean land to another, it loses its Mediterranean identification, becoming, instead, local and regional. Stories of migration within the Mediterranean explore the tensions that accompany the manifestation of this difference.

⁷⁸ Roden, 9.

CHAPTER II

Beyond Proust's Madeleine: Food and Memory

Near the beginning of the first volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the unnamed narrator is surprised to find himself overcome by memories of his childhood, thought lost but reawakened by the taste of a forgotten treat from his youth, a madeleine cake dipped in tea. The episode is structured as a kind of spiral, each memory unfolding into the next with widening scope, until the entire world of his childhood is rebuilt, whole. This episode is perhaps the most famous literary use of food. The texts I examine in this chapter make deliberate what is only accidental in *In Search of Lost Time*. Where Proust's narrator is surprised and overwhelmed by the memories the madeleine triggers, the characters I discuss over the following pages set out to use food to keep certain memories alive. They eat self-consciously, turning to food as a way of making the past live in the present. The foods of memory are privileged in diasporic communities as nostalgic totems. They are unassimilated fragments of resistance against ongoing processes of assimilation, or symbols for the outright refusal thereof.

I begin with a close reading of the madeleine episode from *In Search of Lost Time* and a discussion of theories of memory. Then I chart a path through a number of contemporary Mediterranean texts that foreground the relationship between food and memory. First of these is Claudia Roden's seminal cookbook, *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*, which weaves together autobiography, cultural history, and recipes. Next, I turn to an excerpt from Amara Lakhous' novel about immigrants in Rome, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (*Clash of*

Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio). Finally, I examine Kamāl Raḥīm’s novel about an Egyptian family in Paris, *Ayyām al-shitāt (Days in the Diaspora)*.¹

Mnemonic Madeleine

The madeleine episode from *Swann’s Way*, found at the end of the first section of the first volume of Proust’s seven-volume novel, is the best-known scene in *In Search of Lost Time*. It introduces, in microcosm, Proust’s concerns with memory and time, which weave through all seven volumes of the novel. The passage begins with the adult narrator lying awake at night, remembering the troubled sleep of his childhood at Combray and his need for his mother’s presence before falling asleep. His only concrete recollection of those years is of the path to his bedroom, “as though all Combray had consisted of but two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o’clock at night.”² This memory, static in both time and place, is frustratingly elusive. It contains hints of a larger world and other concerns – the narrator’s mother, his sleeplessness, his fixation on the past – but from this single, still image we can only guess at his life at Combray, extrapolating, as it were, beyond the picture’s borders to imagine the dimensions of the narrator’s childhood.

Before turning to the famous madeleine, the narrator primes the reader for the revelations to come. He alludes to an obscure “Celtic belief” according to which the souls of the departed live on, transfigured, waiting to call out to the living and thereby live again. The narrator’s wandering introspection continues, “And so it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden

¹ Correct vowelizing would be *Ayyām al-shata ṭ*, but as Worldcat renders it *Ayyām al-shitāt* I’ve chosen to retain that spelling for ease in tracking references.

² Proust, 60.

somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object . . . which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.”³ Concealment and luck are the key elements of this formulation. The past could just as easily remain hidden forever as reappear, and the person remembering has no control over whether and when memory might return. To *try* to remember is futile. Only through a nearly mystical encounter with an object impregnated by memory can memory be activated.

There is a sense in these sentences that the past is a kind of furtive, living thing. On his first taste of tea-soaked cake, offered him by his mother on a cold winter’s day, the narrator’s reaction is corporeal rather than intellectual or emotional. “A shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place.”⁴ Before the memory is fully activated, the narrator recalls, “I felt something start within me, something that leaves its resting place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth.”⁵ The memory’s soul lives, as the “Celtic belief” might have it, in the cake, but also in the narrator’s own person. The encounter of one with the other causes something to change within the narrator himself. Remembrance occurs via a generative meeting of person with ensouled object, through which the corresponding memory hidden within the one who remembers is brought to life. The two pieces of this experience call out to each other, rising to meet with magnetic inevitability.

Attempting to describe why the taste of tea-soaked madeleine should have such a strong effect, the narrator reflects, “when from a long-dead past nothing subsists, after the people are

³ Ibid., 61.

⁴ Ibid., 62

⁵ Ibid., 64.

dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest.”⁶ Memory desires us. It hides, but it yearns to be discovered. And because it wants to be found it hides in things that have smell and taste – in food – because memory lives most strongly in these senses.⁷ In Proust’s words, taste and smell “bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”⁸ In this light, what happens when the narrator eats the madeleine is inevitable. It is shocking when memory returns, but once it has come back to us its reappearance seems foreordained. Of course the taste of the madeleine dipped in tea reminds the narrator of his childhood. How could it be otherwise? Its consumption is a kind of sacrament of memory – like the Host, it recalls to the one who consumes it what is absent and yet most real.

In the introduction to their collection of essays on memory in literature and film, Russell J.A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty note that we live “in a world in which it is now possible to walk around with a USB key or ‘flash drive’ in one’s pocket or briefcase, containing as much information as the Library of Congress . . . For most of us today this is what memory is, in a first-order sense, or rather in a sense that transcends any ‘natural’-technical binary: an external, prosthetic storage tool.”⁹ The madeleine is, in a real sense, just such a “technology.” It is an archive, a storage device, meaningless until inserted, as it were, into the human host who can

⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁷ The strong link between scent and memory, in particular, has been supported by scientific research. See Herz 1998, Herz and Schooler 2002, and Smith 2002. The latter two studies were explicitly inspired by *In Search of Lost Time*.

⁸ Proust, 65.

⁹ Kilbourn and Ty, 3-4.

summon and view its content. This reading of the madeleine runs counter to that of Kilbourn and Ty, who write, “the memory as such is not contained ‘within’ the cake or its flavor; the madeleine is the precipitant of what for Proust is memory’s complete and authentic unfolding.”¹⁰ It seems to me, rather, that the memory lives just as much within the madeleine as it is within the narrator. Food is itself memory. A madeleine dipped in tea is diachronic, erasing the distance between the past and present. Literary theorist Evelyne Ender places a biological or scientific sense along this technological valence of memory, demonstrating that the madeleine episode from *Swann’s Way* has been the inspiration behind a whole subfield of scientific memory studies on “involuntary memory.”¹¹ She describes the episode as “a thought experiment so successful that it acquires scientific credibility,” and documents the specific debts the psychological and neuroscientific researches of Oliver Sacks, Marigold Linton, and Antonio Damasio owe to Proust’s figuration of memory as an object that cannot be chased, only submitted to.¹²

Proust’s narrator’s efforts to pin down the cause of his bodily reaction to the madeleine are futile until he relaxes into the sensations. In the end, after surrendering to the physical perturbation brought on by the familiar taste, the narrator finds that the rest of his childhood world “rose up like the scenery of a theatre,” in which his house and garden, the surrounding town, whole days and nights in all weathers, the squares and streets, the daily errands and the lazy country roads, the individual and specific flowers and persons and lives come back to him entire. “The whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.”¹³ The filmstrip of

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Ender, 30.

¹² Ibid., 15. In another chapter of her book, *Architexts of Memory*, Ender documents attempts to deliberately spur Proustian recollection in Alzheimer’s patients through “memory gardens.”

¹³ Proust, 65.

memory, stuck on the static, evening image of the path to the narrator's bedroom at Combray, begins to move. The madeleine acts as a key unlocking something lying in wait inside the narrator, images which in turn "demand a narrative," becoming the driving force behind the entirety of *In Search of Lost Time*.¹⁴

Should memory, then, be modeled as a process of archiving and retrieval, or as a generative action? Scholars of memory have often opposed these perspectives, arguing that memory is either a matter of concrete storage maintained within the mind for later access, or, pointing to the phenomenon of "false memory," that every instance of memory requires an active process of creation.¹⁵ Freud's theory of the unconscious as a repository of hidden or repressed memory that can be exposed encapsulates the retrieval model.¹⁶ A century later, debates over the reliability of witness testimony and the phenomenon of false memory pointed to the latter, generative perspective.¹⁷ The madeleine episode fuses these viewpoints. It begins with the former model, the madeleine summoning the narrator's buried past, but the passage's closing evocation of Combray "growing solid" implies a generative action as well: each act of remembering constitutes the things remembered anew. From the broad perspective of *In Search of Lost Time*, memory is a literally (in both senses of the word) creative act: an initial act of memory makes the novel.

This unfolding chain of memories recalls Jacques Derrida's figuration of metaphor in his essay, "White Mythology," as heliotropic: The sunflower (the heliotrope) is so named because of its visual resemblance to the sun, but it is heliotropic in both a botanical and a metaphorical

¹⁴ Ender, 6.

¹⁵ Rossington and Whitehead, 6.

¹⁶ See Terdiman 2010.

¹⁷ See, for example, Felman and Laub 1992.

sense; it references the sun and it physically turns toward the sun until, finally, it erases its own distinctiveness in its ongoing evocation of the sun. Metaphors continually return to their source objects. The memories summoned by the madeleine in *In Search of Lost Time* are like Derrida's metaphors. The tea-soaked madeleine is diachronic; its visceral evocation of memory bridges the space between the present and the past. The narrator's memories may surprise him in their completeness, but Proust believes they have been resting, whole, in the narrator and in the madeleine, in mnemonic stasis. They unfurl unbidden from the taste of the madeleine dipped in tea and return to it in its consumption. Remembering is thus also a kind of eating: in reliving the past we must consume it.

Near the beginning of the madeleine episode, just after describing his initially limited recollections of Combray, the narrator declares that beyond that single "luminous panel" the rest of his childhood world was "in all reality dead." He asks plaintively, "Permanently dead? Very possibly."¹⁸ It is impossible for the taste of the madeleine soaked in tea to not summon memories of the narrator's childhood at Combray. But it is very possible for the narrator to never eat this mnemonic madeleine at all, for him to refuse his mother's offer of a snack as, indeed, he initially does, or for her to have called for a different type of cake to go with the tea, or for any number of other details of the incident to change, upsetting the delicate arrangement of variables which creates the circumstances for memory. This confluence occurs only by chance, and only when the narrator abandons his willful attempt to remember and instead allows memory to overtake him. Memory's unpredictability is key to Proust's conception of our relationship with the past, which must always take us unawares. For Proust, memories can be neither lost nor held on to,

¹⁸ Proust, 61.

only encountered, and we are at the mercy of these recollections when they strike us, first in the body and then in the mind.

Ful Medames

In immediate opposition to Proust's theory of involuntary memory, the introduction to *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968), Claudia Roden's first and still best known work, begins with the linking of food and memory through a deliberate act of recollection by way of consumption. The experience of eating which Roden narrates on the first page of her cookbook poses a question for *In Search of Lost Time*'s narrator: what does eating a mnemonic food mean if one has not really forgotten the past to begin with? Through the ritualized and routine consumption of foods that remind her of the home she has left behind, Roden paradoxically obviates the need for just such a reminder, keeping the past alive. Since little has been forgotten, this is not the "voluntary memory" that Proust argues can never be truly successful. Instead, Roden blocks the simultaneously somatic, emotional, and intellectual processes by which the archive of memory is filled. This is not to suggest that Roden is not actively shaping her narrative of her past, only that ideas of recovery and recollection are insufficient descriptors of her relationship with memory. As Roden never loses sight of her past, there is no lost memorial world to recover.

"The collection," Roden writes of her cookbook, "began fifteen years ago with a recipe for *ful medames*," a traditional Egyptian breakfast dish made of fava beans.¹⁹ Roden was in school in Paris at the time. It was her first extended stay in Europe, some years before her family's final departure from Egypt in the wake of the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956,

¹⁹ Roden (1968), 1.

after which Roden and her family would settle in London. While in Paris, she writes, “Every Sunday I was invited together with my brothers and a cousin to eat *ful medames* with some relatives. This meal became a ritual. Considered in Egypt to be a poor man’s dish, in Paris the little brown beans became invested with all the glories and warmth of Cairo, our hometown, and the embodiment of all that for which we were homesick.”²⁰ In describing *ful* as an Egyptian poor man’s dish, Roden indicates her own complex relationship with the foods that she labels “Egyptian.” Roden and both her parents were born in Cairo, part of an elite, French-speaking community of Sephardi Jews that, aside from contact with domestic workers, lived largely apart from the Arab population. Like much of the Egyptian Sephardi community, as opposed to the more deeply rooted local Arab Jewish community, Roden’s family arrived in Egypt around the beginning of the twentieth century. Her maternal grandmother was born in Sephardi Istanbul, descended from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Her paternal grandmother and both of her grandfathers were born in Aleppo. Carol Bardenstein observes that Roden’s memories of her family having needed to teach their cook to prepare their dishes indicate “affiliative complexities and ambiguities.”²¹ Namely, “what was the difference between ‘his’ (Egyptian) food and [the family’s], to the extent that he had to be taught to cook the latter?”²² *Ful* is an Egyptian heritage food, but it is also a street food, and a poor man’s food. Due to her family’s Levantine culinary heritage and Francophilic cultural aspirations, *ful* is unlikely to have been often seen on Roden’s table in Egypt.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Bardenstein, 355.

²² *Ibid.*, 354.

In France, however, *ful* becomes what Barthes would call a “totem” food, endowed with the very spirit of Egypt, a mechanism for making oneself Egyptian.²³ The same qualities that make it unlikely that Roden would have often eaten *ful* in Egypt – and especially the food’s identification with the poorer classes who come to represent the “true” national character of Egypt in the rhetorical formations of Egyptian nationalism – make it an ideal memorial food in exile.²⁴ Roden’s privileged statuses – white, wealthy, European – add a sense of the forbidden to the sensuous ecstasy and sacral air which imbue her description of her Parisian meal of *ful*:

Ceremoniously, we sprinkled the beans with olive oil, squeezed a little lemon over them, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and placed a hot hard-boiled egg in their midst. Delicious ecstasy! Silently, we ate the beans, whole and firm at first; then we squashed them with our forks and combined their floury texture and slightly dull, earthy taste with the acid tang of lemon, mellowed by the olive oil; finally, we crumbled the egg, matching its earthiness with that of the beans, its pale warm yellow with their dull brown.²⁵

This passage bears hallmarks of holiness: the ritualized steps of consumption, the reverent silence in which the act is completed. Roden satisfies her nostalgia by reifying her identification with the Egyptian culture she has left behind, and indeed admits that the entirety of her cookbook

²³ Barthes 1972. In this light, Barthes’ idea of “totem” foods inverts Freud’s theory of totemism, contradicting Freud’s observation that “clansmen are under a sacred obligation . . . not to kill or destroy their totem and to avoid eating its flesh,” except for ritualized annual consumption of the otherwise forbidden foodstuff (Freud 1990, 5). For Barthes, consumption of the totem is normalized; its totemicity is attained, paradoxically, by virtue of its everyday quality.

²⁴ The most famous literary example of the enshrining of Egyptian national truth among the poor is Naguib Mahfouz’ 1967 novel *Miramar*, in which men representing various political perspectives in the young nation compete for the attention of a young girl from the countryside, who represents the nation itself.

²⁵ Roden 1968, 1.

is “the fruit of nostalgic longing.”²⁶ Distinguishing nostalgia from its close relative, Freudian melancholia, Svetlana Boym writes, “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups and nations, between personal and collective memory.”²⁷ This communal dimension of nostalgia helps describe members of Mediterranean diasporas who are or feel isolated from their own communities, like Roden’s assemblage of brothers and cousins huddled around their *ful* in Paris. The dull and earthy tang of the *ful* mixes the mundane with the holy ceremony of the *ful*’s consumption. This mixture of revered memory and coarse reality maintains connections, keeping memory alive in the foreign present.

Social space continues to be a site for Roden’s maintenance of her affiliation with Egyptian culture as she moves from Paris to London and is joined by the rest of her family in exile from Egypt. The process of archiving gains a social dimension. “Friday night dinners at my parents’ and gatherings of friends at my own home,” Roden writes, “have been opportunities to rejoice in our food and to summon the ghosts of the past.”²⁸ At first glance this appears to be a description of Proustian memory, and indeed Roden continues to describe the richly textured memories evoked by specific foods, which are linked in her memory with specific places and experiences. “Each dish has filled our house in turn with the smells of the *Muski*, the Cairo market, of the *corniche* in Alexandria, of Groppi’s and the famous Hati restaurant.”²⁹ For those with Egyptian experience, these phrases sketch a very real culinary itinerary through Cairo and Alexandria. This lively physical plane is then lent emotional texture: “Each dish has brought

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., xvi.

²⁸ Roden 1968, 2.

²⁹ Ibid.

back memories of great and small occasions, of festivals, of the emotions of those times, and of the sayings invariably said.”³⁰ Finally, Roden zeroes in on particular recollections:

[The dishes] have conjured up memories of street vendors, bakeries and pastry shops, and of the brilliant colors and sounds of the markets. Pickles and cheeses have re-created for us the atmosphere of the grocery shop around the corner, down to which a constant flow of baskets would be lowered from the windows above, descending with coins, and going up again with food.³¹

This is all terrifically Proustian, and yet there is nothing involuntary to these memories, and indeed there is quite a gap between the primal, earthy beans Roden consumes from a tin in Paris, and the rarefied air hinted at in this image of anonymous baskets traveling up and down from Roden’s apartment. In bringing the food to her, the baskets maintain a physical separation between Roden’s body and the grocery shop whose atmosphere she later finds evoked by pickles and cheeses.

From the weekly *ful* gatherings in Paris to the dinners at her parents’ house and her own parties in London, Roden’s relationship with food has little to do with the unexpected return of the past that overwhelms Proust’s narrator. In spite of the language of “conjuring” and the sacramental air, Roden is staging these memories, not being surprised by them. Further, she is staging them for sale, positioning herself as conduit between the popular audience of her cookbook and the proclaimed authenticity of her memory, which is in fact a deliberate, retroactive construction. Like Proust’s madeleine, Roden’s dishes are archives, storage devices,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

but unlike the madeleine Roden's storage technology is the result of careful planning, not unexpected encounter. Her memory is brazenly public, and held in a state of continual access.

Thus the foods of Roden's cookbook partake of a different kind of memory than Proustian involuntary recollection. They are more concerned with the reenactment and even codification (for easier consumption) of the past than its rediscovery. Roden shares this impulse to fix memory in place with the friends, family members, and acquaintances who helped her fill the cookbook's pages with recipes from across the Middle East. Roden did not return to Egypt to find the best versions of her recipes, nor did she visit the other countries she includes in her broadly defined "Middle East." Her recipes – those that were not adapted from her own personal memories of growing up in Egypt – come from "some relative passing through London, a well-known ex-restaurateur from Alexandria, or somebody's aunt in Buenos Aires."³² The dishes in this book are, therefore, the ones that stuck in the memories of those who left. A fine distinction, certainly, but a worthwhile one: not the foods found by someone who went to the Middle East so as to research its cuisine, but the dishes retained by those who departed and worked to maintain some scent of home in their new, western kitchens, where the cooking does the work of memory in concert with the cooks. A better title, then: "A Book of Middle Eastern Food as It Is Remembered and Cooked by Middle Eastern Émigrés in the West." In 2000, Roden published a substantially revised edition of the text, *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food*. In the updated introduction, she details her methodology more fully: "I hung around carpet warehouses and embassies, visa departments and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London."³³ She leaves unaddressed the question of how the recipes these exiles and expatriates teach her relate to

³² Roden 1968, 1-2.

³³ Roden 2002, 5.

recipes learned, as it were, *in situ*. There must certainly be an affective difference between the tastes of foods one eats with one's servants or learns to make in one's family's kitchen and foods one attempts to recreate later, far way, with only memory as a guide. Yet in describing her encounters with her sources, Roden's major focus is on the sketching of a diasporic network which brings together the experiences and memories of an emerging community of Middle Eastern expatriates in London.

At the center of this network is Roden herself. She confesses, "I have treated the food of the individual countries arbitrarily, giving preference and most careful scrutiny to all aspects of food belonging to my own personal background."³⁴ The text is an extended working out of the history and boundaries of Roden's life and experience. Her arc took her from Cairo to Paris to London, but the myths she makes of her own past reach far beyond her lifetime to embrace a type of ancestral history of being in the Mediterranean world. Roden's claims to authority rest on linking the cuisines she writes of to her personal experiences and those of her family. This is expected enough when Roden deals with the Levant, especially as her introductions at times take on a tone of memoir. But the stakes – and unexpected breadth – of the personal crystallize in one of Roden's more recent texts, *The Food of Spain* (2011), which, at first glance, would seem to be a topic unrelated to Roden's own memories. The introduction to the text begins, however, with this evocative passage:

My grandmother Eugénie Alphandary spoke an old Judeo-Spanish language called Judezmo, or Ladino, which she said was old Castilian. She was from Constantinople (now Istanbul) and was descended from Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492 and went on to live in Ottoman lands . . . As I

³⁴ Roden 1968, 3.

traveled through Spain to research this book, the names of cities and streets conjured up in my mind the faces of my family and friends in Egypt. I recognized the names of vegetables and dishes. Traces of the old Muslim presence – arabesque carvings, blue and white tiles, a fountain spouting cool water in a scented garden – evoked nostalgic memories of the Arab world I was born in. . . . The way people cook in Spain, the ingredients they put together, their little tricks, their turn of hand, are mysteriously familiar. A word, a taste, a smell, triggered memories I never knew I had.³⁵

First, though her family left Spain five centuries ago, Roden confidently roots herself in that country. Second, she links Spain to Egypt, both to reinforce its personal relevance for her and to bind it more firmly to the Mediterranean milieu in which she has established her culinary expertise – she makes the same move in her book on Italy, opening the section on Sicily with the words, “In Palermo I was constantly reminded of Egypt.”³⁶ Finally, she moves from memories of her own Egyptian past to evoke a more primal type of memory, suggesting that the secrets of Spanish cooking are somehow encoded in her being, easily awakened by personal experience in that country. After the personal, Roden’s claims of familiarity are tied to her imagination of an ethnic unconscious that renders the entire Mediterranean her quasi-homeland via familial history.

Roden’s expectation of familiarity across the Mediterranean zone implies the existence of a type of memory partaking of the personal or familial, the historical, and the mystical, genetic encoding of ancestral experience. Svetlana Boym explains, “in the emotional topography of memory, personal and historical events tend to be conflated.”³⁷ Roden’s *déjà vu* in Spain and

³⁵ Roden 2011, 1-2.

³⁶ Roden 1990, 232.

³⁷ Boym, 52.

Italy indicates precisely this blurring between her own past and longer historical processes of Mediterranean migration by Sephardi Jews. Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: the first, “restorative nostalgia,” is about the attempt to totally rebuild the past and make it live again; the second, “reflective nostalgia” is about cherishing the past’s ruin and habituating longing. In food, they coexist. Cooking the foods of the past while in exile, Roden simultaneously treasures the culinary artifacts of her lost homeland and, via her cookbooks, attempts to reconstruct the vanished world of her childhood. The passage from *The Food of Spain* culminates with an astonishing Proustian revelation. Roden has been carefully laying out the consciousness of her memory work, but in the end she, too, can be surprised by the ways in which memory returns to us: “A word, a taste, a smell, triggered memories I never knew I had.” Five centuries into the Sephardi diaspora, Roden extends the boundaries of her conceptual homeland to the place Sephardi identity was born.

One could hardly have guessed, reading *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* when it was first published, that Roden’s career would unfold west across the Mediterranean, rather than remaining within the Middle East she described in 1968. (A careful reading of the list of countries Roden includes in her “Middle East” does offer a hint of the possibility of a Mediterranean perspective: “Syria, the Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Yemen, the Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Israel.”³⁸ The majority of these countries have Mediterranean borders.) What is already apparent, however, is Roden’s ambition to create texts that can somehow substitute for memory, doing the work of keeping the past alive. The structure of the text already indicates this goal. Roden’s introduction includes a section on “Origins and Influences,” where she describes the history of Middle Eastern food alongside the

³⁸ Roden 1968, 3.

history of the Middle East; “Social Aspects,” a description of hospitality traditions and cooking practices in the region; and “The Traditional Table,” which details elements of Middle Eastern décor alongside rules of culinary etiquette. Throughout the cookbook Roden sprinkles excerpts from medieval Arabic and Persian cookery manuals and from classical Arabic literature and folktales. She renders the real stuff of food figuratively intertextual, and even at the level of individual recipes she situates food within culture. Her recipe for *sanbusak* (a cheese- or meat-filled pastry), for example, is preceded not only by a ninth-century ode to the dish, but also by a note that the poem was recited at tenth-century banquet given by the Caliph Mustakfi in Baghdad.³⁹ Roden here links together art, history, and food, positioning herself as a conduit through which the reader (and chef) can access the living embodiment of the past: simply cook the dish, and the past continues to live.

In the one-page introduction to the chapter on soups, Roden describes eating practice (“soups are often eaten as a meal in themselves”), social practice (“richer soups play a part in the rituals of religious festivals”), cooking practice (“calf’s feet or sheep’s feet are added for their gelatinous quality. . . . meat stocks are made richer with a marrow bone”), and then pivots to a description of the social world of her childhood, noting that many of the recipes that follow were poor people’s foods. As in her description of *ful*, there is a sense of the forbidden here, blended with anxiety about the relationship between cuisine and class. Roden writes, “I know many children of rich families who would sneak up the roof terraces to share their servants’ soups and stews.” And immediately following this, before the reader can pause to reflect on the implications of rich children’s preference for their servants’ food, Roden switches focus again: “I have discovered with some excitement that several of the soups I know are almost identical to

³⁹ Ibid., 89-90.

dishes described in medieval texts. I am full of respect for the constancy of the people who continue to prepare them to this day, and for their dignified loyalty to their own past.”⁴⁰ This astonishing matrix of observations encapsulates the reach of both *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* and the arc of Roden’s career. The blending of the social, the culinary, and the personal is typical, as is the linking of these elements with the historical. The final flourish lies in the reminder of continuity between the past and the present. Again, the reader is offered the opportunity to join Roden and her sources in helping to keep the past alive, an activity which here takes on a noble glow of constancy, dignity, and loyalty.

Occasionally, Roden abandons the recipe format entirely, as in her entry on sea urchins, which I quote here in full:

Hunting for *ritza* [sea urchins] is a favorite pastime in Alexandria. It is a pleasure to swim out to the rocks, dive into the sea, and discover hosts of dark purple and black, spiky, jewel-like balls clinging fast to the rocks, a triumph to wrench them away, and a delight to cut a piece off the top, squeeze a little lemon on the soft, salmon-colored flesh, scoop it out with some bread, and savor the subtle iodized taste, lulled by the rhythm of the sea.⁴¹

Sandwiched between a recipe for Moroccan shad stuffed with dates (“requires rather lengthy preparation”) and another for poached prawns, this odd little passage is difficult to categorize. One could, I suppose, follow Roden’s directions here, though it might be necessary to go to Alexandria to do so. A cookbook is, first and foremost, a commercial object. Secondly, it is a utilitarian form that has not, at least traditionally, been understood as “literature.” But there is

⁴⁰ Ibid, 109.

⁴¹ Ibid., 173.

little other way of describing this passage than literary. It is richly descriptive, even atmospheric; the images are lively and compelling. Roden's use of the present tense invites the reader to consider this moment – and is it born of memory or imagination? – as ongoing and achievable. If it is from Roden's childhood in Egypt, we are invited to partake of her memory. If it is invention, it is somehow outside of time, alive for as long as we continue to read it.

In the revised introduction to *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food*, Roden returns to the question of the relationship between her work and collective cultural knowledge. “We had never had any cookbooks,” she writes. “There had been none in Egypt. Recipes had always been transferred from mother and mother-in-law to daughter and daughter-in-law.”⁴² Implicit in Roden's words is the belief that these traditional lines of transmission had an uncomplicated existence in the first place, which has been interrupted in diaspora, and that tradition itself can be marketed as an authentic, consumable product. If a cookbook is meant to substitute for the matrilineal inheritance of recipes, however, what happens to the soups and stews that middle- and upper-class children would sneak off to eat with their families' servants? The cookbook, in archiving a particular kind of culinary knowledge and rendering it accessible, takes the place of, or at the very least augments, certain old patterns of exchange and instruction, while perhaps excluding others. In the process the cookbook becomes, in itself, a kind of codified and externalized repository of memory. Cooking from *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* is a way of finding proxy access to Roden's vision of her own past and, by extension, the entire Mediterranean world she claims as her area of expertise by ancestral right. As Iain Chambers puts it, “in the very details of gastronomic and cultural sustenance there is a constellation of

⁴² Roden 2000, 4.

being that continues to survive.⁴³ For Roden, multiple pasts are constantly with us – both the ones we endeavor to hold onto and those we did not even know we could access. It is Roden’s task to draw Chambers’ “constellation,” to forge a clear picture from the profusion of her memories.

Pasta, Pizza, and Persian Feasts

Roden’s nostalgia, her ability to feed the past by reenacting it in the present, relies on her social construction of memory. Amara Lakhous’ 2006 novel, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio – Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, an explicit reference to Samuel Huntington’s thesis, which Lakhous labors carefully to complicate – treats instead the isolating phenomenon of melancholia. The novel unfolds in multiple voices as the residents of a Roman neighborhood offer rambling, chaotic witness statements to police investigating a murder that has occurred in the apartment building in which many of them live. Their testimonies can be sorted into two loose groups: native Italians who evince profound distrust of immigrants, and immigrants who are deeply skeptical of Italy. Both groups are neurotically preoccupied with food, with their own diets and with others’. An Italian woman is convinced that a resident’s missing dog, Valentino, has been kidnapped and eaten. Her evidence:

First: in the last few years many Chinese restaurants have opened in and around Piazza Vittorio.

Second: Chinese children love to play in the gardens of Piazza Vittorio.

Third: I’ve been told that the Chinese eat cat and dog meat.

⁴³ Chambers, 130.

Given all that I've told you, there is no doubt that the Chinese have stolen poor little Valentino and eaten him!⁴⁴

Meanwhile, a Peruvian immigrant named Maria Cristina Gonzalez locates her unhappiness in her diet. "I suffer from a terrible solitude, that at times strokes the edge of madness. I watch TV and eat all day; I devour enormous quantities of chocolate. As you can see, I'm very fat. I want to lose weight, but under these conditions it's simply impossible."⁴⁵ In her next breath, she rhapsodizes about eating *lomo saltado* with other expatriate Peruvians every week on her day off, joining an anonymous crowd of migrants who gather at a train station. Her experience of Italy is structured around two culinary poles – the chocolate she eats in her sadness, and the Peruvian dishes she enjoys when briefly reunited with her countrymen.

These and other brief reflections on diet are lent greater heft by the staging of the novel. Its first section, which I will examine in detail here, revolves entirely around food, and primes the reader for the briefer food-centric passages which populate the remainder of the text. The novel opens with the lengthy, digressive witness statement tendered by the melancholic figure of Parviz Mansoor Samadi, a political refugee from Shiraz who has settled miserably in Rome, far from his wife and four children, who remain in Iran. Parviz lacks the social and familial network that provides Claudia Roden with stability; he lacks access to even the type of loose expatriate population to which Maria Cristina Gonzalez clings. He has no community with whom to

⁴⁴ Lakhous, 52. "Primo. Negli ultimi anni sono stati aperti tanti ristoranti cinesi a piazza Vittorio e dintorni. Secondo. I giardini di piazza Vittorio sono i luoghi preferiti dei criaturi cinesi per giocare. Terzo. Mi hanno detto che i cinesi si mangiano la carne dei gatti e dei cani. Dopo tutte queste cose che vi ho detto, non ci sono dubbi che i cinesi hanno rapito quel poverello di Valentino e se lo sono mangiato!"

⁴⁵ Ibid., "Soffro di una terribile solitudine, che a volte mi fa accarezzare la follia. Guardo la tv tutto il giorno e mangio tanto, divoro grandi quantità di cioccolata. Come vedete sono molto grassa. Vorrei dimagrire, ma in queste condizioni non ce la faccio proprio."

ritualize and reinforce memories of his homeland. As a result, his relationship with food cycles between a wine-soaked oblivion in which he tries to forget his past, and the ecstasy he finds in Persian cooking, which offers him a brief return to his life in Shiraz. Parviz falls into depression and alcoholism, is rescued from his misery by the opportunity to cook a Persian feast, and then returns to his wine and misery until his concerned friend, Amedeo, can drag Parviz away from his tear-splashed bottles of Chianti on the pretext of another impromptu party for which Parviz' culinary faculties are required. Amedeo, correctly diagnosing the Iranian's malady, gloomily reflects upon finding Parviz drunk once again, "Another Persian dinner will be necessary to drag Parviz out of his melancholy."⁴⁶

In Iran, Parviz was a chef and restaurateur. His witness statement returns continually to the subject of food. "The kitchen," he says, "is the only space that grants serenity to my wounded heart."⁴⁷ He explains that when cooking, "The odors that fill the kitchen make me forget reality, and I seem to be once more in my kitchen in Shiraz. After a bit the perfume of the spices is changed into incense, and it is this that makes me dance and sing like a dervish, ay ay ay... And so in just a few minutes the kitchen is transformed by a Sufi trance."⁴⁸ Like Claudia Roden, Parviz uses the foods of memory to keep his past alive. Unlike Roden, however, he lacks agentive control over this process. Absent the stabilizing effect of community, he alternates between the oblivion he finds in alcohol and the transient, transcendent joy he achieves while cooking; he lives for these brief moments of access to the past.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 33. "Ci vuole una cena persiana per farlo uscire da quella malinconia."

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18. "È l'unico spazio che dia tranquillità al mio cuore ferito."

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20. "Gli odori che riempiono la cucina mi fanno dimenticare la realtà e mi sembra di essere tornato nella mia cucina a Shiraz. Dopo un po' il profumo delle spezie si trasforma in incenso, ed è questo che mi fa ballare e cantare come un derviscio, ahi ahi ahi... Così in pochi minuti la cucina si trasforma in una trance sufi."

Parviz explains that in Shiraz he learned to cook from his father and grandfather. In exile in Italy, these familial links are broken. The kitchen remains a comforting space, but Parviz feels off balance, alone in Rome. “I find myself in the kitchen. And it’s no wonder, because I’m a good cook. I learned the craft passed down from my grandfather to my father. I am not a dishwasher, as they would have me be in the restaurants of Rome. In Shiraz I had a beautiful restaurant. Curse those who ruined me, in the blink of an eye I lost everything.”⁴⁹ Even as he longs for Iran, Parviz fearfully fights with Italian authorities for certification of his refugee status so that he can stay where he is safe.⁵⁰ He exhibits a capacity for doublethink, claiming, ““There’s no point in me learning to cook Italian food [to work as a cook in Italy] because I won’t remain long in Rome. Soon I will return to Shiraz. I am certain of it.”⁵¹ The Sufi trance in the kitchen is, like Parviz’ reliance on alcohol, a kind of fugue state which enables his denial of the permanency of his residence in Italy, while offering a mental escape from his Italian circumstances.

Parviz struggles with his lack of control over his life, and the attendant change in his class from chef and restaurateur to simple cook. He burns through menial jobs in restaurant kitchens around Rome, unable to accustom himself to working in a restaurant he does not own, taking orders from another. “For me, the kitchen is exactly like a ship. Parviz Mansoor Samadi,” he declares, “does not set foot on a ship if he is not in command.”⁵² It does not help matters that

⁴⁹ Ibid. “Io mi trovo bene in cucina. E non c’è da meravigliarsene, perché sono un bravo cuoco. Ho imparato il mestiere tramandato da mio nonno a mio padre. Non sono un lavapiatti, come si dice di me nei ristoranti di Roma. A Shiraz avevo un bel ristorante. Maledetto chi mi ha rovinato, in un batter d’occhio ho perso tutto.”

⁵⁰ When his application for refugee status is initially rejected, Parviz gets drunk and sews his own mouth shut in a symbolic act of protest, denying himself both speech and sustenance.

⁵¹ Ibid., 21. “È inutile imparare la cucina italiana, perché non rimarrò molto a Roma. Tra poco tornerò a Shiraz. Ne sono certo.”

⁵² Ibid., 23. “Per me la cucina è proprio come una nave. Parviz Mansoor Samadi non mette piede su una nave se non è lui a comandare.”

Parviz loathes Italian food, and is openly scornful of the pizza and pasta held dear by Italians. Parviz' screed against Italians who eat pizza on the metro, which he considers even fouler than smoking, begins on the very first page of the novel. Watching an Italian girl devouring a pizza "as big as an umbrella," Parviz remembers how he was "overtaken by nausea and almost vomited."⁵³ Quickly, he clarifies: "My hatred for pizza is without compare, but this does not mean that I hate all who eat it. I would like things to be clear from the beginning: I have no hatred for the Italians."⁵⁴ I wonder, though, if these things are so easily separated. It seems that Parviz' rejection of Italy's most famous foods must in some way imply a rejection of Italy itself. In *Mythologies*, Barthes elaborates the concept of "totem" foods, declaring that in France, "Wine is a part of society,"⁵⁵ and, "Wine is felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheese and its culture."⁵⁶ If wine is a part of France, then pizza and pasta are certainly part of Italy; it seems difficult to treat Italy, Italians, and Italian food as separable entities. When Parviz speaks of "all the different pastas that I truly cannot stand,"⁵⁷ when he wonders how Italians can "devour tremendous amount of dough morning and night,"⁵⁸ his detestation of Italian food is symptomatic of his sorrow at residing in Italy.

Parviz' distaste for Italian food climaxes with a tirade against pasta's unhealthiness. "I wonder why the Italian authorities continue to deny what all honest doctors know: pasta makes

⁵³ Ibid., 11. "...ho visto una ragazza italiana che divorava una pizza grande come un ombrello, Mi è venuta la nausea e per poco non vomitavo!"

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12. "Il mio odio per la pizza non ha paragoni, ma questo non significa che io odii tutte le persone che la mangiano. Vorrei che le cose fossero chiare fin dall'inizio: non ho nessun odio verso gli italiani."

⁵⁵ Barthes 1972, 60.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁷ Lakhous, 13. "tutte le diverse paste che io proprio non sopporto."

⁵⁸ Ibid., 12. "divorare una impressionante quantità di pasta mattina e sera."

one fat and causes obesity. The fat slowly begins to obstruct the veins until the poor heart stops beating.” This, Parviz explains ingenuously, is exactly what happened to Elvis, who, according to Parviz, began by eating healthy rice daily, then fell in love with pizza – partially because he was too busy to cook properly – “and the result was that in a short time he became as fat as an elephant and died because of the fat that drowned his heart, his lungs, his eyes, his whole body.”⁵⁹ Pasta, Parviz claims, should carry the same warnings as cigarettes: “Seriously damages health.”⁶⁰ Parviz’ anti-pasta stance echoes Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s famous diatribe against Italian cooking in “*Il manifesto della cucina futurista*,” in which he calls for “the abolition of pasta, that absurd Italian gastronomic religion.”⁶¹ Putting Marinetti’s infamous abhorrence of pasta in the mouth of an Iranian political refugee underlines the novel’s central question about what it means to be Italian in an Italy composed of immigrants. Lakhous, himself an Algerian immigrant, continually tests the boundaries of *italianità*, asking whether and when foreigners – naturalized or otherwise – can claim ownership over Italian culture, and the concomitant right to judge it. It bears mentioning in this regard that Marinetti was born abroad as well, in Alexandria, and studied in Cairo and Paris before receiving a law degree in Italy. In light of this quintessentially Mediterranean itinerary, Marinetti’s attempt to counter what he saw as Italian decadence and decrepitude with the speed and innovation of the modern age – through food, no less! – could also be considered a quasi-foreign interrogation of Italian culture (note also that the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21. “Mi chiedo perché le autorità italiane continuino a negare quello che tutti i medici onesti sanno: la pasta fa ingrassare e causa l’obesità. Il grasso inizia piano piano a ostruire le vene finché il povero cuore non cessa di battere. . . . il risultato fu che [Elvis] divenne in poco tempo grosso come un elegante e morì per il grasso che gli sommerse il cuore, i polmoni, gli occhi, tutto il corpo.”

⁶⁰ Ibid., 22. “Nuoce gravemente alla salute.”

⁶¹ Ibid., 21. “L’abolizione della pastasciutta, assurda religione gastronomica italiana.”

“Futurist Manifesto” itself was first published not in Italian, but French, in *Le Figaro*). This is the critical tradition in which Amara Lakhous intervenes.

In Parviz’ testimony, this waffling, ambivalent engagement with Italian culture is reflected in the countering of Parviz’ hatred for pizza and pasta by his love for Chianti. If the former are indeed Italy’s totem-foods, wine surely does not lag far behind in esteem (and perhaps would even equal pasta and pizza were wine not claimed so vigorously, as Barthes reminds us, by the French). Chianti, further, is “the archetypal Italian wine,” nearly as fundamentally Italian as the pizza and pasta Parviz despises.⁶² Of a friend, Parviz says, “I know him like I know the taste of Chianti and of ghormeh sabzi,” a typical Persian herb stew.⁶³ The juxtaposition suggests an equality: Parviz knows the food of the land from which he fled precisely as well as he knows the drink of his adopted country.⁶⁴ Chianti is the balm for Parviz’ exilic misery. Longing to hug and kiss his family, Parviz exclaims, “Only tears and these bottles of Chianti quench the fires of nostalgia. I cry a lot and drink even more in order to forget the misfortunes that have befallen me.”⁶⁵ But Parviz suffers not from nostalgia, but from a condition resembling Freudian melancholia, the pathological persistence of love for a lost object that has somehow become identified with the self.⁶⁶ As ever, Parviz’ friend, Amedeo, sees Parviz more clearly than Parviz sees himself:

I think that Parviz is afraid of forgetting Iranian cuisine if he studies Italian cooking. It is the only explanation for his hatred of pizza in particular and for

⁶² Roden 1990, 127.

⁶³ Ibid., 26. “Io lo conosco come conosco il sapore del Chianti e del ghormeh sabzi.”

⁶⁴ In another sense, wine is at least as Iranian as it is Italian – the grape is native to the Near East, and wine was produced in Persia long before it came to Italy.

⁶⁵ Lakhous, 19. “Solo le lacrime e queste bottiglie di Chianti spengono il fuoco della nostalgia.”

⁶⁶ Freud 1953.

pasta in general. . . . Parviz is convinced of the impossibility of bringing Persian and Italian food into peaceful coexistence. For him, Iranian cuisine, with its spices and its smells, is what remains of his memory. Rather, it is memory, nostalgia, and the smell of his loved ones all mixed together. This cuisine is the thread that ties him to Shiraz, which he has never left. Parviz is odd, he does not live in Rome but in Shiraz! And why, therefore, do we ask him to learn the Italian language and Italian cooking? Do people speak Italian in Shiraz? Do they eat pizza, spaghetti, fettuccini, lasagna, ravioli, tortellini, parmigiana in Shiraz?⁶⁷

Cooking Persian cuisine allows Parviz to find stability within his living memory – Parviz is, in a sense, living not in Rome but in Shiraz, in his own past. Wine functions in an apparently opposite fashion, as a means of forgetting both the past and the pain of the present. But this kind of forgetting, in its neurotic repetition, continually calls attention to the very memories Parviz wants to avoid. From the moment he steps away from the kitchen, his memories of Iran require the Italian agent of Chianti to be survived, until the next time Amedeo calls him to cook a Persian feast.

Ful, Revisited

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34-5. “Credo che Parviz abbia paura di dimenticare la cucina iraniana se impara quella italiana. È l’unica spiegazione al suo odio per la pizza in particolare e per la pasta in generale. . . . Parviz è convinto dell’impossibilità di farle convivere pacificamente. Per lui la cucina iraniana con le sue spezie e i suoi odori è ciò che rimane della sua memoria. Anzi, è la memoria, la nostalgia e l’odore dei suoi cari tutti insieme. Questa cucina è il filo che lo lega a Shiraz, che non ha mai lasciato. È strano Parviz, non vive a Roma ma a Shiraz! Allora perché lo costringiamo a imparare l’italiano e a cucinare all’italiana? La gente parla l’italiano a Shiraz? Si mangiano pizza, spaghetti, fettuccine, lasagne, ravioli, tortellini, la parmigiana a Shiraz?”

The capacity to dissociate from one's present circumstances fortifies diasporic memory. Roden's cookbooks and dinner parties and Parviz' kitchen trances and alcoholic stupors are ways of refusing to let the past pass, of bringing it forcefully into the present via the generative power of memory. A quarter-century ago, in the inaugural issue of the *Diaspora* journal, William Safran presented a definition of diaspora that remains powerfully relevant to the present discussion of food and memory. He enumerates six key features of diasporic consciousness. The third of these criteria reads, "they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it." The fourth adds, "they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate."⁶⁸ Kamāl Raḥīm's 2008 Egyptian novel *Ayyām al-shitāt (Days in the Diaspora)* explores these two feelings, which we have already seen expressed in a briefer form via Parviz' testimony from *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*: alienation from the adopted country and longing to return to the homeland. But where Parviz' return is clearly an impossible dream, *Days in the Diaspora* treats return as a real and eternally tempting possibility.

Food is not as central to *Days in the Diaspora* as it is to the other narratives in this chapter. I have chosen to include it here nevertheless in order to highlight the ways in which even in a narrative that is primarily concerned with other matters, food, due to its intimate connection with memory, remains a powerful indicator of nostalgic affect. In this text, as in my other primary sources, food is a way of keeping the past alive. *Days in the Diaspora* is the second book in a trilogy about the life of Galal, an Egyptian of mixed Muslim and Jewish heritage, who moves from Cairo to Paris and back during the second half of the twentieth

⁶⁸ Safran, 83-4.

century. The novel begins in the late 1960s with the narrator, Galal, sitting in a Paris airport waiting for a flight to Cairo. He resents having been taken to France by his mother against his will, and has made plans to flee back to his beloved home. Raised in Egypt by his Jewish mother and her family, he is himself an observant Muslim, following the religion of his father, who died before Galal was born. While his mother's family relocated to Paris and Haifa, his paternal relatives demanded that Galal remain in Egypt. Galal and his mother lived in Cairo until he reached the age of majority (a time span covered in the trilogy's first volume), at which time she brought him to France against his will. Galal immediately longs for Egypt, and decides in secret to return there.

As the novel opens, Galal, having stolen away from his mother and grandparents, is waiting in the airport for a flight to Egypt. And yet, when they call his name for boarding he remains frozen in his seat. "Having seen me this morning, determined to leave, one would never guess I was now this rag lying on a chair in the corner of the airport. I transformed in the blink of an eye, so fast I questioned myself, and felt that my resolve to return to my country was not as strong as I thought. As if there were a part of me that, from the beginning, refused to leave."⁶⁹ Symmetrically, the novel ends with another airport scene: Years later, after twice being married and witnessing the deaths of many of his loved ones, Galal finally departs Paris and gets on a plane to Cairo. Is return, then, a possibility? *Days in the Diaspora* is a story about being caught in between two options. If, as Safran tells us, diasporic consciousness is all about the desire to

⁶⁹ Raḥīm, 14-5.

"من يراني هذا الصباح وأنا مصر على الرحيل لا يقول أبداً إنني هذه الخرقاة الملقاة الآن على مقعد بأحد أركان المطار! تبدلت من حال إلى حال في غمضة عين، حتى إنني تشككت في نفسي وأحسست بأن عزمي على الرجوع الي بلدي لم يكن أكيدا كما ظننت! وكان جزءاً مني ومنذ البداية كان رافضاً الرحيل!"

return to the former homeland, why does Galal remain in France for so many years before finally, at the novel's end, boarding a flight back to Egypt?

In spite of his discontent, Galal owns an attraction to France that began in his youth. "I was fascinated by it when I was small, and I wandered through what I read on the tongues of characters in books: Madame Cosette, Jean Valjean, Esmeralda, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Quasimodo, the poor hunchback . . . I memorized their words, and added to them from my imagination or subtracted . . . and I wandered."⁷⁰ These rather tortured literary models are sadly actualized during Galal's time in France. He rejects his first wife on discovering that she is not a virgin, his second wife dies of a chronic illness soon after they marry, and he becomes bitterly estranged from his mother. His Paris is romantic in the darkest sense, full of tragedy and ennui. In other ways, though, Galal seems to do quite well even in the gloom of his diaspora. He finds work as a low-level clerk in a ritzy clothing shop, and soon enters into a partnership with an older Lebanese man with whom he builds a successful business selling slightly outmoded clothing – especially lingerie – at an outrageous markup to rich Arab tourists from the Gulf countries. He even finds a father figure in Sheikh Munji, a Tunisian butcher who lives in his apartment building and is the father of Galal's second wife.

But the nature of the ties that bind Galal to Paris already begins to indicate the strict limits on his assimilation in France. Everywhere he goes, everyone he meets is Arab. Galal, describing his grandparents' sense of alienation, seems unaware that his words are equally applicable to his own mode of being in France: "My grandfather and grandmother did not, in their daily lives, belong to the people of Paris, or even hear about Paris except in news

⁷⁰ Ibid., 95.

"كنت مفتونا بها وأنا صغير، وأهيم فيما كنت أقرؤه على السنة شخص الروايات: مدام كوزيت، وجان فالجان، وأزميرالدا، وسيرانو دي برجرالك، وكوازيمودو الأحذب المسكين .. كنت أحفظ كلامهم، وأضيف عنه من خيالي وأنتقص .. وأهيم."

programs.”⁷¹ And at his second wedding, Galal observes, “Matters proceeded as if we were in Egypt or Tunisia. Arabs are the same everywhere.”⁷² *Days in the Diaspora* demonstrates how all encompassing the diasporic social world can be; we meet Arabs from all over the Arab world, but there is not a single French character in the text. At a party for Egyptian Jews, Galal remarks, “They were not affected by the life they lived here,”⁷³ but instead continued to behave exactly as they had in Egypt. “Egypt was, for them, like paradise lost. They had no connection to the world in which they lived now; it was foreign to them and they to it. [...] They no longer had anything but Egypt . . . she was consolation and longing.”⁷⁴

Galal is similarly resistant to France’s influence. His first wife, Rachel, is “surprised and angry” that Galal cares about her virginity. “She could not credit that I, having lived all these years in Paris, paid any mind to a matter like this.”⁷⁵ In an early scene in the novel, Galal, having thought of Rachel as completely assimilated to French culture, is astonished by her admission that she adores classic Egyptian films, and watches them several times a week. Galal takes this as evidence of Rachel’s deeply Egyptian nature, to which she remains entirely faithful in spite of her apparent Francophilia. Upon his rejection of her on their wedding night it becomes clear that in *Days in the Diaspora* one cannot have it both ways: you must be either Egyptian or French, never both.

⁷¹ Ibid., 10.

"جدي وجدتي لم يكونا يوما من أهل باريس أو حتى سمعا بها إلا في نشرات الأخبار."

⁷² Ibid., 275.

"جرت الأمور كما لو كنا في مصر أو تونس، فالعرب أمر واحد في كل مكان.."

⁷³ Ibid., 137.

"لم تؤثر فيهم الحياة التي عاشوها هنا .."

⁷⁴ Ibid., 139.

"كانت مصر بالنسبة لهم أشبه بالفردوس المفقود .. [...] لم يعد لهم إلا هي .. هي السلوى، والحنين."

⁷⁵ Ibid., 213.

"كانها دهشة غاضبة [...] غير مصدقة أنني الذي عشت كل هذه السنين في باريس أعير بالا لأمر كهذا."

The drawing of this inviolable line brings us at last to the role of food in the novel. Our introduction to Sheikh Munji, Galal's father figure and the moral center of *Days in the Diaspora*, occurs in the sheikh's butcher shop. A poor customer, well known to the sheikh, is begging for meat for escalopes, a finer cut than he can afford. After protracted negotiations, the sheikh erupts,

What escalopes, you insignificant man? You should be ashamed of yourself, God curse you and your like. What do you have to do with escalopes, you uncultured man? That's the food of the French, with their sensitive stomachs. You're Algerian, your ancestors lived in the Aurès Mountains and ate raw meat! But you, in coming here you forgot yourselves in this broken country.⁷⁶

There is certainly an element of class disdain in this harangue – one senses the sheikh would not have refused escalopes to an Arab customer who could pay – yet there is also a clear sense that to be Algerian and to be French are mutually exclusive. In becoming French, the sheikh states, the poor Algerian has both forgotten and lessened himself. Alongside this Algerian/French distinction, Sheikh Munji alludes to a strength differential between the weakness of the French and the animal power of Algerian mountain-dwellers. Rooting this difference in Algerians' consumption of raw, not cooked, meat directly evokes Lévi-Strauss' classic distinction between the "raw" and the "cooked." In Lévi-Strauss' formulation, cooking is what initially separates man from animal, which in this context would seem to indicate a crude, even barbarian aspect to the Algerian.⁷⁷ Far from degrading him, though, this animality lends him greater power than that

⁷⁶ Ibid., 42.

"بوفتيك أيش يا وخبص! (يا تافه!) تحشم على روحك لعنة الله عليك وعلى امثالك. أيش دخلك في البوفتيك يا عديم الأدب! هاذا أكل الفرنسيين (الفرنسيين) اللي كروشهم ديلكاتو (رقيقة). أنت ديزيري (جزائري) جدودك عاشوا في جبال الأوراس وأكلوا اللحم نيئ! وانتم من جيتم لهنا تنسونتم في ها البلاد البيطة (البايطة)."

⁷⁷ Lévi-Strauss 1975, 83.

possessed by the French, who have been weakened by their contrasting humanity. In his comparison between the Ge and Tupi tribes, Lévi-Strauss also finds that the categories of “raw” and “cooked” are, in themselves, culturally constituted, as is the idea of a binary split between them.⁷⁸ The sheikh, whose role as provider of meat gives him moral authority on the matter, registers his Algerian customer as simultaneously a crude, degraded animal, and a powerful man who has forgotten himself absent the raw source of his power. Eating French food – “cooked” food – does not make the Algerian French, it only makes him less of a man.

In a rare moment of consideration for the French perspective, the novel mirrors Sheikh Munji’s tirade with one delivered by Brigitte Bardot in her role as an animal rights activist. Galal watches an interview with her on television:

She was enraged, gesticulating with her hands, denouncing the unmerciful slaughter methods used by Muslims for the Eid sacrifices. . . . “What are these barbarians doing? What is this cruelty and flagrant violation of animal rights? . . . Are they not ashamed of what they’re doing?” The villainous director of the program inserted scenes from Egypt and Algeria and Pakistan and some of the Gulf countries, showing people with knives in their hands butchering sheep and goats in front of houses and on the stairs of buildings and out in the open. Men, women, and small children gathered round in circles, watching. The cameras focused on their eyes with dilating pupils, and penetrated into the necks of the sheep at the moment of slaughter. Some of the watchers turned their heads or bit their lips or stamped the ground with their feet in joy or maybe pity, and some

⁷⁸ Ibid., 143.

raced towards the blood and smeared their palms in it to print on walls and doors.

...⁷⁹

Incensed at the display, Galal's grandfather shouts, "Fine, these children of dogs spread their workers around the world like angels and show us what we need, they should also talk about what they were doing once upon a time in Algeria!"⁸⁰ Bardot's criticism of Islamic ritual slaughter subverts the Sheikh's observations about the degraded humanity of the French. The very qualities that lent the Algerian man strength before he softened in France are what make Muslims, in Bardot's eyes, subhuman.⁸¹ But Galal's grandfather quickly points to the hypocrisy in a French report about the barbarity of Muslim practice. Where is the outrage about the abuses carried out under the French colonial regime? How dare the French criticize Muslim treatment of animals when French forces so often treated colonized North Africans with equal cruelty? The split between these perspectives signals a fundamental disagreement about what qualifies a practice as human. What remains is a sense of mutual rejection, and of the basic incompatibility of French and Muslim or French and Arab perspectives.

Galal's uncle, speaking about the longing of the Egyptian Jewish community to return to Egypt, uses food to express a similar distinction between Arab diasporas and their French hosts:

⁷⁹ Ibid., 241-2.

"كانت ساخطة وتشيح بيدها مستنكرة عمليات الذبح غير الرحيمة التي يقوم بها المسلمون للأضاحي في الأعياد. [...] «ما هذا الذي يفعله هؤلاء البرابرة! ما هذه القسوة والهمجية والانتهاك الفاضح لحقوق الحيوان! [...] ألا يخجلون مما يفعلون...» ومخرج البرنامج اللئيم يأتي بمشاهد من مصر والجزائر وباكستان وبعض بلدان الخليج، لأنسان في أيديهم السكاكين ويذبحون الخراف والماعز أمام البيوت وعلى سلالم العمارات وفي الخلاء، ورجال ونساء وأولاد صغار يتحلقون في دوائر بتابعون، وتركز عدسات التصوير على أعينهم التي اتسعت حدقاتها وتوغلت في رقاب الخراف ساعة الذبح، ومنهم من يميل برأسه أو يعض على شفته أو يضرب الأرض بقدمه مبتهجا أو ربما شفقة، والذين يتسابقون نحو الدماء يغمسون أكفهم فيها ويطبعونها على الجدران والأبواب [...]"

⁸⁰ Ibid., 242.

"طيب زي ما ولاد الكلب دول عاملين نفسهم ملايكة وبيعرضوا علينا الحاجات دي، ما كان يتكلموا برضه ويقولوا على اللي كانوا بيعملوه في الجزائر زمان!"

⁸¹ Bardot continues to this day to advocate against both Muslim and Jewish ritual slaughter.

“[Arab exiles] don’t want croissants or pâté, or *bonjour* or hello or *pardon*! They say, ‘for us koshary and white cheese and simit and *’ahlan ya hagg* and *izayak ya bey* are enough.’”⁸² The structure of these phrases indicates that this is an either/or choice. To desire both croissants and simit is inconceivable. Galal’s uncle continues, “Yes, they’d return! They’re ready today, before tomorrow, and myself the first of them! Even having French citizenship, they would be liars, anyone who says I’m at peace and living among my family and my people! My language is not their language, their nature is not my nature, and my way of living isn’t theirs.”⁸³ Anthropologist Gerald Mars and historian Valerie Mars have suggested that, “Knowledge of a cuisine and its structure is like knowledge of a language.”⁸⁴ Galal’s uncle collapses the simile: what “they” do not want is both French food and the French language; indeed, it is French culture in any guise. What they do want is Egyptian food and the familiar terms of Egyptian Arabic. In another scene, hearing a few words of Egyptian Arabic is enough to transport Galal deep within his memories of Egypt. In Paris, the family has grown accustomed to addressing one another in the French way. In a moment of pathos, Galal’s grandfather calls his mother in the Egyptian manner, “Umm Galal.” The effect is instantaneous: “When my grandfather called her by her old name, Umm Galal, he brought me back to Daher in the blink of an eye, and I thought of my second mother, Umm Hassan, and the times she would come to us in her house robe and invite us to iftar . . . and when she would come over carrying Eid cookies . . .”⁸⁵ Language inspires memory, and memory

⁸² Raḥīm, 60. *’Ahlan ya hagg* and *izayak ya bey* both be translated, loosely, as “hello, sir.”
 "لا هم عايزين الكرواسون والباتيه وبنجور وهالو ويردون! بيقولوا كفاية علينا الكشري والجينة البيضاء والسميط وأهلا يا حاج وإزيك يا بيه.

⁸³ Raḥīm, 61.
 "أيوه يرجعوا! يستعدين يعملوها النهارده قبل بكرة وأنا أولهم! معايا الجنسية الفرنسية أه. لكن كذاب اللي يقول إني مطمئن وعائش بين أهلي وناسي! لا لغتي لغتهم ولا طبعهم طبعي ولا عيشتي عيشتهم!"

⁸⁴ Mars and Mars, 57.

⁸⁵ Raḥīm, 76.

turns to food. More than merely eating the foods of memory, as Roden and Parviz do, Galal's memory itself is here constituted through the links between food, language, and the past.

Multiple memories of food revolve around Umm Hassan. Near the end of Eid al-Adha one year, Galal confronts a craving for "boiled meat (and fattah with vinegar and garlic). I used to spend all the holidays at Umm Hassan's, Eid al-Adha in particular. Hassan and I would pull the sheep by the collar on its neck . . . and stand nearly on top of the butcher to share in the slicing of the meat."⁸⁶ Galal offers a different reading of the sacrifices that so incense Bardot. The cyclical calendar of Islam reifies Galal's longing for Cairo every year as the same holidays recur. When one of Galal's employees goes to Egypt for a visit, he returns with a bag of food packed for Galal by his "second mother." Unpacking the bag, Galal's grandfather repeats the sentiments expressed above, we want *this*, Egyptian, food, not *that*, French, food. "We emptied Umm Hassan's bag of its contents. A goose and several pairs of pigeons, dried okra linked on a string, and two cow's hooves. My grandfather sorted these things next to one another joyfully, and said, 'That's food that restores the body! That's what's good! Not cheddar cheese, smoked meat, hot dogs, and the bland sustenance that overflows here.'"⁸⁷ This echoes Sheikh Munji's

"عندما ناداها جدي باسمها القديم (أم جلال) أعادني إلى حي الظاهر في طرفة عين، وأنتت على بالي أمي الثانية (أم حسن) عندما كانت تأتي لنا بثياب البيت وتدعونا إلى الإفطار [...] وعندما تدخل علينا حاملة كعك العيد.."

Daher is the name of a neighborhood in downtown Cairo. Iftar is the meal which breaks the fast each day of Ramadan. "Eid cookies" are traditional celebratory sweets, often filled with dates, walnuts, or pistachios.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 175. *Fattah* is known in various guises throughout the Levant. In Egypt, it usually consists of stale bread or flatbread topped with rice and meat.

"اللحم المسلووق (و الفتة بالخل والثوم)، كنت أقضي الأعياد كلها لدى أم حسن. عيد الأضحى بالذات. أنا وحسن اللذان نشد الخروف من الطوق الذي في عنقه [...] ونقف على رأس القصاب ونشارك في تقطيع اللحم [...]"

⁸⁷ Ibid., 299. Although Galal's grandfather's point is clear, one cannot help but wonder where Galal and his family have been shopping and dining that their idea of French food prominently includes cheddar cheese and hot dogs. At the risk of oversimplifying, my suspicion is that these foods are intended signal a generic "western-ness" to Raḥīm's Egyptian audience. One could also argue that the non-French-ness of these foods is an indicator of how limited the family's engagement with France has actually been.

criticism of his Algerian customer: Arab food gives you strength; French food makes you weak. And when Galal finally makes up his mind to return to Cairo at the end of the novel, he begins his description of his desire for the “old world,” with a plea for tea and *koshary*, the classic Egyptian street food.⁸⁸ Food makes up the context of his past. There is something about food that resists change; it furnishes memories Galal can cling to even as he is forced to come to grips with the fact that the Cairo he will return to will not be precisely the Cairo of his memories. When his employee goes to Cairo, Galal gives him a long and detailed list of places to see and people to visit during his trip. Galal is perturbed when the man returns and tells Galal that he could not find everything on Galal’s list. “He hurt me when he said that he did not find any trace of ‘Am Abu Leahf’s store. Instead, he found a store for buying videotapes . . . Similarly, he did not find the tram station. They had removed it from the face of the earth.” Surprised by the changes in his neighborhood, Galal reflects, “I remained distracted while driving home, as if the Abbasiya tram that had died was a relative.”⁸⁹ Even if return is possible, the place to which you return can never be exactly the same as it is in memory. Or, as Heraclitus has it, “You cannot go into the same water twice.”⁹⁰

Faced with evidence that the physical landscape of Cairo has changed, Galal can hold on to the culinary as a way of maintaining the illusion that the present will always resemble the past.

"أفرغنا حقيبة أم خسن من محتوياتها.. إوزة و عدة أزواج من الحمام، و ثمار بامية مجففة موصولة بخيوط، و كار عين من الكندوز. جدي يرص هذه الأشياء إلى جوار بعضها فرحا، و يقول: «أدي الأكل اللي يرم البدن! أدي الخير! مش الجبنة الشيدر و اللحم المدخن و الهوت دوج و الحاجات اللي ينطفحها هنا!»"

⁸⁸ Ibid., 385.

"و واحد شاي يا عم لبيب «بس يكون كشري و على مية بيضة».."

⁸⁹ Ibid., 293.

"أنه ألمني عندما قال: إنه لم يعثر لمحل عم أبو لحاف على أي أثر، وإنه وجد بدلا منه محلا لبيع شرائط الفيديو . . . كما لم يجد محطة الترام. أزالوها من على وجه الأرض. . . ظللت شاردا و أنا أقود السيارة إلى البيت، و كأن ترام العباسية الذي مات أحد أقاربي . . ."

⁹⁰ Plato, 89.

Food memories tend towards stasis; cuisine, like language, evolves slowly, and the foods of childhood maintain their flavor in adulthood. This is precisely why Proustian recollection works: what you taste now *is* what you tasted then. After Galal separates from Rachel, he sinks into a depression which is only alleviated by food. “[My grandfather] prepared a plate of *ful medames* with flaxseed oil, and entered carrying a tray with the plate, and beside it a bowl filled with pickles. . . . It was as if with dish of *ful* with its flaxseed oil was the antidote, for I began to emerge from the depression that surrounded me.”⁹¹ If Galal’s marriage to Rachel is the moment of crisis in which assimilation into France and resistance to it confront one another, then *ful medames*, one of the most quintessentially Egyptian dishes and a major part of Galal’s childhood, is what restores Galal to equilibrium after the shock. The *ful* recalls him to himself; through food he is able to reconnect with what Rachel disrupted, his image of himself as Egyptian, not French – with, as always, the attendant impossibility that one can be both. Considering this episode in relation to Claudia Roden’s use of food to reinforce memory reveals the link between food and nostalgia. It is clear that *ful* could rightly be considered a totem food of Egypt, but it also seems that the most powerful experiences of eating *ful* occur in circumstances of temporal and spatial displacement. *Ful*, and perhaps any totem food, achieves its greatest potency in exile. Food resists the passing of time, and when it is geographically displaced from sites of memory it becomes a way of summoning, à la Proust’s chance encounter with the madeleine, entire memorial worlds.

⁹¹ Rahīm, 216.

"يتهمك في إعداد طبق من الفول المدمس بالزيت الحار، ويدخل عليّ حاملاً صينية عليها الطبق وإلى جانبه سلطانية مليئة بالمخلل . . . وكان طبق الفول هذا بزيتته الحار هو الترياق.. إذ بدأت أنسل من الكأبة التي تطوقني"

The possibility of returning to the past, or, as Svetlana Boym puts it, “to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition,”⁹² offers a powerful seduction. “Nostalgia,” Boym writes, “is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”⁹³ Through remembering, something enjoyable and precious emerges through the pain of exile, offering Galal a bittersweet satisfaction. Nostalgia’s romance echoes Galal’s romantic literary introduction to the city of Paris via Cyrano de Bergerac and Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The juxtaposition of pleasure and pain in memory and remembering is irresistible. At the beginning of this section I posed a question: Why does Galal stay in France for so long before following through on his intention to return to Cairo? The familiar ache of nostalgia nourishes the exile’s soul. Return opens the possibility of new agonies upon confrontation with the reality of change. If Galal was wounded by hearing from his employee that Daher’s beloved streetscape had changed, the pain of witnessing with his own eyes the new shape of his neighborhood would be all the greater. Living in memory does not precisely offer contentment, but it furnishes a surer satisfaction than the possible wounds of return. In Paris, *ful medames* can be relied on to soothe memory’s ache.

*

The first two sections of this chapter illustrate a dichotomy between Proust’s and Roden’s relationships with memory. For the former, food triggers the past’s involuntary return; for the

⁹² Boym, xv.

⁹³ Boym, xii.

latter, food is a tool for the deliberate memory-work required to keep the past alive in the present. The diachronicity suggested in Roden's cookbook – the possibility of making the past live in the present – is challenged by Parviz' attempts to forget in *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. Parviz is caught in a feedback loop of forgetfulness and recollection, as the wine he uses to forget his exile continually calls attention to its ongoing pain. *Days in the Diaspora* explores what happens to exilic memory when there is a real possibility of return. Even while food provides so strong link with the past as to erase the distance between it and the present, Galal is made to confront hard physical evidence of change over time, which belies the nostalgic's dream of pure return.

Aside from Proust, the figures discussed in this chapter attempt to use food to figure an instantiate encounter with memory that acts out Pierre Nora's assertion, "Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present."⁹⁴ Yet these narratives share with Proust an understanding of eating as an act that involves both body and mind. Recalling Proust's narrator's physical shudder and the sense of something rising within his body, we may describe memory, like eating, as an embodied experience. The relationship between food and memory is thus unavoidably sacramental and covenantal. Eating the foods of memory is a way of ingesting that which is not present, yet most powerful. The ritualized repetition of this act represents a pact with the past, a kind of promise to not forget, and a way of paying fealty to the memory itself as a source of selfhood. The following chapter will address the opposite phenomenon, as I examine texts in which migrating characters use food to take on new identities in their new homelands.

⁹⁴ Nora, 146.

CHAPTER III

Eating to Become

If a migrant or traveler can use the foods of memory to maintain an active link with the past, it follows that she may also use the foods of her new homeland to anchor herself in the present or pull herself into the future. In the pages that follow, I explore migration stories that at first appear much like those I addressed in the previous chapter. In these narratives, however, the travelers in question dissociate from, rather than cling to, the past. I argue that they use the foods of their new homelands in a zero-sum game of selfhood, deliberately attempting to erase their former selves as they create new identities. These characters instrumentalize food in the construction of new lives via intimate and personal processes of identification: active endeavors to remake themselves in, and in the image of, their new homelands. From their negotiations with home and homeland we can extrapolate patterns of identification that suggest a narrative arc held in common among those who eat to become other. This process of identification lays bare the fault lines at the migrant's core.

I begin with a discussion of much-debated theories of “identity” and “identification” and their application to migrants, and then turn to my primary sources: Luca Guadagnino's dreamy 2009 film, *Io sono l'amore (I Am Love)*, and Amara Lakhous' 2006 novel of immigrants in Rome, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio (Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio)*. Though the latter was addressed at some length in the previous chapter, at this juncture I take up the perspective of a different character from the novel, whose

relationship with food suggests a new reading of the loneliness of migration. Following a detailed analysis of these works, I examine how their insistence on the present operates as a counter-narrative to common tropes that suggest that immigration and assimilation are dialectically worked out via the encounter of two cultures awaiting synthesis in the warm contexts of family and community.

“Identity” and “Identification”

In 2000, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper declared the term “identity” to be overloaded with meaning and consequently vacuous, irrelevant to continuing critical discourse. In their landmark article, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” Brubaker and Cooper argued persuasively that “the prevailing constructivist stance on identity – the attempt to ‘soften’ the term, to acquit it of the charge of ‘essentialism’ by stipulating that identities are constructed, fluid, and multiple – leaves us without a rationale for talking about ‘identities’ at all.”¹ After briefly reviewing the history of “identity” and its use in the social sciences, Brubaker and Cooper conclude:

If one wants to examine the meanings and significance people give to constructs such as ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘nationality,’ one already has to thread through conceptual thickets, and it is not clear what one gains by aggregating them under the flattening rubric of identity. And if one wants to convey the late modern sense of a self being constructed and continuously reconstructed out of a variety of competing discourses – and remaining fragile, fluctuating, and fragmented – it is not obvious why the word identity captures the meaning being conveyed.²

¹ Brubaker and Cooper, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

In “identity’s” stead, Brubaker and Cooper propose a set of more specific terms, grouped under three governing ideas: identification, self-understanding, and commonality. The first of these, identification, acknowledges that while a thing called “identity” may not be “intrinsic to social life,” the act of applying labels – to oneself or others, in a variety of situations and contexts – is.³ The second, self-understanding, refers, broadly, to “one’s sense of who one is,” while the third and final term, commonality (along with its complement, connectedness), suggests the possibility of belonging to a group.⁴ In effect, Brubaker and Cooper’s scheme breaks the too-general term “identity” into its constituent parts – the fluctuating personal, social, and processual contingencies that make “identity” such an unwieldy concept to work with. What Brubaker and Cooper intend is not to devalue the various things to which the term “identity” has referred, but rather to propose more precise language for continuing to discuss many of the same issues they find muddled when lumped together under a single lexical umbrella.

If “identity” can be broken down, as it were, into identification, self-understanding, and connectedness, does that mean “identity” does, in fact, exist, via the mathematical addition of its three components? And if “identity” does not exist, what are we to make of the obvious complementarity of these three terms? The reach for greater clarity and precision is worthwhile, but in attempting to split the weighty term “identity” into its components, Brubaker and Cooper call attention to the overlaps between the very categories they suggest. Identification, self-understanding, and commonality are mutually dependent, and it is not clear that considering each independently of the others effectively increases our understanding of any one of them. Self-understanding seems to be meaningless absent consideration of communal ties; identification

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Ibid., 17, 20.

always refers back to self-understanding and commonality. If “identity” is overly saddled with meaning, identification, self-understanding, and commonality each seem, on their own, to not mean enough. “Identity” may indeed be a weak concept, meaning too much to effectively mean anything at all, but we still must grapple with the conceptual overlaps that led to such generalizing language. We await an effective way of speaking about the dynamics of the interactions between these three elements – without, of course, resorting to the discredited language of “identity” itself.

Margaret Somers, attempting to recover some usefulness from the concept of “identity” in the years before Brubaker and Cooper finally dismissed it, posited the narrative construction of identity. Building on the idea that people pervasively narrativize their own lives – that is, understand the events that occur in their lives as inherently storied – she argues that juxtaposing narrative with identity creates a “processual and relational” concept of identity which “embeds the actor within relationships and stories.”⁵ Somers’ argument works by way of simile; she suggests that identity is, *like* narrative, influenced by particular, shifting conditions of time and space. She believes that a proper understanding of a person as a social actor must rest on how labels pertain to that person in the contexts of a variety of “relationships and stories.”⁶ A whole array of identities might be more or less salient in any number of different situations, at different times in that person’s past. Somers therefore maintains, “Narrative *location* [in time and space] endows social actors with identities – however multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral, or conflicting they may be.”⁷ This last, though, is precisely the problem Brubaker and Cooper point to when they consider Somers’ analysis: if identity is always multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral, and

⁵ Somers, 621.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 618.

conflicting, what is the use of such a weak concept in the first place?⁸ Somers' idea of narrative identity still tends to demand an array of fixed "identity" objects that are somehow discoverable.

Reconsidered in light of Brubaker and Cooper's tripartite scheme, however, Somers' narrative theory of identity produces a powerful critical tool. In particular, Brubaker and Cooper's concept of "identification" as the act of applying labels dovetails neatly with Somers' equally action-oriented understanding of identity-as-narrative. The union between these theorists' work entails conceiving of "identification" as an incompletable process, not a finite action. Under this rubric, identification is a slow groping forward with a continually deferred expectation of resolution or conclusion. Identification is the unfolding story of how we acquire the labels that inevitably mark us, in spite of our vital resistance to the elisions such labels entail. I suggest conceiving of "identity" as the entire story of a life, refigured as an unreachable object, and "identification" as the ongoing act of telling that story. Under this framework it becomes possible to examine the highly individual processes of identification at the heart of each migrant's story, in the context of, but not limited to, the communities to which any migrant belongs. Per Brubaker's own critique in "Identity Without Groups," such a strategy avoids the conveniences of labeling by ethnicity and the flattening formulations of "groupism," instead honoring the particularity of each experience.⁹ The crux of this understanding of identification is the idea of storytelling. Narrative identification is an active, ongoing process, awaiting neither certitude nor finitude.

The utility of this perspective comes into relief when we consider the situation of the migrant *who is becoming* other. Her self-understanding is not a fixed object – fluctuating even

⁸ Brubaker and Cooper, 12.

⁹ See Brubaker, 2002, esp. pp. 164-7.

among the labels of migrant, exile, and the myriad other categories of the displaced – but a moving target, an ill-defined area somewhere along a spectrum between the old homeland and the new. Similarly, her sense of connectedness wavers between the imagined community of her birth nation and that of her adopted country, with the possibility of attachment to an expatriate community of her former countrymen in her new home adding a complicating vector. As Iain Chambers evocatively writes, “[the migrant] carries borders within herself.”¹⁰ These borders are, equally, fault lines, sites of possible breakage in the narrative of her identification. These fractures are the site of my engagement in this chapter. The two stories of identification I examine – *I Am Love* and *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* – are about the attempted erasure of the old self in order to create the new. This kind of erasure ruptures and remakes the narrative of a life, and simultaneously calls attention to the incompleteness of such narratives. What remains are unhealed wounds in these migrants’ stories.

Insalata Russa

Luca Guadagnino’s 2009 film *I Am Love* tells the story of Emma Recchi, the Russian wife of a Milanese textiles heir, as she, middle-aged with three grown children, tears apart the fabric of her life, falling from a vague restlessness into a torrid affair, and thence into a sort of emotional catatonia from which she finally emerges reborn.¹¹ This inverted marriage plot finds Emma involved with a chef named Antonio, a friend of her oldest child, Edoardo. Her first, brief sight of Antonio is when he stops by the Recchis’ urban manor in the middle of a dinner party to drop off a cake for Edoardo. She greets him distractedly, uninterested until their second meeting,

¹⁰ Chambers, 7.

¹¹ There are vague echoes here of another restless and adulterous Emma, the titular character of *Madame Bovary*.

weeks later, at Edoardo's birthday party, when she tastes the food Antonio has prepared for the celebration. Emma enters her apparently empty kitchen, gazing hungrily at a table loaded with antipasti. A charmed smile comes over her face, and only then does she look up and see Antonio, wielding a torch over a dish at the far end of the kitchen. Edoardo enters, and he and Antonio invite Emma first to try out the kitchen torch, and then to taste the *insalata russa* Antonio has prepared.¹² Emma spends the night of Edoardo's birthday party upstairs, away from the noise and festivities of Edoardo's friends. She briefly falls asleep and, perhaps inspired by Antonio's salad, dreams of Russia, first of brown streets and onion domes and an urban tram, and then, suddenly, a vivid image of her hands cupped around a mound of freshly picked berries, their juices dripping bloodily from her fingers. Edo has to call her back to reality, bidding her goodnight as he goes to join his friends downstairs. Later in the evening, Antonio thoughtfully sends up a special plate for Emma's dinner. Her attraction to him is born with the sight of his food and its evocation of her origins, and then transferred to his person.

By day Antonio works in his father's restaurant, but he dreams of opening his own place on a rustic mountain farm outside Sanremo. Serving Edoardo a simple dish of eggplant and elderflower extract, he explains, "People have to climb up to try my dishes. The essence of flavors. Simple. Like here."¹³ The exertion of that climb refigures food as a reward, rather than a necessity, something one must prove oneself worthy of. Purity of flavor is a privilege attained by those committed enough to make the arduous trip. When Emma meets Antonio for the third time, it is at his father's restaurant, where she is dining with her mother-in-law and future daughter-in-law, Edoardo's fiancée. Antonio apparently has control of the kitchen this day, and the dishes he

¹² An *insalata russa* mainly consists of vegetables dressed with mayonnaise.

¹³ "La gente deve arrampicarsi a provare i miei piatti. L'essenza di sapori. Semplice. Come qui." Elderflower extract is sometimes used in Alpine cuisine.

presents affect Emma deeply. As she takes her first bite, the restaurant lights dim and a spotlight shines bright on her plate. The camera zooms in on her features, first lips, then dilating pupils, the curve of her ear, her closed eyes. When she returns to herself she looks down at her plate astonished by the carnage she has wrought upon it. Immediately after departing the restaurant she turns and rushes back, catching Antonio outside the kitchen to offer her compliments, to which he responds with a tacit invitation. “I grow the vegetables myself,” he tells her. “Really, where?” “In Sanremo, near Sanremo in the countryside.”¹⁴ It is not long before Emma, on the pretense of a drive from Milan to Nice to visit her daughter, Elisabetta, finds herself in Sanremo.

Emma’s plan to visit her daughter thinly veils her need to satisfy her own yearnings. Stopping in Sanremo, Emma clearly hopes to come across Antonio, her romantic desire for whom is mixed up with her physical hungers (both culinary and sexual) and her desire to escape the ennui presented by the chilly wealth and status of her household in Milan. Soon after her arrival in Sanremo, a suggestive shot traces the path of Emma’s gaze, panning from the Russiantesque, onion-domed heights of an Orthodox church down to the sight of Antonio walking the streets of Sanremo with a bag overflowing with greens in his hand. Guadagnino renders Emma’s narrative identification immediately legible – she finds herself somewhere on a continuum between Russian and Italian.

After stalking Antonio through the streets of Sanremo, Emma at last bumps into him – a physical collision that takes her breath away – outside a bookstore, whereupon he promptly invites her up to his farm for a look at the site where he hopes to open his dream restaurant. Visually, this flustered encounter is nearly a meet-cute, but the soundtrack layers it with tension

¹⁴ “Le verdure le coltivo io.” “Davvero, dove?” “A Sanremo, vicino Sanremo in la [sic] campagna.”

more evocative of a spy-versus-spy sequence than a romantic comedy, heightened by Emma's darting gaze as she follows Antonio through the city. As Emma and Antonio drive in his pickup truck up the mountain to his farm, Emma's intention to continue on to Nice and visit her daughter has apparently been forgotten. When they arrive at the farm, Antonio tells Emma to feel free to explore; he walks away, and through tree branches we glimpse him stripping and changing into more rugged clothes. Emma alights on a ridge, basking in the sun, and soon the camera loses focus. Antonio's blurry figure approaches, and they kiss. When they have sex it is with a sort of urgent inevitability, without preamble. Emma returns to Milan and locks herself in her bathroom, smiling, covering her face with her hand, laughing to herself, looking with delighted shock at her reflection in the mirror.

The scenes at Antonio's mountain refuge were shot on the farm of a real Sanremo chef, Paolo Masieri, who is the subject of Guadagnino's 2004 documentary, *Cuoco contadino (Farmer Cook)*. Several of the shots in *I Am Love* replicate shots from the documentary. Emma and Antonio arrive at Antonio's farm, accompanied by his golden retriever, exactly as Masieri does with his own dog. Our glimpse, through the trees, of Antonio changing into clothing more suitable for the farm precisely mimics a shot of Masieri in the documentary. And one of the dishes Masieri prepares in *Farmer Cook*, a plate of prawns and vegetables which Guadagnino lavishes with warmly lit close-ups, appears to be almost identical to the dish Emma consumes in Antonio's father's restaurant. By repeating scenes from *Farmer Cook* in *I Am Love*, Guadagnino invites the viewer of *I Am Love* to treat the film's depictions of food as directly sourced from reality, as if we are accessing the truth of Italian food – and *italianità* – through the fictionalized story of a Russian immigrant and the Italian chef who awakens her to Italy's culinary riches.

The secret of Emma's affair is a distorted mirror of the not-quite secret of her heritage, her Russian past which is acknowledged but rarely discussed. On her second visit to Antonio's farm outside Sanremo, Emma begins to tell him about her youth. "Emma," she reveals to him, is not her real name, but rather an Italian replacement bestowed upon her by her husband, Tancredi. Antonio asks her what name she was born with. Incredibly, she claims to have forgotten it. "I no longer know it. At home, everyone called me Kitesh."¹⁵ How can we narrate a life without a name by which to call it? Attempting self-identification, she asks Antonio to say it, "Kitesh," and as he does they fall back into one another's arms. In calling her by her childhood name he accesses a part of her that her husband attempted to supplant. This reach for identity is frustrated by her continued externalization, or deferral, of the power of naming. She is, at this juncture, begging to be identified, asking her lover to reawaken the past that her husband, by giving her the name "Emma," attempted to write over. Yet by asking Antonio to say the name rather than saying it herself, and by stressing that Kitesh was not even her true name, Emma reserves an emptiness at her core, an absence or impossibility of signification. As she tells Antonio about her past the camera leaves them, presenting us instead with images of the lush hills around Sanremo.

¹⁵ "Non lo so più. A casa, mi chiamano tutti Kitesh." "Kitesh" or, properly, "Kitezsh," is the name of a mythical underwater city in central Russia, subject of a Rimsky-Korsakov opera (*The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*), Warner Herzog documentary (*Bells from the Deep*, 1993) and an Anna Akhmatova poem ("The Woman of Kitezsh"). Tilda Swinton, the actress who portrays Emma, details Guadagnino's motivation for choosing the name in an interview: "Kitesh [a variant spelling used in the English subtitled version of the film, and how Swinton pronounces the name] is a legendary Russian village that was being ransacked by – I don't know who, the barbarians, of some kind – and the idea was that the village, when the marauders were coming, sank down into this lake. The village was located next to this very beautiful, clear lake. The idea is that it sank down into the lake to protect itself from the marauders, and you can go there now, and go see it in the lake, because it's so clear you can see the reflection. But that's what Kitesh is, and we called her Kitesh because of the idea that she would be submerged. She's not suppressed, oppressed, or repressed, in any way, but she is submerged. It's like she's waiting to come up, which she does, of course, at a point in the film." See Roberts 2015.

Being unable to see her face renders Emma's past inaccessible to the film's viewers, echoing the distance she herself feels from it. Without a name, she cannot be called into being. "Emma" is a raw creation of Tancredi, a shiny Milanese veneer that has, over time, suffocated what lay underneath it. Only surface remains. And just as she was collected, consumed by Tancredi, she methodically goes about consuming Italy after years of having merely lived there, gorging herself on both Antonio and his food.

The timeline of the film parallels Emma's emotional arc, taking us from the title credits, which are backed by establishing shots of Milan grayly coated in winter, through a wan Milanese spring to, at last, the glorious verdant summer of Sanremo, where Antonio has his farm. Milan may be in Italy, a southern country, but the city, cold and industrial, is absolutely of the north. Sanremo, on the other hand, while not precisely "il sud," is fully Mediterranean, bright, warm, and coastal, a fertile ground for exploring the boundaries of identification, for testing oneself against the other. As Franco Cassano puts it in his landmark *Southern Thought*, "Southern thought is the thought one starts to feel inside where the sea begins, when the shore interrupts the fundamentalisms of the land . . . when one discovers that the border is not a place where the world ends, but the place where different peoples come into contact and the game of relating with the other becomes difficult and true."¹⁶ In making its way to this fecund borderland, the geographic shift from Milan to Sanremo mimics the temporal progression from winter to summer to evoke ancient linkages between food, sex, and the land. The scene of Emma and Antonio's first coupling is lush with primal indications of earth goddesses and fertility, glorious

¹⁶ Cassano, 7. "Pensiero mediterraneo è quel pensiero che si inizia a sentir dentro laddove inizia il mare, quando la riva interrompe gli integrismi della terra . . . quando si scopre che il confine non è un luogo dove il mondo finisce, ma quello dove i diversi si toccano e la partita del rapporto con l'altro diventa difficile e vera."

shots of Emma in a coral dress on the vibrant green ground, bathed in golden sun. She drags her hand through tall grasses and brings the earthy smell to her nose, removes her sunglasses and tilts her head back toward the sky. She opens up, blossoming alongside the natural world around her. In a later outdoor sex scene at the farm, shots of Emma and Antonio's bodies are intercut with flowers and insects, making their sex seem rough and natural, organic, emerging from the land itself.¹⁷ The transition from winter to spring to summer reinforces the theme of her awakening.

Before all this, though, at the very beginning of the film, we meet Emma dressed in beige, her blonde hair and pale skin and neutral clothes blending into one another as she stands quietly polishing silver and preparing for her father-in-law's birthday dinner. She is interrupted from this task by the housekeeper, Ida, with a question about the evening's seating chart. Emma and Ida circle the dining room while rearranging place cards on a board, laying out the stable markers by which all the members of her family, save herself, are easily identified. The table has just been covered with a cloth but is as yet unset. The other members of the family are in a sitting room, reading the newspaper, eating breakfast, drinking orange juice from a tray brought by Ida. Emma moves between the silver arrayed in a galley off the dining room and an enormous kitchen on a lower floor where pots already steam and a number of cooks and kitchen helpers – including Ida, again, who seems to be everywhere – prepare vegetables and arrange pastries on metal pans for later baking. A dinner takes a whole day. Through Emma we witness the matrix of tasks underlying the meal, as a consequence of which the food itself is enriched, the visible artifact of those hours of planning and preparation. But when the camera at last revolves around the dinner

¹⁷ Guadagnino uses the same technique in *Farmer Cook* to suggest the links between food and the land.

table crowded with guests, there is no food in evidence, with the exception of a mountainous meringue pierced by a lit candle, presented to the patriarch for his birthday. The plates, in fact, are empty, and we never see the final results of Emma's daylong labors. The scene is bizarrely lit – the table itself seems to be the light source, and so the faces of the company around it are dark, eerily illuminated from beneath. That luminescent, empty table focuses our attention. Even as the Recchi patriarch delivers the news of his retirement and divides his textile company between his son, Emma's husband, Tancredi, and his oldest grandson, Edoardo ("It will," he rumbles, "require two men to replace me"), the table glows distractingly, like an altar.¹⁸ Upon the arrival of the grandfather's birthday dessert, we must conclude that the main courses were served and enjoyed off-screen. But why, then, is the table still set, the china and silverware apparently untouched? The lack of food, the strange sight of a dinner without dinner, heightens the scene's anticipatory air. Paradoxically, being denied sight of the meal reminds us of the effort that went into the evening. The fruits of Emma's labor go unseen and unappreciated.

One of the spectral dishes at this meal – the only dish on the menu that is ever named, in fact – is *ukha*, a Russian fish soup beloved by Edoardo, and variously tolerated or disdained by the other members of the family ("Edo's dish," his younger brother calls it with disgust).¹⁹ Earlier, in the kitchen, we saw Edo delightedly bury his nose in the simmering pot. He greets his mother and thanks her, in Russian, for including the soup on the evening's menu. We later learn that Emma first made the soup during a bout of homesickness when Edo was six years old, and since then he has asked for it constantly. Through Edoardo, *ukha* takes on a dual role in the narrative of Emma's identification. A recipe taught her by her grandmother, it is certainly the

¹⁸ "Esigeranno due uomini per sostituirmi."

¹⁹ "Il piatto di Edo."

food of her Russian past, but it is also, via Edoardo's adoration of it, an element tying her to her Italian present and the family she has created in her marriage; Edoardo, Emma's first-born, is a link carrying her forward, even as she fills him with the food of memory and thereby circles back to the past.

"Edo," Emma says, "loves the Russia that I carry within me."²⁰ This odd syntax reinforces the split Emma feels between herself and her past – Russia is a separate object she carries, not an integrated part of her person. And in referencing Edo's particular love of her Russianness, she seems to imply that the rest of her family is indifferent to her origins. Indeed, Edoardo is the only one of Emma's children with whom she speaks her mother tongue, and even he views Russia as Emma's interior property, something to which he is connected but cannot truly own. Emma offers him the language, like the soup, as a private space of bonding between the two of them. Edo's sudden death, the result of a fall sustained while twisting away from his mother in the midst of a violent argument brought on by his discovery of her affair with Antonio, breaks Emma's link with her past.

Another dish of *ukha* is the instrument of Edo's discovery. When Edo sits down to a business dinner catered by Antonio with the whole family present – they are selling the storied Recchi textile business to investors from London – a bowl of *ukha* is set before him and a rapid montage presents his sudden revelation: the discovery of a lock of his mother's newly shorn hair at Antonio's farm, a book seen in both their hands, and, now, the *ukha* itself a sign that Emma has given her spirit to Antonio alongside this recipe, betraying the bond that was formerly Edo's alone. "Thank you, mother," Edo growls in Russian, fleeing from the dining room. Emma follows him while Tancredi, mockingly, makes a crack about Russian temper, revealing that the

²⁰ "Edo ama la Russia che porto dentro di me."

Italian name “Emma” scarcely covers the Russian woman he still sees in her. Emma and Edoardo argue, and just before his fall Edo accuses Emma of being just like his cold father and callow younger brother. “You gave [Antonio] our *ukha*,” Edo moans, in Russian.

The movie’s ambiguous conclusion underlines the hollowness at Emma’s core, beneath the Italian façade, in the partially erased space of her Russian past. At Edoardo’s funeral, Emma admits her affair to Tancredi, saying “You don’t know me anymore.” He replies, “You don’t exist,” perhaps acknowledging the final disappearance of Kitesh, or perhaps attempting to deny Emma’s new sense of wholeness.²¹ But even as she finally gives herself over to Italy in the person of Antonio, Emma carries that Russian fish soup with her, reminding us that identification is an ongoing, unfolding story, diachronic and impossible to summarize. Her tale concludes with a suggestion of vacuous nirvana – the open door left in her wake presents her absence, and, as the credits roll, light shifting through a waterfall vaguely illuminates her and Antonio’s bodies, united.

Layered over this story of self-actualization and personal fulfillment, and the building up of real Italian substance beneath the thin Italian mask forged by Tancredi, are arguments about class and gender. Emma’s abandonment of the Recchi manse in favor of Antonio and the countryside suggests that Italy’s truth is in the land and the people who inhabit it, not in the rarefied world of the Recchis, and Emma herself is a latter day *ciociara*, taking Sofia Loren’s role from De Sica’s *Two Women* as she flees the city for the country, where the truth of Italy rests. Antonio is ennobled by his physical closeness to the land, confronting Milanese urban *civiltà* with his own, earthy rurality. Guadagnino does not go so far as to romanticize poverty, but he at least casts a skeptical eye on wealth. Antonio, too, very early criticizes his father for

²¹ “Tu non mi conosci più.” “Tu non esisti.”

caring more about money than the elevated simplicity of Antonio's pure flavors. Further, Milan and its industrial riches are explicitly called out in a brief scene during which Gianluca, Emma and Tancredi's younger son, reminds his older brother, Edo, of the source of their family's money. "Grandfather made no scruples about doing business with the [fascist] regime to spread that pollution, and after the war pretending to have done nothing while he was exploiting Jewish labor. This is who we are. This is the Recchis."²² For Emma to embrace the "real" Italy she has to leave to marble confines of the house built with the Recchis' dirty money.

The film's final sequence is a blurred rush of emotion – Emma hurriedly packs her clothes after her confrontation with Tancredi; Ida, the housekeeper, sheds violent tears; the rest of the family is dressed in mourning; Gianluca apparently blind to the emotional turmoil around him. As Emma runs to the front door her eyes meet her daughter Elisabetta's, who gives her mother an approving nod and half-smile. Meanwhile, crosscuts reveal Edoardo's fiancée's secret: she is pregnant. This knowledge would surely remake the ties between Emma and her family, the child being in some sense Edo's continuation, and therefore a further link in the complex chain Emma has built between her past and her present. But Emma is out the door before she can hear this revelation. Absent the knowledge of her grandchild's conception, she is able to treat Edo's death as a final break with the past she carried with her to Milan in the form of the Russian she taught her oldest child and the Russian food she cooked for him. As always in *I Am Love*, though, the distinction between past and present is undermined by a reminder of the spectrum that constitutes Emma's identification. We know Emma has already taught Antonio the recipe for *ukha*. Will they cook it together in the future, even as they make a home in the Italian

²² "Nonno non si fece scrupoli a fare affari con il regime per fare crescere la polluzione, tranne poi alla fine della guerra a fare finta di niente, e nel frattempo sfruttava manodopera ebrea. Questo siamo. Questo sono i Recchi."

countryside? With every step she takes away from her past she erodes the distance she attempts to create.

Cappuccino, Cornetto, and Corriere

All that is equivocal and hesitant for Emma is part of a deliberate process of reidentification for Amedeo, the primary narrator of Amara Lakhous' 2006 novel, *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*. I examined this text at some length in the previous chapter, and here turn to the perspective of a different character from its multi-vocal narrative. The novel is structured as a series of statements given by the residents of an apartment building in Rome to the police during a murder investigation. Between each statement is an excerpt transcribed from Amedeo's tape recorder; he has disappeared, and is the police's prime suspect in the murder, though no one whom the police interview believes he could possibly be guilty. In different ways, they all hold Amedeo up as a paragon of Italian virtue, incapable of crime, dishonesty, or any uncivil behavior. Most of them are entirely unaware that their neighbor "Amedeo" is, in fact, "Ahmed," an immigrant from Algeria.²³

The confusion over Amedeo's name arises from a simple but repeated mistake in hearing. Italian ears are not alert to the sighed "h" in Ahmed, and in colloquial Roman the name Amedeo is frequently shortened to Amede'.²⁴ When he introduces himself as Ahmed, Romans tend to hear "Amede'," and assume his full name is Amedeo. Like Emma, Ahmed loses his name through a kind of erasure that is the direct result of emigration. But more remarkable than this

²³ While it should be noted that Amara Lakhous, like Ahmed/Amedeo, is an Algerian immigrant to Italy, nothing in the novel suggests that it should be read as autobiography.

²⁴ "Ahmed" is pronounced with a voiceless pharyngeal fricative h, usually rendered as "ḥ" texts transliterated from Arabic.

accident of Roman comprehension is Amedeo's response to it: he accepts the error and takes on the name Amedeo as his own, adopting it so thoroughly that he, like Emma, seems to have forgotten his name: he fails to recognize himself in the call of "Ahmed!" issued by an old neighbor who runs into him in the streets of Rome. The ease of this change in nomenclature indicates Amedeo's relationship to his Algerian past. Unlike Parviz, the Iranian refugee whose testimony I examine in the previous chapter, Amedeo abhors the past. "Memory," he says, "is just like the stomach. Sometimes it makes me vomit."²⁵ The North African food of his former home makes Amedeo nauseated as well. He explains that, once, "during an attack of nostalgia for couscous, I went to an Arab restaurant and after a few spoonfuls I threw it all up. Only later did it occur to me that couscous is like mother's milk: it has a particular fragrance that you can only detect when it is accompanied by kisses and hugs."²⁶ Absent this special odor acquired within the context of familial love, Amedeo finds couscous unpalatable.²⁷ He goes on to describe his related belief that Ramadan is meaningless when it is observed away from one's friends and family:

What use is renouncing food and drink, only to break one's fast alone? Where is the voice of the muezzin? Where the *buraq*? Where the couscous that my mother prepared with her own hands? Where the *qalb alluz*? Where the *zlabia*? Where the *harira*? Where the *maqroun*?²⁸ How can I make myself forget the nights of

²⁵ Lakhous, 156. "La memoria è proprio come lo stomaco. Ogni tanto mi costringe al vomito."

²⁶ Ibid., 169. ". . . mi sono ricordato di quella volta in cui, assalito dalla nostalgia del cuscus, sono andato in un ristorante arabo e dopo qualche cucchiaino ho vomitato tutto. Solo dopo mi è venuto in mente che il cuscus è come il latte della madre, e ha un odore particolare che si può sentire solo accompagnato da baci ed abbracci."

²⁷ This theme echoes an episode in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Language of Baklava* during which she finds Jordanian food literally unpalatable. See Bardenstein 2010.

²⁸ Traditional festival foods in Algeria and elsewhere in North Africa: *Qalb alluz*, almond cake; *zlabia*, sweet fritter; *harira*, tomato-based soup; *maqroun*, semolina cakes or cookies. The *buraq*

Ramadan in the poor quarters, the return home late at night? The voice of my mother, full of tenderness, the love that enchanted my ear: “Son, it is time for *suhur*.” The month of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and the other festivals fill my heart with anxiety. People have advised me, “Why don’t you go to the Mosque of Rome for the Eid al-Fitr prayers?” No, thank you. I do not want to see hundreds of needy people like me, needy for the scent of their loved ones.²⁹

Amedeo’s lengthy plaint suggests the emotional distance he feels from his past. Religious observance, for him, is pointless without the context of family. Amedeo therefore isolates himself from the potential social network offered by the Algerian and Muslim communities in Rome, choosing instead to dive deeper under the cover provided by the Italian name he has adopted. While being questioned by the police, the Algerian friend who called out to Ahmed upon unexpectedly seeing him in Rome recalls asking Ahmed’s mother in Algeria where her son had gone. Her cryptic reply: “He’s outside.” The friend explains, “The word ‘outside’ has a thousand meanings: outside of reason, outside of Algiers, outside the law, out of favor with his parents, outside the grace of God.”³⁰ The likely Arabic term is also used to say someone is

is the horse-like creature which carried Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem in the “Night Journey” reported in the Quran, commemorated annually at Laylat al-Mi’raj. *Suhur*, a few lines below, is the pre-dawn meal consumed during Ramadan.

²⁹ Ibid., 169-170. “A cosa serve rinunciare a mangiare e a bere, per poi mangiare solo? Dov’è la voce del muezzin? Dove il buraq? Dove il cuscus che preparava mamma con le sue mani? Dove il qalb alluz? Dove la zlabia? Dove la harira? Dove il maqrout? Come faccio a dimenticare le serate di Ramadan nei quartieri popolari, il ritorno a casa la notte tardi? La voce di mamma piena di tenerezza, l’amore che incantava il mio orecchio: «Figliolo, questo è il momento di suhur». Il mese di Ramadan, la piccola festa, la grande festa e le altre feste riempiono di ansia il mio cuore. Mi hanno consigliato: «Perché non vai alla grande moschea di Roma per la preghiera della grande festa?» No, grazie. Non voglio vedere centinaia di bisognosi come me, bisognosi dell’odore dei loro cari.”

³⁰ Ibid., 163. “«È fuori». La parola fuori ha mille significati: fuori dalla ragione, o fuori da Algeri, fuori legge, fuori dalla carità dei genitori, fuori dalla grazie di Dio.”

abroad.³¹ The multivalence of the idea of Ahmed's being "outside" points to the separation he has built between Ahmed and Amedeo. The nausea he feels when eating couscous is the physical consequence of the distance he has achieved from his past. Like Emma, Amedeo is remade by his Italian name, but there is no Algerian counterpart to Emma's Russian *ukha* in Amedeo's story. Not carrying Algerian food with him into Italy indicates less a conscious refusal of those foods than a visceral, bodily rejection coupled with a fundamental incomprehension of the point of maintaining a culinary link to his past. For Amedeo it is both absurd and sickening to eat family dishes and the foods of memory away from one's family and homeland.

Instead, Amedeo gorges himself on the soul of Italy, ritualizing his daily consumption of a quintessentially Italian trio: cappuccino, *cornetto* (Italian-style sweet croissant, often filled with jam or custard), and *Corriere* (that is, *Corriere della sera*, an Italian newspaper of record). The obvious Catholic parallels – wine, wafer, and word of God – reinforce the sacramental nature of Amedeo's daily habit and hint at the complexity of his status as a Muslim immigrant in a Catholic country, who we already know no longer finds his own religious practices compelling.³² The link between the breakfast trio and the Christian trinity suggests a conversion on Amedeo's part. To his tape recorder, Amedeo says, "I've become a fanatic believer in the triad of cappuccino, *cornetto*, and *Corriere della Sera*! I love *cornetti* so much. . . . My relationship with cappuccino is like that between a car and gasoline, necessary to keep it running strong the whole day." Without a segue, Amedeo's monologue shifts focus as he describes an article he recently read in which a psychologist advocates occasionally changing one's name in order to keep one's

³¹ في الخارج or, more formally, *بره*.

³² Another echo of this alliterative trio comes from the first canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which Dante encounters the unclear signifiers of the *leone*, *lonza*, and *lupa*, three beasts that attempt to block his path.

life fresh and exciting. “[The psychologist] said that changing your name helps you to live better, because it lessens the weight of memory,” which is precisely the effect it has on Emma/Kitesh in *I Am Love*.³³ The juxtaposition of the trinity with Amedeo’s renaming grants the latter even greater heft; it might be termed a christening, or a baptism. This is not to say that Amedeo has converted to Christianity, but to highlight the total and spiritual nature of the split between Ahmed and Amedeo. The person he has become in Italy is ritually divorced from his former self.

Alongside his cappuccino and *cornetto* habit, Amedeo has developed a great love for pizza. “I’ve become fat,” he says. “There’s no doubt that pizza is my favorite food, I can’t do without it. By now all the symptoms of dependency are evident. . . . In a short time I will be dissolved in the dough and become, in my turn, a pizza.”³⁴ The idea of Amedeo’s becoming a pizza – you are what you eat – corresponds with an old European tradition of mockingly addressing one another across national borders using the typical foods of different countries as derogatory nicknames. In her study of the history of the pig among European Jews and Christians, Claudine Fabre-Vassas notes, “In Europe we call one another frogs [French], roast beefs [British], or macaroni eaters [Italian].”³⁵ Substituting pizza for macaroni, Amedeo figures his own unfolding Italian identification as the result of a compulsive kind of consumption. Every day, by these sacraments he makes himself Italian.

³³ Ibid., 139-140. “Sono diventato un credente estremista della triade cappuccino, cornetto e *Corriere della Sera*! Amo tanto il cornetto. . . . Il mio rapporto con il cappuccino è come quello tra la macchina e la benzina, una carica necessaria per mantenersi in forma tutto il giorno. Ho letto questa sera sull’*Espresso* l’articolo di uno psicologo che consiglia alla gente di cambiare nome ogni tanto. . . . Ha detto che cambiare il nome aiuta a vivere meglio, perché attenua il fardello della memoria.”

³⁴ Ibid., 33. “Sono ingrassato. . . . Non c’è dubbio che la pizza sia il mio cibo preferito, non posso farne a meno. Ormai tutti I sintomi della dipendenza sono evidenti. . . . Fra poco mi scioglierò nella pasta e diventerò a mia volta una pizza.”

³⁵ Fabre-Vassas, 9.

The novel offers a metaphorical counterpart to Amedeo's very Italian diet via repeated references to the story of Rome's mythical founder, Romulus. According to legend, Romulus and his twin brother Remus, children of the war god Mars, were abandoned by their mortal mother and, in her stead, nursed by a wolf before being adopted by a kindly shepherd and his wife. From this story derives the idiomatic expression for a true Roman: "suckled by the wolf." The first time this phrase occurs in the text is when Amedeo finds himself engaged in a competition with a taxi driver named Riccardo over which of the two men has greater knowledge of Rome's streets. The café owner who serves Amedeo his morning cappuccino and *cornetto* relates the story. "With regard to knowledge of the history of Rome, Amedeo has no rivals, he knows the origins of the names of the streets and their meanings. I have never in my life seen someone like him. Once, after Amedeo defeated him for the umpteenth time, Riccardo, laughing, said to him, 'Damn, Amede', how well you know Rome! What, did the wolf suckle you?'"³⁶ A few pages later, Amedeo relates the same incident to his tape recorder: "By now I know Rome as if I had been born here and never left. I have the right to ask myself: am I a bastard like the twins Romulus and Remus, or am I an adopted son? The fundamental question is: how to suckle at the wolf without her biting me."³⁷ Later Amedeo repeats, "I am nursed by the wolf together with the two little orphans, Romulus and Remus. I worship the wolf, I can't do without her milk."³⁸ And, near the end of the novel, "Here I am between the wolf's arms, so that I may suckle until I'm

³⁶ Lakhous, 134-135. "Per quanto riguarda la conoscenza della storia di Roma, Amedeo non ha rivali, conosce l'origine dei nome della strade e i loro significati. Non ho mai visto in vita mia una persona come lui. Una volta, dopo l'ennesima sconfitta di fronte ad Amedeo, Riccardo gli ha detto ridendo: «Ammazza' Amede' come conosci Roma! Ma che t'ha allattato la lupa?»"

³⁷ Ibid., 142. "Ormai conosco Roma come vi fossi nato e non l'avessi mai lasciata. Ho il diritto di chiedermi: sono un bastardo come i gemelli Romolo e Romo oppure sono un figlio adottivo? La domanda fondamentale è: come farmi allattare dalla lupa senza che mi morda?"

³⁸ Ibid., 168. "Mi allatto dalla lupa insieme ai due orfanelli Romolo e Remo. Adoro la lupa, non posso fare a meno del suo latte."

satiated.”³⁹ Just as with the pizza and the cappuccino, *cornetto*, and *Corriere*, Amedeo’s metaphorical consumption of Rome is addictive and compulsive. “I’m like a newborn,” he says, “I need milk every day. Italian is my daily milk,” the Italian language itself imagined as the life-giving nourishment the Roman wolf provides him with.⁴⁰ Amedeo’s wife, Stefania, was in fact his first Italian language teacher when he arrived in Rome. She is an avatar of the wolf, the prime source of the linguistic milk he imbibes. This is consumption as eating for nourishment, but also in the old, medical sense, Amedeo’s Italian diet as a wasting disease, a sort of tubercular hollowing out from within as Ahmed is erased, and then replaced. The Roman wolf’s milk on which he nurses remakes him, and here is another echo of Catholic rite: the mystical transubstantiation of Ahmed into Amedeo.

Amedeo never claims to be Roman – he admits he learned Rome’s streets so well simply through his love of walking around the city – but he certainly obfuscates his origins; no one in Rome save his wife and his old neighbor from Algiers knows he is not a native Italian. Yet his Roman neighbors’ insistence on Amedeo’s seemingly native knowledge of Rome exposes their general preoccupation with origins which, in the context of the Mediterranean neighborhood, becomes a narcissism of small differences. In the previous chapter I reference their fixation on immigrants and their diets. Their interactions with Amedeo reveal a further layer of anxiety focused on cultural divisions within Italy itself. Lakhous’ novel dwells on a confusion over Italy’s internal cultural and geographical borders, questioning whether the city of Rome should be seen as northern or southern, and capitalizing on the duality of the Italian term *sud*, which can be used with similar derogatory valence to describe both the southern parts of Italy and the

³⁹ Ibid., 186. “Eccomi fra le braccia della lupa per farmi allattare fino a saziarmi.”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 155. “Sono come un neonato, ho bisogno del latte tutti i giorni. L’italiano è il mio latte quotidiano.”

countries to Italy's south. When asked where he is from, Amedeo simply says "south." Does he intend for his neighbors to believe he is from southern Italy? The apartment building's Neapolitan super recalls, "I didn't want to pester him with more questions to find out more details, I said to myself: who knows, he's probably Sicilian, Calabrian, or Puglian. And there's no difference between Catania and Naples, between Bari and Potenza, we all come from the South. What harm is there, in the end we're all Italian! Rome is the city where there are people who come from all over. Do me the favor," she concludes to the police officer interviewing her, "of not accusing Amedeo of being an immigrant."⁴¹ The police officer is trying to explain to the concierge that Amedeo is Algerian, but what she hears is a slur directed against denizens of Rome who were born in the southern provinces of Italy. It never occurs to her that Amedeo, with his perfect Italian, could be from another country.

The testimony of another denizen of the building, a Milanese professor, reveals a similar slippage between the ideas of an immigrant from abroad and an immigrant from the Italian south. "Amedeo is an immigrant!" he exclaims, astonished:

For me there is no difference between immigrants and southerners. Even if I don't understand Amedeo's relationship with the south. I am an attentive observer, capable of distinguishing between a lazy man and one who wants to work. For example, the Neapolitan super, Sandro Dandini [the proprietor of Amedeo's favorite café], and Elisabetta Fabiani [another resident of the building] are

⁴¹ Ibid., 53. "Non ho voluto scocciarlo con altre domande per avere altri particolare, ho detto tra me e me: chissà, sarà siciliano, calabrese o pugliese. Poi non ci sta differenza tra Catania e Napoli, tra Bari e Potenza, tutti veniamo dal sud. Che male ci sta, alla fine siamo tutti italiani! Roma è la città dove ci sta gente che arriva da tutte le parte. Faciteme 'o piacere di non accusare Amedeo di essere un immigrato."

symbols of the south, with their melancholy, chatter, underdevelopment, gossip, faith, and superstition.

The professor concludes, incredibly, “I am not racist.”⁴² He assumed Amedeo was northern, like himself, until once he heard Amedeo say, “‘I’m from south of the South.’ So,” the professor continues, “I deduced that Rome is the South and the cities of southern Italy like Naples, Potenza, Bari, and Palermo are the extremity of the South!”⁴³ This same Milanese professor makes a point of advising his students to read Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, “in order to understand how the South was born of weakness and underdevelopment. The situation now is no different than in the past, the mentality remains the same. . . . The time has come to admit that the unification of Italy was an irredeemable historical error.”⁴⁴ To the patently prejudiced Milanese, who sees himself as a sort of exile from the cultured North condemned to live among heathens, Rome itself is already southern. To conceive of a south beyond the reaches of the Italian peninsula stretches his imagination. Franco Cassano explains the professor’s perspective via a discussion of Italy’s ambivalent relationship with its own Mediterranean quality:

The repudiation of the Mediterranean, in fact, is not only the simple repudiation of the other, of those who live on the other side of the sea, but also a sort of repudiation of the Italian south, and of Italy itself, a loss of the awareness of one’s

⁴² Ibid., 106. “Amedeo è un immigrato! Per me non c’è differenza tra gli immigrati e la gente del sud. Anche se non capisco il rapporto di Amedeo con il meridione. Io sono un attento osservatore, in grado di distinguere tra un pigro e uno che vuole lavorare. Ad esempio la portiera napoletana, Sandro Dandini ed Elisabetta Fabiani sono simboli del sud con la loro tristezza, le chiacchiere, il sottosviluppo, il pettegolezzo, la credenza, la superstizione. Io non sono razzista.”

⁴³ Ibid., 107. “«Io sono del sud del sud». Allora ho dedotto che Roma è del sud, e le città del sud d’Italia come Napoli, Potenza, Bari e Palermo sono l’estremo del sud!”

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106. “per capire come il sud sia nato nella pigrizia e nel sottosviluppo. La situazione non è cambiata rispetto al passato, la mentalità è rimasta la stessa. . . . è giunto il momento di ammettere che l’unità d’Italia è stato un errore storico irrimediabile.”

specificity, a sick relationship of Italians with themselves. In Italy the emphasis on modernity and the construction of European unity has been translated into an authentic “passion for the North,” in the incessant, obsessive repetition of the idea that the only correct way to be European is by becoming “northern” European, correcting all “southern” vices and temptations.⁴⁵

Cassano diagnoses a cultural malady, a deep Italian self-hatred born of the aspirations the country harbors towards true belonging in Europe, coupled with a mass disingenuous about the necessary Mediterranean dimensions of Italy.⁴⁶

But Amedeo, beyond reproach from the perspectives of both the northern Italian professor and the southern Italian building supervisor, seems to embody an *Italianità* of mythical, unarguable purity, as unadulterated as the wolf’s milk he drinks. This milk is the mythological counterpart to real items of food and drink that Barthes believes can carry the weight of entire nations’ souls. In two successive essays in *Mythologies*, “Wine and Milk” and “Steak and Chips,” he describes the totemic natures of mythological foods. “Wine,” he begins, “is felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheese and its culture. It is a totem-drink, corresponding to the milk of the Dutch cow or the tea ceremonially taken by the British Royal Family.”⁴⁷ He continues,

⁴⁵ Cassano, 55. “Il ripudio del Mediterraneo, infatti, non è solo il semplice ripudio dell’altro, di colui che vive al di là del mare, ma anche una sorta di ripudio del meridione d’Italia, e dell’Italia stessa, una perdita della consapevolezza della sua specificità, un rapporto malato degli italiani con se stessi. In Italia l’enfasi sulla modernità e sulla costruzione dell’unità d’Europa si è tradotta in un’autentica ‘passione del nord’, nella martellante e ossessiva ripetizione dell’idea che l’unico modo corretto di essere europei è quello di emendarsi da tutti i vizi e da tutte le tentazioni meridionali diventando europei del nord.”

⁴⁶ There are clear echoes here of Roberto Dainotto’s work in *Europe (in Theory)*. See Dainotto 2006.

⁴⁷ Barthes 1972, 58.

Like wine, steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized. It figures in all the surroundings of alimentary life: flat, edged with yellow, like the sole of a shoe, in cheap restaurants; thick and juicy in the bistros which specialize in it; cubic, with the core all moist throughout beneath a light charred crust, in haute cuisine. It is a part of all the rhythms, that of the comfortable bourgeois meal and that of the bachelor's bohemian snack. . . . Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values: it helps them to rise in wartime, it is the very flesh of the French soldier.⁴⁸

Wine and steak are, for Barthes, both foodstuffs and entire sets of consumption practices and social realities surrounding those foods. In the legend of Romulus and Remus, the mythical object of the wolf's milk takes the place of whatever might be the "real" totem-foods of Italy, pizza or pasta, obviously, but also cappuccino and *cornetto* (and perhaps an Italian would object to Barthes' characterization of wine as French property). But as we consider the role of totem consumption in the narrative of Amedeo's identification as Italian, we must keep in mind Amedeo's own reminder of a different usage of the concept of totemicity. To his tape recorder, he says, "This evening I lingered for a long time over these words from Freud's *Totem and Taboo*: 'A man's name is a principal component of his personality, perhaps even a portion of his soul.'"⁴⁹ Again, Amedeo's experience mimics Emma's. These words unite the culinary with the linguistic; Amedeo is self-aware about the power of naming and the potential magnitude of his acceptance of his own new moniker. His new name is a new piece of his soul, and,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁹ Lakhous, 74. "Questa sera mi sono soffermato a lungo su queste parole di *Totem e Tabù* di Freud: 'Il nome di un essere umano è un elemento del suo essere, anzi, è una parte della sua anima'." My English rendition of the passage from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* is from James Strachey's Standard Edition, page 139. See works cited.

simultaneously, the totem-foods he consumes provide him with sustenance derived from the very soul of Italy. His identification, the story of Ahmed's becoming Amedeo, is a narrative of making himself Italian.

Storytelling is itself a fixation of Amedeo's. At the very end of the novel he offers an agonized reflection on the figure of Shahrazad, the archetypal storyteller in Arabic literary tradition. In addition to Ahmed and Amedeo, he asks, "Am I also Shahrazad?" He continues in a Didion-esque vein:

We both escape death, and the night harbors us. Is telling stories useful? We must tell stories in order to survive. Cursed memory! Memory is the boulder of Sisyphus. Who am I? Ahmed or Amedeo? . . . Teach me, my venerated lady, the art of escaping death. Teach me, Shahrazad, how to escape from the rage and hatred of the sultan Shahryar. Teach me how to remove the sword of Shahryar from my neck. Teach me, Shahrazad, how to defeat the Shahryar that is inside me. My memory is Shahryar.⁵⁰

These are the words with which the novel concludes, but they are not the end of the story.

Immediately before this final excerpt from Amedeo's tape recorder, we hear at last from the police inspector investigating the murder in Piazza Vittorio. At first, he avers that Amedeo – aka Ahmed Salmi – is the murderer, with the prime evidence being Amedeo's secret foreign origins and the fact that in the wake of the murder Amedeo has disappeared. Soon, though, the police

⁵⁰ Ibid., 186-187. "Sono anche Shahrazad? . . . Entrambi sfuggiamo alla morte e ci ospita la notte. Narrare è utile? Dobbiamo raccontare per sopravvivere. Maledetta memoria! La memoria è la pietra di Sisifo. Chi sono? Ahmed o Amedeo? . . . Insegnami, mia adorata signora, l'arte di sfuggire alla morte. Insegnami, Shahrazad, come sfuggire alla rabbia e all'odio del sultano Shahryar. Insegnami come allontanare la spada di Shahryar dal mio collo. Insegnami, Shahrazad, come sconfiggere lo Shahryar che sta dentro di me. La mia memoria è Shahryar." See Didion 1979, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

inspector learns that Amedeo has been located, a comatose John Doe lying in a hospital bed after being struck by a car while walking his beloved Roman streets. The accident occurred before the murder; Amedeo is innocent.

Amedeo's struggle against his own memory – it is at last revealed that he left Algiers because of his despair after another murder, of his beloved by highway bandits, a trauma which still haunts his dreams – is a fight for the sort of emotional peace that comes with emptiness of the soul. His identification as Amedeo, not Ahmed, is a deliberate attempt at the erasure of his past. If identification is storytelling, then Amedeo is his own Shahrazad, and his loathsome memories are the Shahryar within him whom he attempts to placate. As the Moroccan literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito reminds us, "Shahrazad knows full well that she can defer her death only by telling stories."⁵¹ And *A Thousand and One Nights* is itself the very same kind of incompletable story as that presented by my concept of "narrative identification," the title of the story cycle serving to indicate a generic vastness rather than a specific number of stories, no "final," thousand-and-first night having ever been discovered in any of the source manuscripts. Like narrative identification, the *Nights* present an unspooling without end. Shahrazad teaches us that storytelling is an act with a purpose; it is always more than mere entertainment, it has lessons to impart and goals to achieve. Kilito notes as well that in *A Thousand and One Nights*, "there is often a misfortune, a loss, or a want that impels the narration."⁵² This is true on both the macro level of the frame story of Shahrazad and Shahryar, and on the micro levels of many of the embedded stories that comprise the *Nights*. Like most characters in the *Nights* from

⁵¹ Kilito, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 112.

Shahrazad down, Amedeo himself is such a storytelling subject, the man who lost his beloved and as a consequence tries to lose himself.

Counter-Narratives of Assimilation

Thus far, I have treated these sources in light of their divergence from those I presented in the previous chapter, in terms of their relationships with time and memory. Those stories and these represent two poles of migrant engagement with the past – complete attachment to it and utter remove from it. This kind of binary or opposite relationship immediately calls attention to the space between, where the vast bulk of migration tales naturally lie. In the remainder of this chapter I will address the magnitude of the difference *I Am Love* and *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* present not from the living memory which my first chapter examines, but from that in-between zone where acculturation is hesitant, mediated, and undertaken in intergenerational stages that waver along the continuum of identification between past and present. Emma and Amedeo's stark dismissals of the past offer counter-narratives of assimilation as a solitary and totalizing process.

It should, at this point, be unsurprising that many of these stories revolve around food. The centrality of family to these other stories points to exactly what is missing from Emma and Amedeo's immigrations to Italy: they both leave their families behind. The most well-known example in America is likely Joel Zwick and Nia Vardalos' 2002 film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, in which the protagonist's ambivalence about her Greek heritage is symbolized by her childhood desire to have her parents pack white-bread sandwiches, not moussaka, for her school lunches. The central conflict arises when she falls in love with a non-Greek man – whose family her father compares to dry toast – while her family would prefer a Greek match. Advertising for

the film claimed that the Greek-ness it presented was analogous to a range of other Mediterranean ethnicities. One memorable spot flashed the title on screen, and then replaced the word “Greek” with a rapid scroll featuring “Turkish,” “Jewish,” and “Italian” as equal substitutes. This pan-Mediterranean flair is a feature of the film’s casting as well, as the actors playing the Greek family are, variously, of Greek, Jewish, Turkish, Armenian, and Italian heritage. The film’s epilogue cements its portrayal of acculturation as an intergenerational process. In a flash forward, Toula, the protagonist, having convinced her family to accept her American husband, cajoles her reluctant Greek-American daughter into attendance at “Greek school” with a laughing promise that when her daughter grows up Toula will allow her to marry whomever she wants. The narrative identifications of both Toula and her daughter have grown to encompass “Greek” together with “American” in a simple fusion wherein ethnic distinctiveness is maintained alongside acculturation. Meanwhile, Toula’s family can continue to market their Greekness in their restaurant and at the travel agency where Toula works, making the other easily available for consumption.

A similar multi-generational drama about American white bread and Mediterranean culture unfolds in Louise DeSalvo’s 2004 memoir, *Crazy in the Kitchen: Food, Feuds, and Forgiveness in an Italian-American Family*. In the opening section, DeSalvo describes her mother’s adamant rejection of Italian food, which she replaces with blandly American products including a tasteless, spongy white bread full of preservatives. DeSalvo imagines, “Maybe my mother thinks that if she eats enough of this bread, she will stop being Italian American and become American American.”⁵³ Meanwhile, DeSalvo’s grandmother twice weekly bakes a dark,

⁵³ DeSalvo, 13.

rustic loaf that DeSalvo finds she vastly prefers to the industrial product her mother insists on. It is

a big bread, a substantial bread, a bread that you can use for dunking, or for open-faced sandwiches, or for scraping the last bit of sauce from a bowl of pasta, or for toasting and eating with jam, or for breaking into soups and stews, or for eating with a little olive oil and a shake of coarse salt, or with a thick slice of slightly underripe tomato, or with the juices and seeds of a very ripe tomato and some very green olive oil.⁵⁴

More than delicious, this bread is productive, from it can be extrapolated an entire diet. It symbolizes what DeSalvo, as a child, thinks of as “*real* food,” as opposed to her mother’s tasteless, “fake” food.⁵⁵ In this memoir, identification unfolds as a simple dialectic: Italian thesis, American antithesis, and the Italian-American synthesis DeSalvo arrives at in adulthood, after visiting the rural southern Puglia her grandparents emigrated from and coming to understand the poverty and threat of starvation that made them leave. DeSalvo is, she admits, “nothing but an invader” in Italy. The marvelous southern cuisine she tastes on her trip was entirely unavailable to her peasant ancestors – her grandmother’s dark bread was a symbol of her poverty, and her mother’s factory-made sliced white loaf equally symbolizes the possibility of a better life presented by emigration. The “either/or” of Italian or American is rejected, substituted by a hyphen which contains within it the entire story of DeSalvo’s family’s migration from Italy to America, and of DeSalvo’s own navigation of that narrative.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 17

The same sort of intergenerational negotiations are on view in Abdellatif Kechiche's 2007 film *La graine et le mulet* (distributed in English as *Couscous* or *The Secret of the Grain*), which follows a family of Tunisian immigrants in southern France as the patriarch, Slimane, attempts to open a couscous restaurant. His French is limited, and so his lover's daughter, Rym, a French girl of Tunisian descent, accompanies him to various offices in the role of translator and guide as he attempts to arrange the restaurant's permits and financing. In the film's climactic scene, a crisis during the restaurant's opening night brings three generations of Slimane's family – including his ex-wife and their children and grandchildren, and his lover and her daughter – together to make the night a success. Rym herself saves the day with a marathon belly dance that distracts the guests from their long wait while the food is prepared. In this performance she shows herself capable of navigating both the French and Tunisian components of her identification narrative, skillfully employing them as the situation demands. When the couscous is finally served the diners marvel with surprise over its delicious taste in an oddly disingenuous moment. Rym, with her fluid hyphen, is already a kind of norm in France, where popular *couscouseries* dot every city, providing a dining option somewhere between fast food and traditional French gastronomy, analogous in some ways to the indigenous *creperies*. The entire film thus seems to address a problem that does not exist: of course a couscous restaurant will succeed in France. Rym's easy code-switching is both the proof and the product of this new reality.

Another Mediterranean example is found in Nadia Kamel's 2007 documentary *Salata Baladi (Egyptian Salad)*, which takes as its central metaphor the idea that Kamel's family is an "Egyptian salad" that is in fact composed of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Egyptian, Italian, Israeli, Palestinian, Turkish, and – sounding a sole non-Mediterranean note – Ukrainian elements. This

work and the others are stories of food and migration that result in comfortable, even triumphant hypophenomena, all of which serve to highlight the strangeness of the absence of families from Emma and Amedeo's narratives in *I Am Love* and *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*.

In this light, Parviz' testimony from *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* establishes him as a foil to Amedeo. Both men have migrated alone to Italy, but Parviz desperately misses his family, and the only emptiness he seeks is the anesthetization provided by his bottles of Chianti. His sadness is relieved by the very foods of home that Amedeo finds so nauseating. Another character in the novel, a Peruvian maid, is similarly alone, but every week on her day off she joins a crowd of her countrymen to feast on *ceviche* and *lomo saltado* and rejoice in the taste of home. Amedeo's difference, and Emma's, is thereby brought into even sharper relief: not only are their migrations solitary, but they are *chosen*, rather than the consequence of economic or political circumstances and obligations. In opposition to every other text I have discussed, they instrumentalize food to write new narratives of identification that are sharply broken off from their pasts. Their migrations are deep dives into Italy, stories of remaking oneself as Italian.

Food is the means and prime marker of these counter-narratives of assimilation, yet it is – or becomes over the course of these stories – divorced from the familial contexts that enrich it with emotional depth in family-based tales of acculturation and assimilation spread over multiple generations. Instead, we are presented with the active process of narrative identification, the result of a wandering, hesitant engagement with the present and a corresponding break with the past. Emma's vacillations over *ukha*, her bond to her doomed, Russian-speaking son and her love for his friend, an Italian chef; Amedeo's sacred breakfast trinity and Roman wolf's milk: these

culinary artifacts signpost what is in, in Emma's case, a story of growing distance from Kitesh, and, in Amedeo's case, a total rejection of Ahmed. The open door Emma leaves behind her when she flees the Recchi mansion and the coma Amedeo is lost in at the end of his story represent the ultimate nullification of past selves. In different ways, they both disappear into Italy, achieving a sublime emptiness that leaves them indistinguishable from the land they inhabit.

*

The narrative similarities between *I Am Love* and *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* are so numerous as to be overwhelming. Both stories are about foreigners in Italy who marry and lose their names before, eventually, losing themselves. Finally, both Amedeo and Emma disappear from their own narratives, their absence proclaiming their assertions of power over their own narratives of identification. What separates these stories is the linearity of the path from Ahmed to Amedeo, when compared with the mysterious transformations undergone by Emma. In *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, the process is simple, and simply explained: Ahmed converted to Amedeo and Amedeo. He hears the name Italians give him and, rather than objecting, takes it as his own and disappears within it. For Emma, the situation is much murkier. We know that "Emma" replaced something, but not what; only that as a child she was called "Kitesh," which was but a nickname or a name her family called her. We are told her Italian husband gave her the name Emma, but not how she reacted to it, how long it took her to feel at home in it – if she ever did – nor whether she will keep it as she escapes to the country with Antonio. The comatose John Doe at the end of *Clash of Civilizations* cleanly overlays "Amedeo," which itself sits neatly atop "Ahmed." "Emma," on the

other hand, is sandwiched between two question marks: the open door she leaves behind her at the end of *I Am Love*, and the former name she claims to have forgotten.

A minor subplot in *I Am Love*, unmentioned thus far, concerns Emma's daughter, Elisabetta, who comes out to Emma as a lesbian during the film. Emma greets this confession with compassion and understanding; it seems, to some degree, to authorize the deepening of Emma's own search for love with Antonio. The approving look Emma and Elisabetta share as Emma finally departs the Recchi mansion speaks of their common experience as women whose ambitions and desires fall outside the traditional patriarchal mores of Italy, and, in doing so, underlines the Emma's major transgression in choosing to write her narrative of identification outside the confines of the home and the family. Given the bold and essential femininity of this move, what can we make of the enduring similarities between Emma's story and Amedeo's? It seems to me that the migrant is somehow always the woman who refuses to be bound. Amedeo's coma is his own open door: he has lost his fiancée, left his mother, and at the end of the novel he is departed from his Italian wife, as well, choosing emptiness over association. The risk both Emma and Amedeo take is one of troubling the names they are given, asserting control over their own narratives of identification. I do not think we need quibble on feminist grounds with the fact that Emma's narrative is framed through her relationships with men, because in both stories the marriage plot that matters is not the one between man and woman, but the one between migrant and homeland. Tancredi and Antonio are the tools by which Emma converts herself into an Italian, as Stefania is the tool by which Amedeo does the same.

In *I Am Love* and *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, the split between past and present is rendered as dually chronological and geographical, and the famous opening line of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* is made literal: "The past is a foreign country:

they do things differently there.” Emma and Amedeo’s stories defy the tropes of migration narratives. Their peregrinations are elective and solitary, and result in complete breakages between the past and the present, their geographical distance from their homelands mirrored by equal mental separations. This split is accomplished by using food to write identification narratives which reject the past’s existence, confining it to the realm of dreams.

In the previous chapter I note Svetlana Boym’s method of distinguishing nostalgia from Freudian melancholia: “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups and nations, between personal and collective memory.”⁵⁶ The counter-narratives, or conversion narratives, of Emma and Amedeo work in opposition to both phenomena: they reject communal attachments while disengaging from the past. Inevitably, perhaps, this disengagement looks very much like the melancholia it opposes. The desperate self-consciousness of Amedeo’s attempt to leave Algeria behind, in particular, cannot but call attention to the prominent role his past continues to play in his narrative. That is, he would not work so hard to make himself Italian were his past not constantly troubling him.

Migration in the Mediterranean is undertaken with a unique sense of privilege, what Franco Cassano calls “the gift of the sea . . . not in the negation of homelands, but in forcing them to be chosen, to be elective.”⁵⁷ This is precisely what Amedeo undertakes when he leaves Algiers for Rome, and it is what Emma gradually discovers over the course of her long residency in Italy. One may choose to become other. What these stories add to Cassano’s formulation is a sense that this process may have consequences: one may indeed choose to become other, but by

⁵⁶ Boym., xvi.

⁵⁷ Cassano, 41. “il dono del mare . . . non nel suo negare le patrie ma nel costringerle a farsi scegliere, a essere elettive.”

taking the foods of the other into one's body one necessarily rewrites the self. In other words, incorporation is identification. Not, simply, "you are what you eat," but, complexly and uncertainly, what you eat affects what you are becoming. You eat what you want to be.

CHAPTER IV

Hunger

In the first half of this dissertation I treated food and migration in relation to time, focusing on the mirror image phenomena of, first, culinary nostalgia for lost homelands, and, second, the voracious consumption of the present by migrants attempting to erase their histories. In both cases, food is employed as a way of manipulating one's relationship with time, either to strengthen ties to the past or to dissolve them. Time and geography consequently bleed into one another as eating becomes a means of, alternately, travelling through the past and across the Mediterranean, or enforcing stasis in the here and now. The present chapter turns to works that are concerned with questions pinned to the particular geopolitical realities of globalization, war, and poverty in the Mediterranean. The stories I examine over the following pages are preoccupied with their narrators' changeable relationships to the Mediterranean space and the consequent ambivalent quality of their movements. Some of these characters are uncertain if they want to leave their homes, while others are certain they want to but uncertain how to realize that goal. They are often ignorant of the reasons for their own restlessness. They share, however, a sense of being out of place, and an ambivalence about how best to situate themselves in their different contexts.

In these texts – Raffaele Nigro's journalistic account of a decade's travels around the Mediterranean sea, *Diario Mediterraneo (Mediterranean Diary, 2001)*; Ḥanān al-Shaykh's novel of the Lebanese Civil War, *Barīd Bayrūt (Beirut Post, 1992)*; and Muḥammad Shukrī's

autobiographical *Al-Khubz al-hāfi* (*For Bread Alone*, 1973) – hunger is keyed to uncertainty, and a feeling of being trapped between impossible options.¹ It manifests in circumstances of alimentary deprivation, but also as a kind of neurotic overconsumption or insatiability. Its bodily aspect inherently entwines sexual desires with the requirements of the stomach.

In order to describe the desires and attitudes that unite these texts, it is necessary to be attentive, first, to what is incommensurate in them. The three works discussed in this chapter do not, at first blush, treat easily comparable phenomena. For Shukrī, hunger is a ravaging, physical fact, while Nigro can only observe deprivation second-hand, and maintains a largely intellectual relationship with food. Al-Shaykh's narrator, too wealthy to feel her diet much constricted during Lebanon's long war, is instead prone to overconsumption as she seeks an exit from her distress. Nigro is concerned with migration and globalization, Shukrī with escaping poverty, and al-Shaykh with the intersecting violations of her land and its people. I do not intend to flatten these distinctions; indeed, a chapter or more could be written on any of these phenomena. I bring these incongruent texts together precisely because they turn such different lenses on the topic of hunger. Their apparent disparity yields to what I argue is a shared understanding of appetite: they link the desire for food, whether it is born of nutritional deprivation, psychological unease, or some combination thereof, to a sense of dislocation within territory that one feels should be familiar. The movements of these texts' narrators are synchronized with their evolving responses to the question of whether to confront this dislocation or flee from it.

¹ A literal translation of the title *Barīd Bayrūt* would be "Mail from Beirut." A published English translation of the novel is titled *Beirut Blues*, mimicking the alliteration of the Arabic and referencing the narrator's love for and identification with Billie Holiday. My choice to translate the title as *Beirut Post* captures, instead, the novel's epistolary structure, while punning on the protagonist's central concern: should she leave Beirut, and, if she did, what would come after?

I begin with a discussion of my key term, “hunger.” Next, I turn to my primary sources, which I have arranged according to the physicality of the hunger(s) they contain (and in inverse chronology), from the largely metaphorical hunger of Raffaele Nigro, to the blended metaphorical and physical hunger of Asmahan, the narrator of *Beirut Post*, to the mainly physical hunger of Shukrī. By proceeding through these texts in this order, I demonstrate how the critical concept of “hunger” points to an array of mental, emotional, and physical wants which can be compared along a continuum. Hunger is often metaphorical, but it is never, even in Nigro’s text, *only* a metaphor. It inextricably unites the desires of the body with those of the mind.

Raffaele Nigro’s *Mediterranean Diary*, echoing Horden and Purcell’s distinction between history “in” the Mediterranean and history “of” the Mediterranean, unites the question of hunger in the Mediterranean with the complementary issue of Nigro’s own hunger *for* the Mediterranean as an idea.² In the wake of Nigro’s voyages, I examine the desire for an escape from violence that permeates *Beirut Post*, and the novel’s figuration of the crossing of the Mediterranean as a monumental and irrevocable step upon the edge of which the protagonist teeters uncertainly. Finally, I find in *For Bread Alone* the blending of real, physical hunger with the protagonist’s belief that he does not fit among his family, his community, or anywhere in a Maghrebi milieu in which Spanish and French colonial mores compete with Arab and Berber cultures. *Beirut Post* would usually be described as Arab or Middle Eastern literature, and *For Bread Alone* could fit within those categories as well, or in that of North African literature. I maintain throughout this chapter, however, that these texts may be productively read through a Mediterranean optic, in which the stakes of migration and intercultural contact are brought to the fore. In all the texts I

² Horden and Purcell, 9.

examine here, hunger is paired not only with anxious indecision, but with a sense that place itself has been distorted around the narrator, leaving the world awry.

On “Hunger”

Just as a mention of Proust’s madeleine is *de rigueur* when discussing literary links between food and memory, when addressing the topic of hunger in literature it is difficult to begin without reference to Knut Hamsun’s 1890 novel, *Hunger*, Franz Kafka’s 1922 short story, “A Hunger Artist,” and Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy, which has recently returned critical attention to the themes brought forward by earlier writers. Kafka’s story presents a psychological sketch of the monumental capacity for hunger of the titular figure, a performer, the last of his kind, who hungers so deeply and unyieldingly that he shrinks away into nothingness (or whose fame has fallen so far that he inadvertently gets buried alive, or perhaps winds up eaten by the panther that takes his place in the cage he sits in at a circus, depending on your reading of the story’s final paragraphs).

As a performer, the hunger artist is defined by his virtuosic capacity to go without food; during forty-day fasts staged in town squares he reaches a state of transcendence in which he feels himself capable of continuing to hunger forever. But when his artistic practice goes out of fashion he is reduced to working for a circus, where his cage is increasingly neglected until, at last, a circus supervisor decides to replace the hunger artist with a crowd-pleasing panther. At this moment, the hunger artist speaks after a long silence, and in doing so moves his practice of hunger from the realm of art to that of necessity. “I have to hunger; I cannot do otherwise . . . because I could not find the food that was to my taste. If I had found it, believe me, I would have

caused a stir, and would have eaten my fill, like you and everybody else.”³ The story invites multiple readings of the phenomenon of hunger: it is an artistic choice molded to the demands of entertainment and public spectacle, but it is also a kind of ecstatic discipline recalling the self-induced starvation of ascetics seeking nirvana or the divine.⁴ Layered atop all this is the final matter of taste, the artist’s hunger as an aesthetic rejection of unworthy foodstuffs.

In her study of anorexia in modern culture, Leslie Heywood explains the phenomenon of choosing to hunger via the “anorexic logic” of control.⁵ In Heywood’s formulation, the choice to hunger – a choice made by, among others, anorexics, Kafka’s hunger artist, and religious ascetics – is about coping with one’s psychological submission to aesthetic norms by exerting control over one’s physical body. Hunger here is thus the symptom of an internalized neurosis resulting from an externally imposed aesthetics of the body. Even when wearing a spiritual or artistic guise, hunger inevitably retains this bodily, aesthetic – or grotesque – aspect.⁶ The desired experience is not, therefore, hunger itself, but the visible and public reduction of the hungering body. This spectacle of thinness is what the hunger artist’s performance revolves around: “He would sit, pale, in his black singlet, with sharply jutting ribs...and stretch out an arm through the bars for his audience to feel how thin he was.”⁷ His emaciated body is the proof of his worthiness, his magnificent talent for hungering, and above all his control over his own appetite. He would eat only if he found worthy food.

³ Kafka, 64-5.

⁴ For a sustained discussion of hunger as ecstatic discipline, see Bynum 1988.

⁵ Heywood, xii.

⁶ In the case of anorexia, body dysmorphia transforms the aestheticized hungering body into a desexualized grotesque, manifesting the frequent linkage of anorexia with a desire to return to a childlike, (supposedly) asexual state. The anorexic self is never thin enough. This self’s internal perceptions are at odds with the public gaze. See Heywood, esp. pp. 2-16, 173-186.

⁷ Kafka, 57.

Knut Hamsun's novel, *Hunger*, depicts a hunger that is no sense chosen, but enforced by external circumstances such as conflict, scarcity, or poverty. *Hunger*'s unnamed narrator is a struggling writer in Christiania (Oslo), Norway, whose hunger, in a self-perpetuating cycle, drains him of the energy he needs to write the pieces that he believes would earn him money to buy food. "I had noticed very clearly that every time I went hungry a little too long," the narrator observes, "it was as though my brains simply ran quietly out of my head and left me empty."⁸ All that remains is the hunger itself, which, in a surreal reversal, the narrator understands as a dissociated agent consuming his own body:

It gnawed without mercy in my chest, kept up a strange and silent labor in there. It was like a couple of dozen tiny creatures who put their heads over to one side and gnawed awhile, then put their heads over to the other side and gnawed awhile, lay for a moment absolutely still, started again, bored their way in without making noise or hurrying, and left behind them empty areas wherever they went.⁹

This kind of hunger, imposed from without, shares with Kafka's story a fixation on the corporeal, here manifested as an unsatisfied, yearning body, rather than an unsatisfying, rejected form. The poverty of *Hunger*'s protagonist suggests his hunger is a symptom of political or economic realities, as opposed to psychological ones. Yet even granted *Hunger*'s strident physicality, literary hunger is never only a hunger for food. The narrator's desire to be a writer coexists with and informs the desires of his body. His wantings are coterminous, and their satisfaction will be achieved simultaneously. This duality informs the concept of hunger I bring to bear in this chapter. In the discussions that follow, hunger is, in addition to the result of

⁸ Hamsun, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

physical deprivation, a symptom of wanting that, although it may begin with nutritional or alimentary desire, always stretches towards a place of more abstract longing.

Suzanne Collins' dystopian *Hunger Games* trilogy has brought hunger back to the fore of critical discourse. At the trilogy's beginning the young protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is in the woods hunting animals, but she soon finds herself the prey in a different sort of hunt, as she fights to survive in the artificial wilderness where the titular games are staged. The story, like Hamsun's *Hunger*, links physical and psychological hungers. Katniss fights first for her life, and subsequently to rescue her people from poverty and to achieve the self-determination denied her by the fascist system that controls her world. This layering of political forces over physiological and psychological needs highlights Katniss' lack of control over her own circumstances; even more than for Hamsun's narrator, Katniss' foundational hunger is directly, and deliberately, imposed on her from without. In this light, hunger is figured not as a circumstantial phenomenon but as a fundamental fact of the world, engendered by structural economic inequality. Hunger – whether for the literal sustenance of food during Katniss' childhood, or, on a much larger level as the trilogy progresses, for freedom – is the core feature of her reality.

Food, in the *Hunger Games*, has symbolic value in addition to its nutritional function. In an essay on the trilogy, the critic Max Despain writes, “food [is] a metaphor for cultural, social, political, and personal longing . . . [in] a dystopian future where a brewing rebellion is best portrayed through hunger, and independence comes when that hunger and its metaphorical substitutes are finally satisfied.”¹⁰ Despain implies that these two types of hunger are inseparable, and perhaps indistinguishable. He merges physical and metaphorical hunger into a unitary and overwhelming desire for sustenance, whether that sustenance is food or freedom.

¹⁰ Despain, 69.

Layered over these metaphors is a reminder that this sustenance has to be earned to be appreciated. The self-induced vomiting of residents of the Capitol during a banquet in *Catching Fire*, the second volume of the trilogy, is a function of the glut of food in their world. Detecting echoes of the excesses of Ancient Rome, readers understand the consumption habits of those who live in the Capitol as a naïve indulgence born of extreme privilege wherein ingestion is inverted into expulsion, simply to eat more. Starvation may be imposed from without, or a sign of self-loathing or revulsion, but, recalling ascetic traditions, privation may also enable transcendence. Hunger becomes a precondition to knowledge.

What tantalizes – and I use this verb advisedly, with reference to the always-just-out-of-reach food and water that punished Tantalus in the Greek myth – the protagonists of the stories I focus on below is the possibility of making decisions, achieving fulfillment, and reaching understanding of their circumstances. This is the the core of my symbolic reading of hunger as a way of being held apart from the surrounding world, making of oneself an outsider, analyzing one’s own circumstances from a half-step above or beyond, much like the hunger artist who, inside his cage, observes, judges, and finds wanting the sustenance the world offers him. The characters whose tales I examine below are ill at ease with their surroundings, and turn a critical gaze on the quotidian and exceptional alike in a search for personal meaning. They seek an understanding of the places they occupy in the Mediterranean, and of the places they *could* occupy, should their decisions lead them in new directions. They come to reject the possibility that their problems are internal, seeking instead to remake their environments according to their steadfast seeking. In *Mediterranean Diary*, *Beirut Post*, and *For Bread Alone*, hunger is a wayfinding device for the dislocated.

In all my examples, near constant movement is the key which unlocks the narrators' and protagonists' desires. In *Mediterranean Diary* this movement takes a paradigmatic Mediterranean form, as Nigro crosses and recrosses the sea, moving from port to port in a characteristic pattern. In *For Bread Alone* and *Beirut Post* a less frequently discussed but, I argue, equally Mediterranean oscillation is given prominence, as the narrators' movements trace orbits between mountainous hinterlands and the urban Mediterranean coast. Braudel describes the mountains surrounding much of the Mediterranean as a "refuge," containing, in some cases, political and religious zones that are entirely separate from coasts, and in other instances providing seasonal homes for pastoral populations who link the plains and the highlands along the paths of ancient transhumance.¹¹ The narrators of *For Bread Alone* and *Beirut Post* come down from the mountains to position themselves within quintessentially Mediterranean cities that they endeavor to remake according to their desires. Their movements towards and away from the urban coast track with their shifting perspectives on the questions that dominate their lives. The interior holds the possibility of escape, while the coast where each eventually settles signifies the possibility of satisfying their hungers, and the choice to hold fast against their shared sense of dislocation.

Sweet Enemies

Raffaele Nigro's *Mediterranean Diary* (2003) chronicles ten years of the author's travels around the Mediterranean. Nigro, a journalist based in Bari, was inspired to undertake this project by the "changing panorama of immigrants" in his hometown beginning in the 1970s, when Arabs, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, and, later, Senegalese and Nigerians joined the

¹¹ Braudel, 31.

Slavs and Romani who already made their homes in Bari alongside the Italian population.¹² The Italian south, to Nigro, had always been “a land where an orientalism and an occidentalism coexisted,” with the Italian peninsula and the Adriatic Sea operating as a sort of fault line “crushed” between East and West, North and South, “a wall of water between the Catholic world and the Islamic world,” between Europe and the Orient.¹³ Bari’s changing demographics – and the endemic poverty afflicting Bari in particular and southern Italy in general – seemed to Nigro to indicate a turn from a narrow fixation on the idea of “the south of Italy” to a broader affiliation with “the Souths of the world,” inspiring anew the question of whether Italy is properly European, and how, in particular, the southern part of the peninsula should position itself in a world coming to be defined by human migration.¹⁴ Nigro, attentive to major theories of the Mediterranean put forward by Fernand Braudel, Franco Cassano, and Predrag Matvejevic, among others, is sanguine about the utopic possibilities presented by a Mediterranean frame, rehearsing the standard dichotomy between images of Mediterranean harmony and conflict. He believes that the Mediterranean could be “a sea traversed by forces that unite, by cultural unity. [Yet] this Arcadian image was not, is not concrete, because the Mediterranean is a place of conflicts and migrations.”¹⁵

What troubles Nigro is his inability to define and locate the source of a vague “Mediterranean feeling” – tentative though it may be – that has haunted him since he first

¹² Nigro, v. “il panorama in mutamento.”

¹³ Ibid., “una terra in cui convivessero un orientalismo e un occidentalismo.” 61, “Il mio paese è come schiacciato tra queste due pulsioni.” 112, “l’Adriatico un muro d’acqua tra mondo cattolico e mondo islamico.”

¹⁴ Ibid., v. “Il sud d’Italia...i Sud del mondo.”

¹⁵ Ibid., v-vi. “...il Mediterraneo un mare percorso da forze aggreganti, da uniformità culturali. Questa immagine arcadica non era, non è concreta, perché il Mediterraneo è un luogo di conflitti e di migrazioni.”

remarked upon the changing patterns of migration across the sea.¹⁶ The *Diary* presents the results of his attempt to investigate this feeling through the experience of traveling around the Mediterranean, meeting with writers, artists, and intellectuals, fervent nationalists and idealistic regionalists, men and women who offer their own perspectives on the worth of a Mediterranean framework. Nigro juxtaposes these wide-ranging travels with episodes set closer to home, among the immigrant populations of Bari. The question always returns to the position of Italy between Europe and the South. In words that recall the borders drawn by the bigoted Milanese professor from Amara Lakhous' *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, Nigro asks, "Is Rome closer to Oslo or Tunis?"¹⁷ For Nigro, the answer to this question would provide a way of understanding his entire world via a taxonomy of difference, or a genealogical tree of cultures. He wants to know who his neighbors are, who his brothers are, and how to position himself and his country in the contemporary world, at the crossroads of Mediterranean migrations.

The driving hunger in *Mediterranean Diary* may be merely a metaphor inspired by Nigro's desire for definition, but this is complemented early in the text by the physical hunger expressed by a young Albanian named Dashnor, who contacts Nigro after the publication of one of Nigro's early novels, a historical fiction inspired by Nigro's participation in a memorial festival held by the Arbëreshe community in Italy of Italo-Albanians who fled Turkish conquests in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. "You, Mister Rafael, wrote of us. You are now a friend of the Albanians. But," Dashnor asks, "have you been to Albania?"¹⁸ A friendship grows

¹⁶ Ibid., v. "il sentimento del Mediterraneo."

¹⁷ Ibid., vi. "Roma è più prossima a Oslo o a Tunisi?"

¹⁸ Ibid., 9. "Voi, mister Rafael, avete scritto di noi. Voi ora amico di popolo Albanese. Ma voi conosce Albania?" Dashnor's Italian often has an ungrammatical, pidgin quality. For ease of comprehension, I have chosen to normalize my English translations of his words.

through telephone calls, eventually accompanied by visits back and forth across the sea. When Dashnor visits Italy, he confronts Nigro with his hunger.

“Could I see a supermarket,” he asks?

I take him to a supermarket. He pales, he brings his hands to his cheeks, to his temples, he is stunned by the quantity of food, of clothing, of utensils. “It’s incredible,” he repeats, “incredible.”

“What is incredible, Dashnor?”

“It’s more than the mind could imagine. Here is why when an Albanian returns home from the west they take him straight to the insane asylum.”¹⁹

Dashnor is Nigro’s oracle of difference. Where Nigro wishes to see only shared cultures and values across the Mediterranean, Dashnor continually reminds him of disparities, the political and historical divergence of the fates of the Mediterranean’s various populations. Poverty, which feels so omnipresent in Bari, is relative. In an early exchange Dashnor describes himself thusly to Nigro: “I am thin, but here everyone is thin, without a western stomach, without even a little money in the bank. I am Muslim. But what does it matter if I am Christian or Muslim? God is one, if God is.”²⁰ Dashnor highlights one dimension of difference while resisting another. What separates him from Nigro has more to do with the availability of food and money – explicitly linked, here – than with religion, which begins to seem like a too-easy way of distinguishing

¹⁹ Ibid., 29. “«Potrei vedere un supermercato?» chiede. Lo porto in un supermercato. Diviene pallido, si porta le mani alle guance, alle tempie, è stordito dalla quantità di cibi, di vestiare, di utensili. «È incredibile – ripete – incredibile.» «Cos’è incredibile Dashnor?». «È più di quello che la mente può immaginare. Ecco perché quando un albanese torna a casa dall’Occidente lo ricoverano dritto nella clinica dei pazzi.»”

²⁰ Ibid., 10. “Sono magro, ma qui tutti magri, senza pancia occidentale, senza piccolo capitale in banca. Io musulmano. Ma che importa se cristiano o musulmano? Dio è uno, se c’è.”

Mediterranean populations, of splitting North from South and East from West, especially in a world where these lines are crossed so often by ever increasing numbers of migrants.

Nigro's place within this human flood is uncertain. The freedom with which he travels around the sea is a token of his privilege, especially as Dashnor, one of his primary informants, lacks the European Union passport that smooths Nigro's way. But Nigro's meditations on the Mediterranean are not an idle artifact of his liberty; his preoccupation is shared by writers from all around the sea with whom he meets informally and at a series of conferences on the Mediterranean idea. The lengthy catalog of his interlocutors includes names by now familiar in this dissertation – Predrag Matvejevic and Muḥammad Shukrī, the latter of whose autobiographical work is discussed later in this chapter – alongside other well-known authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Adonis, Emile Habibi, Dominique Fernandez, and Vassilis Vassilikos. There is something magnificent about this parliament of Mediterranean thinkers, brought together to consider the potential value of the idea of their region. What emerges from their meetings is a series of declarative statements which come to dominate the tone of the *Diary*: “The Mediterranean is x,” “Greece is y,” “The Mediterranean is not z.” Here, again, is the desire for definition, the hunger of intellectuals after the meaning of the Mediterranean.

Collecting these formulations provides a window into what the Mediterranean means to those who write it. Reflecting on the destabilizing possibilities presented by floods of refugees, Nigro thinks back on the long history of the Mediterranean:

Perhaps the Mediterranean is this, a space of the possibility of change, of arrivals and escapes, inspired by the excessive proximity of the coasts. Thus the Phoenicians colonized the Maghreb, the Greeks southern Italy, the Daunians and Illyrians the western coast of the Adriatic, and the Romans the entire

Mediterranean. A continuous pouring out of men and culture. Nothing ever stops between the shores of this sea, and the migrations fostered cultural exchange and enrichment. Cultures died and regenerated thanks precisely to this continuous remixing of peoples.²¹

Later, meditating on the Pillars of Hercules while visiting Mycenae, he adds, “The Mediterranean is the place of history, of mutations, of the winds, the merchants, the sailors, and the soldiers who scatter, as Braudel explains, cultural pollen.”²² While I can find no reference to cultural “pollen” in Braudel, Nigro’s metaphor reflects the sentiments behind many of Braudel’s observations in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. I am reminded, in particular, of Braudel’s dictum, “The Mediterranean has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow.”²³ The salient type of movement in the present day, more than trade, more than piracy, more than war or colonialism, is migration.

Nigro’s flattening formulations, which attempt to embrace the entire sea in just a few phrases, are joined by parallel phrases that attempt to acknowledge difference, though Nigro cannot help beginning with precisely the kind of religious distinctions Dashnor earlier rejected: “The Mediterranean, therefore, is not only the place where the vine and olive root, but also

²¹ Ibid, 41. “Forse il Mediterraneo è questo, un luogo della possibilità delle mutazioni, degli arrivi e delle fughe, fomentati dall’eccessiva vicinanza delle coste. Così i fenici hanno colonizzato il Maghreb, i greci il Sud d’Italia, gli illiri e i dauni la costa adriatica occidentale e i romani l’intero Mediterraneo. Un continuo travaso di uomini e di culture. Nulla mai si è fermato tra le sponde di questo mare e le migrazioni hanno favorito l’osmosi e l’arricchimento culturale. Le culture muoiono e si rigenerano proprio grazie a questo continuo rimescolamento di popoli.”

²² Ibid., 61. “Il Mediterraneo è il luogo della storia, delle mutazioni, dei venti, dei mercanti, dei soldati che spargono, come spiega Braudel, il polline della cultura.”

²³ Braudel, 277.

where the words of the Gospels and the Qur'an took root."²⁴ In mentioning these scriptures, is Nigro attempting to find common ground by envisioning the Mediterranean as the cradle of monotheism, or intending instead to remind himself, and his readers, of religious difference? Is it possible to do one without the other? Breaking the Mediterranean apart along confessional lines flies in the face of Nigro's unitary project, yet he is fixated on this single marker, perhaps because it allows him to retain Italy's place at the center of it all, along that imagined fault line between east and west. Regionalist thought is, as always, at odds with nationalist imaginaries. And, indeed, Nigro finds his meditations returning always to the particularity of Italy. He reproduces a letter from an Albanian poet named Cozeta Bassia, a refugee in Greece who asks for Nigro's help to enter Italy with the words, "Greece is not beautiful, not modern, like Italy. Greece is not Europe." Nigro thinks in reply, "For the Albanians the world across the [Adriatic] sea was and is Eldorado, Eden. The escapes of Albanians reveal themselves as flights to a bourgeois paradise, flights from peasant hell and archaic tradition, from a condition of total stasis."²⁵ This glorifies the Italian alternative, but it also reflects Dashnor's initial figuration of the inferior status of Albania vis-à-vis Italy and, by extension, a vaguely dreamed of Europe or European Mediterranean. Though Nigro's travels bring him all around the sea, Albania is the most frequently occurring other of the *Diary*, and perhaps this, too, is only to be expected: Derrida reminds us that the most distressing other is "the nearest neighbor. *Unheimlich*."²⁶ Albania and Italy, gazing at each other across the narrow Adriatic, united by history but divided

²⁴ Nigro, 61. "Il Mediterraneo dunque non è soltanto il luogo dove attecchiscono la vite e l'olivo, ma dove sono attecchite le parole del Vangelo e del Corano..."

²⁵ Ibid., 68-9. "«Grecia non è bella, non moderna, come Italia. Grecia non è Europa».... Per gli albanesi il mondo di là dal mare era ed è l'Eldorado, l'Eden. Le fughe di albanesi si stanno rivelando fughe verso un paradiso borghese... fughe dall'inferno contadino e dall'arcaicità tradizionale, da una condizione di stasi totale...."

²⁶ Derrida, 37.

by politics, culture, and class, cannot but wonder at each other's alterity, and imagine a way of synthesizing that difference.

Dashnor, as often in *Mediterranean Diary*, holds the key. In one of their earliest conversations, Nigro asks Dashnor what he thinks of Italians. Dashnor replies, "They were our enemies, but sweet enemies."²⁷ This bittersweet formulation seems to me to encapsulate, in just a few words, the entire history of Mediterranean rhetoric, and the nature of the ties that continue to link its various peoples. Mediterraneanism, if such a thing exists, is the desire for brotherhood, for amity, for healing. To be a sweet enemy is to be loved and resented, desired and feared. It is, in sum, to negotiate these oppositions. Collapsing binaries, Dashnor's poignant words describe and reflect the Mediterranean world.²⁸

At a writers' conference in Turin, Nigro wonders, "What elements join us Europeans to the Arabs and Africans, other than some foods, the olive, the sun, the scarcity of rain, white lime houses, the flies that devour us in summer, prolificacy, chorality, life in the outdoors, poverty,

²⁷ Nigro, 9. "Sono stati nostri nemici, ma nemici dolci."

²⁸ The same sentiments are reflected in Tahar Ben Jelloun's observations on colonialism when he and Nigro speak in Naples: «Ho speranza che, più della Francia, l'Italia aiuti il Maghreb. Ho l'impressione che l'Italia, che ha conosciuto il problema dell'emigrazione possa capire meglio gli immigrati del Maghreb che vengono qui. E poi, le popolazioni maghrebine sono mediterranee, esse somigliano un po' alle popolazioni italiane, soprattutto del Sud. C'è infatti una complicità, una familiarità, una parentela di comportamenti e di sensibilità; ciò costituisce un legame importante fra l'Italia e il Maghreb» (51)." If France disappoints Ben Jelloun, he sees in Italy the possibility of aid stemming from mutual understanding. Italy and the Maghreb somehow resemble one another – Italy becomes a logical destination for Arabo- and Francophone migrants from the Maghreb; preferable, even, to France, not because of postcolonial animosity but simply because Italy and the Maghreb share a Mediterranean-ness from which France is excluded by virtue of being too stable, too northern, too European, and consequently incapable of understanding the plight of a Mediterranean migrant. A full consideration of Italy's colonial history is outside the scope of this dissertation. Consult Rodogno 2006, Labanca 2002, Ben-Ghiat 2015, and Del Boca 2005 for more.

the light, the silence?”²⁹ He overwhelms himself with this list, unsure whether it means Mediterraneans share everything, or that they share nothing important, and whether these shared qualities are to be praised or denounced. Predrag Matvejevic, remembering a different symposium in his *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, comes to a similarly ambivalent conclusion: “Even the closest Mediterranean neighbors are woefully ignorant of one another; nor do they show much desire to learn.”³⁰ Nigro and Matvejevic’s mournful characterizations recall Michael Herzfeld’s concept of “cultural intimacy,” “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity” – Mediterranean, in this case – “that are considered a source of internal embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.”³¹ This “cultural intimacy” is what engenders Nigro’s weakness for list-making, a habit of lucidly enumerating the facets of an apparently shared Mediterranean existence, while wondering how important they are, alternating between negative and positive descriptions of the sea. In Tangiers, he observes, “Dust and dirtiness are the common denominators of the Mediterranean.” But then he visits “a typical place where one can eat swordfish and salad,” and reflects, “These salads are the primary nourishment in the Mediterranean, together with olive oil, here more acidic, there more sweet. Olives, cheese, salad, and spicy oil, from the Bosphorus to Gibraltar.” And, a moment later, he responds to the strong smells emanating from a dish of sweets. “They are the smells that I have detected in the entire basin, from Athens to Palermo to Tunis. The sweets of the Mediterranean have in common excess. But excess is a constant in the lives of these people, from the ostentation of their intimacy to their poverty, their richness, their violence, their pomp,

²⁹ Nigro, 99. “Quali elementi accomunano noi europei agli arabi e agli africani, oltre alcuni cibi, oltre l’olivo, il sole, la scarsezza di piogge, le case bianche di calce, le mosche che ci divorano d’estate, la prolificità, la corallità, la vita all’aperto, il disagio economico, la luce, il silenzio?”

³⁰ Matvejevic, 210.

³¹ Herzfeld, 3.

their friendship.”³² Everywhere he remarks on the olive trees, stalking him through Turkey and Greece, following him to Morocco and Andalusia, and reminding him always of the terrain surrounding his native Bari. In the *Diary*'s concluding passages he returns to his list-making oscillations, describing “the ideology of slowness, of reflection, of poverty, of simplicity, the culture of the sea. . . .”³³ It remains unclear whether Nigro sees these qualities as valorous or condemnable. His tone, at times, veers on the clinical, or merely bored. How many ways are there to describe an olive tree?

Nigro is playing on the edges of a melancholy suspicion that the adjective “Mediterranean” has been emptied of meaning. He wants, in a word, “authenticity,” instead of the sea he is confronted with, “a sea inevitably artificial.”³⁴ In food he finds the primary evidence of this manufactured quality. While visiting Rabat, he remarks, “Two steps from us there is an Italian restaurant that offers, by now, of Italian food, only pizza, the most international food in the world, more diffused than Coca-Cola and McDonald's.”³⁵ Globalization alienates Nigro from his own Italian culture and, by extension, from the Mediterranean at large, in which rustic olive groves have become tourist attractions serviced by neatly paved roads, the sea itself regulated by the laws of international tourism.³⁶ Nigro's dislocation is reflected in his summary comment on

³² Nigro, 245. “Polvere e sporcizia che sono i denominatori comuni del Mediterraneo.... un locale tipico dove si può mangiare pesce spada e salade. Queste insalate che sono il nutrimento primo nel Mediterraneo, insieme all'olio d'oliva, dove più acido e dove più dolce. Olive, formaggio, insalate e olio piccante dal Bosforo a Gibilterra.... Sono gli odori che ho sentito in tutto il bacino, da Atene a Palermo a Tunisi. I dolci del Mediterraneo hanno in comune l'eccesso. Ma l'eccesso è una costante nella vita di questi popoli, dalla ostentazione di familiarità alla povertà, alla ricchezza, alla violenza, allo sfarzo, all'amicizia.”

³³ Ibid., 319. “l'ideologia della lentezza, della riflessione, della povertà, della semplicità, la cultura del mare”

³⁴ Ibid., 236. “Un mare inevitabilmente artefatto.”

³⁵ Ibid., 247. “A due passi da noi c'è un ristorante italiano che di italiano ha ormai solo la pizza, il cibo più internazionale del mondo, più diffuso della Coca-Cola e dei McDonald's.”

³⁶ Ibid., 195, 236.

the writers' conference in Torino: "We are speaking about the Mediterranean as one speaks about somewhere far away."³⁷ Migration partakes of the same instability of meaning. Predrag Matvejevic prods Nigro, "In Italian, think, there are many ways to indicate the same condition." What follows is a list, difficult to translate, of Italian synonyms for the migrant: "displaced persons, refugees, expatriates, deportees, illegal immigrants, fugitives, expelled persons, exiles, and those driven out."³⁸ The close shades of meaning are impossible to render perfectly in English, but the point comes through clearly: there are many ways of describing the same experience, some of which even force a single phenomenon to contain its opposite. Julia Clancy-Smith does something similar in *Mediterraneans*, listing types of movement where Matvejevic lists varieties of movers: "wanderings, pilgrimage, pastoral nomadism, transhumance, voluntary relocation, forced expatriation, trade diaspora, travel, tourism, slavery, and labor mobility." The mental work of making these lists constitutes, in itself, a critical perspective on migration.³⁹ The Mediterranean is made equally from olive groves and that vacuous pizza, equally by refugees, fugitives, and tourists. And yet, if the evacuation of specificity from pizza shows us that in food we can detect signs of the collapse of some "authentic" Mediterranean, food offers, as well, nourishment for Nigro's metaphysical hunger. If Nigro seeks meaning in the Mediterranean, here it is, in the olives that dog his travels, in the internally contradictory lists he compiles of what the Mediterranean could be. Nigro's hunger can only be satisfied by, as Dashnor might put it, finding the sweetness that binds the elements of these oppositions. In *Mediterranean Diary*

³⁷ Ibid., 100. "Parliamo di Mediterraneo come si parla di un luogo lontano."

³⁸ Ibid., 110. "«In lingua italiana, pensi, ci sono molti modi per indicare la stessa condizione: profughi, rifugiati, espatriati, deportati, clandestini, fuggiaschi, espulsi, esiliati, scacciati»."

³⁹ Clancy-Smith, 4. She continues, "The critical elements in taxonomies of motion are the relative presence or absence of force, the motivations and objectives of those favoring departure over staying put, the duration and patterns of expatriation, and whether the place of exile became over time a space of belonging." These questions are at the heart of my dissertation.

Nigro reproduces the text of a talk he gave on the subject of “Food culture in the Latin Mediterranean.” This wandering, introspective speech turns to religion, navigating in a single paragraph between Christ, Noah, and Dionysus to climax with this gnomic koan: “Food is life. Life is God and the food of the Mediterranean is God.”⁴⁰ Nigro, who does not personally experience privation, makes his desire for the Mediterranean legible through the metaphor of hunger. If there is a coherent meaning to be found in Nigro’s Mediterranean, it lies in the region’s food and the human paths along which it travels.

Shrapnel Rice

In *Beirut Post* (Ḥanān al-Shaykh, 1992), Nigro’s circum-Mediterranean travels and the large cast of his interlocutors are replaced with the solitary figure of Asmahan, a Beiruti woman searching for stability during the long-running Lebanese Civil War.⁴¹ The novel is structured as a series of ten letters composed by Asmahan to various recipients, but it is less an epistolary novel than a stream-of-consciousness narrative built on an epistolary scaffold. The intended recipients of the letters include friends, acquaintances, and lovers, but Asmahan also addresses herself to Beirut, to Billie Holiday, to the land, and to the war itself. The epistolary superstructure creates a space for Asmahan to talk aloud, to work through her relationship with the armed conflict that shadows her life. The disjuncture between the framework provided by the formalities of letter writing and the clear fact that these letters are likely not intended to be sent imbues the narrative with ambivalence. Lacking direction but retaining financial security by virtue of her wealthy, land-owning family, with plenty to eat in a city of the hungry, over the course of the novel

⁴⁰ Nigro, 264. “Il cibo è la vita. La vita è Dio e il cibo del Mediterraneo è Dio.”

⁴¹ Originally published in 1992, with a revised edition in 1996. I quote throughout from the 1996 edition.

Asmahan casts about for some remedy for her malaise, a way of either confronting or escaping the conflict that surrounds her. As with Kamāl Raḥīm's *Days in the Diaspora*, *Beirut Post* is from its first pages built around a question of departure that is not resolved until the final chapter: will Asmahan abandon Beirut? Her emigration is presented as a possibility, an open question awaiting an answer.

Like Raffaele Nigro, Asmahan does not herself suffer much from deprivation. As a member of Beirut's dwindling cosmopolitan class, she is privileged to largely avoid the shortages that so often attend war. Nevertheless, she bears careful witness to the privations around her. In the apartment she shares with her grandmother in Beirut, their maid, Zemzem, overflows with rumors about "Someone's mother [who] sold her wedding ring so that she could make fattoush and kibbeh."⁴² Asmahan's own grandmother decides "that eating kashkaval cheese would not extend our lives, so she stopped buying it." Zemzem, meanwhile, "began to roast one chicken instead of two, and the basics began to disappear from the houses of working and middle class people. Our neighbor no longer brought around a pot of coffee in the afternoon when she came over to hear our news. Instead she began to bring berry juice that she brought from her village."⁴³ Later, Asmahan describes small changes in her own kitchen:

The big gas oven had been the pride of the kitchen after Zemzem insisted on buying one to be like the Beirut neighbors' daughter who made fancy cakes. It stood silent, now, on account of the unavailability of gas. If we opened the gas

⁴² Al-Shaykh, 80.

"«أم فلان باعت محبسها مشان تعمل فتّوش وكبّة»."

⁴³ Ibid., 81.

"فكّرت جدّتي أن جبنة الفشقوان لن تطيل حياتنا إذا أكلناها، فتوقّفنا عن شرائها. وأخذت زمزم تشوي دجاجة واحدة بدل دجاجتين بينما أخذت تفرغ بيوت الوظيفين ومتوسطي الحال من الأوليات. لم تعد الجارة تأتي بركوة القهوة في العصر حتّى تكون على مقربة منّا تسمع أخبارنا، بل أخذت تأتي بعصير التوت الذي أتت به من ضيعتها."

line a squeaking sound rang out, and it looked dirty, since Zemzem no longer bought the special, expensive powder for cleaning it. Meanwhile, in the corner of the kitchen we left a hole made by a shell, and replaced a window with nylon, having given up on repairing it.⁴⁴

These accounts of shifts within the female, domestic sphere describe something adjacent to hunger – scarcity gnawing at the edges of Asmahan’s privilege. Though she remains unharmed directly, shortages and attendant lifestyle changes come to surround Asmahan, enfolding her in a panoramic experience of the war. The war becomes the salient fact of her life both directly, through its obvious violence, and indirectly, as a furtive thread twining through the apparently unrelated ephemera of her existence. During a time of increased violence, Asmahan bitterly jokes about cooking a missile fragment, should one land in her and her grandmother’s kitchen, and serving it with “shrapnel rice.”⁴⁵ The war is in her oven and her refrigerator, whistling through her windowpanes and the rumors Zemzem brings her. Asmahan senses it as a gestalt emerging from the myriad changes around her.

Through the accumulating weight of these changes the war wraps itself around her. A news story about the plight of foreign hostages in a particularly violent district of Beirut leads Asmahan to describe herself as a hostage, too, a condition which makes it impossible for her to imagine life other than as it is. “I no longer think about life outside my own place,” she worries.⁴⁶ “The hostages have ceased enjoying food, and my appetite has disappeared, too. To

⁴⁴ Ibid., 237.

“فرن الغاز الكبير أيضاً والذي كان مفخرة المطبخ. بعد أن أصرت زمزم على شرائه أسوة بابنة الجيران البيروتية التي كانت تحضر قوالب الكاتوه. يقف الآن ساكناً حسب توفر الغاز. وإذا فتحناه يتعالى صريره وتظهر قذارته إذ لم تعد زمزم تشتري المسحوق الخاص الغالي لتنظيفه. بينما وفي زاوية المطبخ تركنا ثقباً خلفته قذيفة ونافذة هرّ زجاجها فسدناه بالنايلون، بعد أن ينسنا من إصلاحه أكثر من مرة.”

⁴⁵ Ibid., 49 “أرز الشظايا”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 35.

eat one needs hands made for morsels of food, teeth for chewing, a tongue for tasting.”⁴⁷ Her alienation from Beirut is mirrored in a sense of alienation from the functions of her own body. Even so, she laments, “I, like the hostages, have no alternative to continuing with the daily routine.”⁴⁸ When she enters a bomb shelter she at first, confusedly, thinks that the people around her are “prisoners, especially the children . . . Fear had eaten their faces.”⁴⁹ The civil war holds Beirut and all its inhabitants captive. Those sheltering in a bomb shelter are, like the narrator of Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, starving and yet being themselves consumed, by fear. For Asmahan, though, who has the wealth and means to flee and has been repeatedly offered the opportunity to do so, this captivity is a matter of choice. By staying in Beirut she is choosing to be held hostage; if she were to leave, she would be choosing instead to be an exile. The war violates her by forcing her to make this decision. There are no real alternatives here, only different ways of submitting to the war’s reality. Asmahan’s search is for a way around this choice.

The characters that surround her suggest different models of accommodation with these unappealing options. *Beirut Post* begins with Asmahan’s letter to her friend Hayat, who has abandoned Beirut for Belgium, but has failed to truly escape the war by doing so. On the phone, Asmahan hears a pining for Lebanon in Hayat’s voice. Asmahan repeats back Hayat’s stories of life abroad. “You’ve found a Lebanese cook who makes you kibbeh and mulukhiya? And your son’s playing tennis and is going to be a champion and you are homesick. Oh, my dear one, so

”لم أعد أفكر بالحياة خارج مكاني“

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

”توقّف الرهائن عن التلذذ بالأكل وأنا توقّفت شهيتي. الأكل بحاجة إلى أيدي مستسلمة للقمة، لأسنان تمضغ واللسان يتذوق“

⁴⁸ Ibid., 33.

”إلا أنّي كالرهائن لا أجد بداً من إكمال روتين الأيام“

⁴⁹ Ibid., 34-5.

”فكرت أنهم سجناء. خاصّة الأlad . . . وقد أكل الخوف وجوهوم.“

homesick.”⁵⁰ The weaving of banalities about Hayat’s son’s exploits on the tennis court with nostalgic fragments about Lebanese cooking reveals the ways that longing infects every moment of Hayat’s life abroad, a low refrain troubling the apparent fact of her escape. When Asmahan imagines her own potential flight, for Paris, she decides, “I will refuse to get to know Lebanese people there, I don’t want to become like them.”⁵¹ If Asmahan makes the impossible choice, she will do so with a dramatic completeness. She rejects the possibility of joining a community in exile, and explicitly declines to engage in the type of culinary nostalgia that so often characterizes the experience of migration.⁵² When Hayat reveals the depths of her yearning for Beirut, Asmahan impatiently demands a resoluteness of which Hayat is incapable. “I used to listen to you as you told me you were truly happy. . . . With the years the sound of your voice became different. Immigration had affected you. In this Western country you can only live on the margins.” Later, “your sighs multiplied. You began to begrudge me ‘kibbeh with yogurt’ even though you had told me before that you’d met Olga, the Lebanese cook, and that she visits you once a week to cook everything for you.”⁵³ The pain of exile slowly accretes inside Hayat. The longer she is away, the less she fits into her new life in Belgium.

Multiplying her tragedy, we learn that Hayat’s maladaptation cuts both ways: Hayat begins contemplating returning to Lebanon just as Asmahan begins seriously considering

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7.

”لو وجدت طبّاحة لبنانية تطبخ لك كبة الصينية والملوخية؟ وابنك يلعب التنس وسيصبح «شامبيون» وأنتك مشتاقة...ويا لطيف، مشتاقة.”

⁵¹ Ibid., 282.

”أفكر بأنّي سأرفض التعرّف باللبنانيين هناك، لا أريد أن أن أصبح مثلهم!”

⁵² See chapter one of this dissertation.

⁵³ Ibid., 254.

كنت أستمع إليك وأنت تجيبين بأنك جدّ سعيدة. . . . مع السنين أصبحت رنة صوتك أخرى. فالهجرة قد طالت ولا بدّ أنك لا تعيشين في هذا البلد الغربي إلا على الهامش. . . . كثرت تنهداتك أصبحت تحسدني على «كبة اللبن» مع أنك سبق أخبرتني ”بأنك تعرفت على أولغا الطبّاحة اللبنانية وأنها تزورك مرة كل أسبوع وتطبخ لك كل شيء.”

leaving, and Asmahan responds to her friend's questions about the current situation with scorn.

“You? In Beirut? You couldn't live here for a day. And your children? Not even a minute.”⁵⁴

The mistake, to Asmahan's mind, lies in attempting to have things both ways, to leave Beirut but imagine one can remain Beiruti, or to leave Beirut but imagine one might one day return. Hayat's departure is irrevocable. There is no way of going back. Her only hope of avoiding dissatisfaction is complete dissociation. When Hayat visits Lebanon for a wedding, Asmahan finds herself irritated by her old friend.

At first, what I criticized was the way that you moved and sat and spoke, your insensitivity and stupidity. And when you tried to be with us, pity shadowed your face, pity for everyone who remained here. While speaking you drew people towards your breast, then touched their faces, then drew them to your breast again, as if you were saying, “I know your torment.” Why were you convinced that only those who remained suffered?⁵⁵

The offense begins with Hayat's attempt to pick up the strands of her social life where she left them, as if nothing had changed since her departure, and, more, as if her departure had itself changed nothing. It continues with the condescension of Hayat's pity, and climaxes with her blindness to her own pain. Her gravest crime is in refusing to acknowledge outright the ache that attends her exile, and the inevitability of the change that exile has wrought upon her. When Asmahan narrates her efforts to find an abaya to purchase for Hayat and send to her in Belgium,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

”أنت؟ ببيروت؟ مش ممكن تعيشي يوم واحد. وأولادك؟ ولا دقيقة.“

⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

”أول ما انتقدته كان الطريقة التي كنت تتحركين بها وتجلسين وتكلمين، وإبما عبرت عن عدم حساسيتك أو عدم ذكائك، وعندما حوالت أن تكوني معنا، خيمت على وجهك الشفقة تجاه كل من بقي هنا. تتحدثين وأنت تضمين الأشخاص إلى صدرك ثم تتحسسين الوجوه، تضمين الشخص إلى صدرك من جديد، كأتك تقولين: «أنا أعرف عذابكم»، لماذا أيقنت أن من بقي فقط هو الذي يتعذب؟“

scorn creeps into her voice. “I know you’ll want an abaya that seems ‘original’ in Europe.”⁵⁶ Via a kind of auto-Orientalism, Hayat has become incapable of seeing Lebanon from the perspective of the country’s own people. Her gaze anticipates that of the Other by whom she is surrounded abroad. This same Other was, before the war, the animating force of Beirut’s cosmopolitanism, when the city was modeled as a kind of outpost of Europe in the Levant. Marking Lebanon’s increasing divergence from Europe, Asmahan mourns the loss of a cosmopolitan affiliation which is no longer available to her.

Her own belly full of food far more satisfying than whatever sustenance Hayat, her departed foil, has found in Belgium, Asmahan’s indecision about whether to confront or escape the war manifests via sexual hunger and romantic desire. The various men with whom she attempts relationships in *Beirut Post* present an array of possibilities for her engagement with the Lebanese Civil War. She sees the conflict through each of their eyes, in turn, adopting whatever meaning each of them make of it as her own. Asmahan has become dissociated from the violence, and only by mediating her own perceptions through those of her lovers does she regain access to what is happening around her. The first of these men is Nasser, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon from whom Asmahan split before the novel begins, but whose memory lingers throughout the text. The third letter in *Beirut Post* is addressed to him. Writing to Nasser, Asmahan wanders through the history of Palestinian refugee populations in Lebanon, dipping back and forth between the initial wave of Palestinian immigration following Israel’s declaration of independence in 1948, the second wave, in 1967, on the heels of the Six Day War, and the early years of Lebanon’s Civil War, which began in 1975. Nasser left Palestine in 1948, but he

⁵⁶ Ibid., 22.

”أعرف أنك توَدِين أية عباءة تبدو «أوريجنال» في أوروبا.“

and Asmahan do not meet until 1967. The timeline of the novel is imprecise, but their relationship appears to unravel several years into the Lebanese Civil War, after Israel enters the action in 1982, when the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps occur and the bombardment of Beirut begins.

By the time he flees Lebanon, ending his relationship with Asmahan by default, Nasser has become known as “Nasser the Palestinian,” his nationality limiting and standing in for his identity. Despite her love for him, Asmahan finds herself holding Nasser, and Palestinians in general, responsible for the continued violence in her home country. She recalls her guilty desire that he, and all the other Palestinians, simply leave.

Once, when I was rushing in my car through Harj Beirut, in front of me rose trees that had been cut in half, and instead of the pine boughs that had been like a green umbrella, black embers spread everywhere. Sobbing, I threaded my way through the black, and I thought that maybe the Palestinians should go, instead of allowing the Israeli airplanes to fill the sky, leaving their contrails over everything.⁵⁷

Foreshadowing the later uncertainty of her own attempt to leave Beirut, Asmahan trembles at the idea of Nasser’s departure, while simultaneously yearning for it. “Does it make sense that you are now a burden on me and on Beirut, as if you are not the Nasser who became and so long remained my obsession?”⁵⁸ Nasser has in his turn become suspicious of her and her countrymen. At a club one evening, he whispers to her, ““You Lebanese want to *consume us*, you Lebanese

⁵⁷ Ibid., 60-1.

“أنا أهرع بسيارتي مارّة بخرج بيروت، وقد انتصبت أمامي أنصاف الأشجار، وبدلاً من أغصان الصنوبر التي كانت كمظلة منمنمة من اللون الأخضر انتشر الجمر الأسود. أشهق وأنا أكمل شقّ طريقي عبر اللون الأسود، وأفكر بأنه ربما يجب أن ينصرف الفلسطينيون، بدلاً من أن تمتلئ السماء بالطائرات الإسرائيلية، وتترك آثارها فوق كل شيء.”

⁵⁸ Ibid., 75.

“هل معقول؟ أن تصبح عبئاً عليّ وعلى بيروت وكأنك لست ناصر الذي أصبح ولا يزال لمدة طويلة هوسي.”

will *expel us*.”⁵⁹ It is unclear if Nasser sees consumption and expulsion as competing alternatives, or as a natural and unstoppable digestive sequence within a war that seems to suck the whole world into itself. Asmahan’s guilty blame of Palestinians for the developments in the civil war in the early 1980s joins with Nasser’s fury at Lebanon’s handling of the refugees to indict both Palestinians in Lebanon and the Lebanese response to them, seeming, at first, to offer a cause and explanation of the conflict’s unfolding. But Asmahan’s subsequent relationships with other men suggest, rather, the impossibility of distilling easy sense from the war. Nasser is only the first in a series of her attempts to satisfy her desire for a path through the violence, and the Palestinian refugee population is only one of an array of players in Lebanon’s conflict. When Nasser flies from Beirut without warning Asmahan of his plans for departure, she follows his trail to Cyprus and thence to Alexandria, but never manages to catch up with him. He simply vanishes, enduring only in her memory, an unsatisfactory answer to the question that continues to haunt her.

In the wake of Nasser’s disappearance, Asmahan, more adrift and uncertain than ever, finds herself drawn to an unnamed Spaniard she meets at a country house away from Beirut. The Spaniard’s estate surrounds her with trees and breezes, and as Asmahan floats disengagedly through enormous rooms and elegant gardens, she watches herself as if from outside her own body. “I found myself walking with [the Spaniard]. With every step I thought about this citadel-house, this Eden, and about Beirut and my life in general. I was truly troubled.”⁶⁰ She admits she desires the Spaniard not for himself, but for the possibility of escape he represents. The estate is

⁵⁹ Ibid., 67. The italics reflect emphasis in the Arabic.

”أنتم اللبنانية بتوريديو تأكلونا أكل انتو اللبنانية ستطردونا..طرد».

⁶⁰ Ibid., 41.

”وجدتني أسير معه. مع كل خطوة وأفكر في هذا البيت القلعة، في هذه الجنة وفي بيروت وحياتي عامة. إني فعلاً مضطربة؟“

so far removed from Beirut's chaos that it seems to her to represent a different life entirely, and she finds herself craving that blank slate. "This place was neutral. . . . It was as if it were, for me, the beginning of the world, and my only obligation was to reach for the empty cup and enjoy the imaginary drug."⁶¹ She imagines her life there, the Spaniard occupied with his opaque business dealings while she peacefully retreats from the world, consuming this alternate reality as a way of retreating from her sense of dislocation within a country gone wrong. Yet just as she decides to submit to this vision of her future, she is informed she must return to Beirut. On the narrative level, this is a consequence of another woman's having won the dubious prize of the Spaniard's affections, but in the symbolic constellation formed by Asmahan's various love interests her expulsion underlines the impossibility of such an easy escape from a war that has infected all corners of her life and her country.

The Spaniard's narrative foil is Simon, another foreigner whom Asmahan desires but does not love. Where the Spaniard offers her the possibility of escape from the war, Simon, an American press photographer, brings her more deeply into it, re-presenting it to her in ways that begin to help her understand the conflict and her place in it, while forcing her to engage with its reality anew. He shows her city as she has learned not to look at it. Paranoid and fearful, he eventually leaves Beirut, but before his departure his gaze brings Asmahan to a rare awareness of the violence around her. "What I saw with Simon made me think about the war in a completely different way from those who didn't leave their houses, but instead derived what was happening from radio broadcasts and newspapers and the horror of the battles. . . . The concepts of life and death became solid before my eyes and in my throat."⁶² Following Simon, Asmahan dives into

⁶¹ Ibid.

"هذا المكان هو حيادي . . . كأنها بالنسبة لي بداية العالم وما عليّ سوى أن أتناول الكأس الفارغة وأنعم بالمخدّر الوهمي."
⁶² Ibid., 211.

the war, where before she only watched its unfolding from alongside. Ironically, for all his documentary vision, Simon remains blind to the stakes of the conflict. His fear alternates with what seems to Asmahan astonishing naïveté. “He did not believe that his [Christian] name stood between him and life or death.”⁶³ It is not until Simon is kidnapped and almost executed that he realizes how much being a Christian matters in this conflict, that the specificity of labels he was born with but did not choose is anything but incidental to the fractured city he has been photographing.

The common thread running through Asmahan’s retelling of these romances is the use of consumption metaphors to describe her evolving relationship to her country’s civil war. When Nasser growls at her that the Lebanese want to “consume” and “expel” the Palestinian refugee population, he intimates that both the country and its citizens are hungry enough for an end to the violence that they will eat their neighbors if it will help them reach that goal. With the Spaniard, Asmahan imagines retreat from the conflict as a kind of drug she can swallow. With Simon, having been denied the Spaniard and the possibility of escape that attends him, Asmahan finds that the war solidifies in her throat, blocking her ability to swallow anything at all, whether it be the Palestinian refugees, the drug of escape, or the full reality of the war itself. The consumption metaphors point to the twinning of bodily and mental appetites, the desire for escape and the desire for sex and love bleeding into one another and becoming a fused, and frustrated, appetite for difference.

"ما رأيته مع سيمون جعلني أفكر في الحرب بطريقة تختلف تماماً عن الذين كانوا لا يفارقون منازلهم وإنما يستمدون ما يجري من الإذاعات والجرائد ورعب المعارك. . . . فكرة الحياة والموت أصبحت راسخة أمام عيني، عند حنجرتي."

⁶³ Ibid., 212.

"لم يصدّق أنّ اسمه وقف بينه وبين الحياة والموت."

The object of Asmahan's final affair, the only one that occurs in the novel's present tense, is Jawad, a Franco-Lebanese writer. Even as she falls in love with him, Asmahan is wary of the voyeurism tingeing Jawad's presence in Lebanon. She despairs of his weak attempts to understand her country, writing, "He still looks at everything as if it is literature."⁶⁴ Over the course of their relationship, Jawad becomes the only one of her lovers whom Asmahan seems to influence more than be influenced by. It is she who opens his eyes to the war, not the other way around. Like Asmahan's émigrée friend, Hayat, Jawad seems to want from Lebanon some vanished folk authenticity, which he prizes above its unpleasant contemporary realities. Where foreigners offer competing visions of the war, Lebanese characters often seem incapable of looking at it at all. Asmahan constantly suspects Jawad of looking for material for a novel, rather than confronting the place actually around him.

He had been submerged in his curiosity and his seeking after the past and so he had closed his eyes for a while, only to open them on the present and see the darkened streets and piles of trash, the sound of motors trying his patience and thrumming in his chest, and the gloomy atmosphere. He began to follow the news, and found it was like chasing a mystery. . . . The newspapers were no longer fodder for his jokes and sarcasm, but seemed to make his eyes burst with the irrationality of what was happening.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 217.

”لا يزال يرى كل شيء وكأنه عمل أدبي.“

⁶⁵ Ibid., 246.

”أغرقه الفضول واستجلاب الماضي، فأغمض عينيه لمدّة ليعود يفتحهما على الحاضر فيرى الطرقات المظلمة وقمامات الزبالة، وصوت الموتورات تنفذ إلى صبره وإلى صدره بضجتها وبجوّها القائم. وأخذ يتابع الأخبار، ويجد نفسه كأنما يتابع لغزاً . . . ولم تعد الجرائد مصيدة لنكاته وسخريته بل كأنها أخذت تنفقاً عينيه بلا معقولية ما يجري.“

But Jawad’s epiphany only inspires renewed frustration in Asmahan. What to Jawad is new and horrifying is, to her, the life she has been living for years. Though she dutifully takes Jawad on a tour around the scenes of destruction, for herself, she writes, “Now these ruins make me feel tired and bored.”⁶⁶ It is a kind of privilege to be shocked by violence – shock is only possible when violence is rare. Part of what *Beirut Post*, written two years after the official end of the Lebanese Civil War, explores is how we respond to violence when it is made unremarkable. If Jawad has any influence on Asmahan, it is in this, in reminding her how the conflict felt when it began. It is in this mental space that Asmahan accedes to Jawad’s pleas for her to accompany him back to France, accepting that the war is crazy and the only sanity lies in fleeing it. In the novel’s tense final pages, she realizes she has made the wrong decision, and refuses to board their flight to Paris. She repeats to him her criticisms of Hayat, “I don’t want to become a tortured, longing spirit. . . . I know that I’m unhappy here. Why should I want to become unhappy in two countries?”⁶⁷ Jawad offers to remain in Beirut with her, but she declines. “[If he stays here] he will even lose his joy in words, that’s what Beirut does to those who have not witnessed her war. It strips off their smiles, then pulls off their helmets, blocks their eyes with dusty black gauze, smears their noses with black paste and their tongues with the taste of castor oil, and leaves their bodies exposed for the birds to eat.”⁶⁸ Like Hayat, Jawad lacks the capacity to survive the war. To abandon him is to save him.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 209.

”أنا عارف مش مبسوطه هون. ليش بدّي صير مش مبسوطه بلدين . . . ؟ ما بدّي صير روح وأتعذب وإشتاق“

⁶⁷ Ibid., 289.

”ما بدّي صير روح وأتعذب وإشتاق“

⁶⁸ Ibid., 288.

”سيفقد هنا حتى بهجة كلامه، هكذا تفعل بيروت بالذين لم تتهدوا حربيها، تنزع الابتسامة ثم تخلع طاقة الأمان. ثم تسدّ العينين بشاشة سوداء مغبرة ثم تدهن الأنف بمعجون أسود واللسان بطعم زيت الخروع وتترك الجسم عرضة لطيور ناهشة.“

In engineering Jawad's solitary departure, Asmahan accentuates a division between her experience of the war and his, and, moreover that of anyone who has not lived its entire unfolding. The various lovers she takes on her path towards clarity are all, to one degree or another, outsiders to both Beirut and Lebanon. Nasser the Palestinian, the anonymous Spaniard, Simon the foreign press photographer, and even Jawad, with his French citizenship, represent various foreign stakeholders weaving in and out of Lebanon's conflict, a new cosmopolitanism of the war period, taking the place of the spectral European ambience of pre-war Beirut.⁶⁹ After Nasser and Simon flee Beirut and the Spaniard chooses another woman, her final rejection of the escape to France offered by Jawad renders the option of flight exercised by these men morally bankrupt in her own case. For the war's true witnesses, the only path forward is within Lebanon's borders.⁷⁰

As she wavers, throughout the novel, on the edge of the choice to leave Lebanon behind, Asmahan oscillates physically as well, moving back and forth across the narrow space between

⁶⁹ Though Asmahan is not positioned as a symbol of her nation, her place in the center of this romantic web recalls Naguib Mahfouz' novel *Miramar* (1967), in which the peasant girl Zohra, an avatar of a mythically pure Egyptian identity, is fought over by men who stand in for various forces attempting to wrest control of a newly-independent Egypt's path forward. The men who attempt to win Zohra are, however, with one exception, Egyptian. None of Asmahan's lovers are Lebanese, and all of them choose to live outside Lebanon's violence. In his recent study of Lebanese Post-Civil War Novels, Felix Lang writes, "When the imperative to remember, the need to address troubling memories of the past, is conceived as a human universal, the authors come to stand in for the people at large. Their interests are implicitly equated with the interests of the whole of Lebanese society" (Lang, 7). Substitute the word "character" for "author," and Lang's reflections describe exactly the over-determined symbolism Asmahan does *not* partake of. It is occasionally useful to consider her as a symbol for Lebanon, but that is not her primary role.

⁷⁰ Al-Shaykh has been living in London since 1976, the year after the Civil War began. Is she herself not a true witness of the war? Asmahan grants al-Shaykh a way into the very conflict the author escaped.

coastal, war-torn Beirut and the relatively peaceful countryside.⁷¹ Horden and Purcell remind us that in the Mediterranean, “the land is the fringe, its marginality increasing with its distance from the water,”⁷² following Braudel’s delineation of a quintessentially Mediterranean opposition between coastal areas and the mountains that rise behind them (in this case, Beirut and the coast as opposed to Mount Lebanon, the highlands of the Beqaa Valley, and the Anti-Lebanon mountains).⁷³ Asmahan’s orbital travels to and from Beirut reveal a dichotomy between the city wracked by war and the land she retreats to for respite. The hours-long drive from the city to the country ritualizes the separation between these two zones. Where in Beirut her appetite is suppressed by her sense of herself as a hostage, as she moves toward the countryside Asmahan becomes ravenous. In a letter addressed to “My Dear Land,” she narrates the drive, “We got out of the car near a green and verdant orchard. . . . The distance to our village is long, and it takes long hours to get there. The driver suggested we make lunch, and began to kindle a fire and make potatoes, eggs, and chicken. . . . The smell of the roast stole into my nose and I suddenly felt hungry.”⁷⁴ At this midpoint in the journey, the land begins to awaken her, rescuing her from her feeling of being held hostage to the war, and returning her to herself.

⁷¹ Lang observes as well that Lebanese writers of al-Shaykh’s generation avoid spatial and temporal precision in their writing on the Civil War. *Beirut Post* is, as I have noted, vague on dates, but in a departure from Lang’s model, Asmahan’s feeling of alienation from Beirut is accompanied by careful marking of her paths around the city and from the city to the countryside. See Lang, 102-106.

⁷² Horden and Purcell, 133.

⁷³ Braudel, 25-6.

⁷⁴ Al-Shaykh, 78.

"ترجّلنا من السيّارة قرب بستان أخضر وارف. . . . طويل المسافة إلى ضيعتنا باتت ساعات طويلة أيضاً. اقترح السائق عليّ أن نتناول طعام الغداء، وأخذ يضرّم النّار ويتناول البطاطا والبيض ودجاجة. . . . تتسلّل رائحة الشواء إلى أنفي، وأشعر بالجوع فجأة."

Asmahan's inner sense of ownership over the land is magnified by her family's status as the village's major landowning clan, their name (unspecified in the text) having been taken as the name of their village, and thence attached to the produce of their lands.

My grandfather's name spread to Beirut after it became the name of a place on Mount Lebanon. . . . The name of my grandfather's family shouted from boxes of apples, pears, and a new type of fruit which my grandfather commissioned by grafting an apple and a guava. Its texture was between the sweet, sugary smoothness of an apple and the porous roughness of a quince. Its taste was between orange blossom water and jujubes.⁷⁵

The narration of her grandfather's agricultural successes is a reminder of Asmahan's class status and an explanation of how she avoids starvation during the war, but it also positions her to be particularly jarred by changes in the status quo of her family's dominance in the countryside. She is not a reactionary, resistant to any alterations to the world of her childhood, but she is unusually alert to these changes. In the village, her vision is doubled, past and present overlain on one another. Arriving after a long absence, she is startled. "A chocolate factory? A bank? Farms, a family restaurant? 'The Fountain Café – Three Floors,' villas...can this really be our village?" she asks.⁷⁶ She finds the restaurant, in particular, inconceivable. It is difficult for her to square the formalities of restaurant dining with memories of the rustic foodways of her childhood:

⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

"امتدّ اسم جدّي إلى بيروت بعد أن أصبح اسمه من جبلة لبنان. . . . وكان اسم عائلة جدّي يطلق على صناديق التفّاح، الإجااص وعلى نوع فاكهة جديدة. أمر جدّي بطعيمها من بذرتي التفّاح والغوافا ملمسها بين نعومة التفّاح الحلو السكري وبين خشونة السفرجل ذي المسام وطعمها بين ماء الزهر والعنّاب."

⁷⁶ Ibid., 86.

"معمل الشوكولا؟ بنك؟ مزارع، مأكول العائلات؟ قهوة النبع - ثلاثة طوابق، فلل...معقول هيدي ضيعتنا"

I couldn't picture it in our village. To imagine tables with tablecloths, and servers carrying paper and pen, instead of . . . the dusty little area where we used to go to eat cucumbers and yellow melons that were still young. . . we would shout [to a worker] "Half a kilo," and he would leave his pickaxe and come, carrying in his hands the cucumbers wrapped in newspaper or a sheet ripped from his bag of soil. Even now my ears hear the flies buzzing, unless it is the whirring of the machines in the chocolate factory.⁷⁷

Asmahan's memory bleeds into the present, rendering her senses diachronic. She realizes that Beirut is not the only place that has changed radically since her youth, and she finds herself here, in the country, just as displaced as she is when composing letters amidst Beirut's violence. Her bodily travels are complemented by temporal journeys to and fro, from memory to reality and back again.

As she grapples with the village's modernization, Asmahan realizes that the countryside of her birth no longer provides a Braudelian refuge from the war. The conflict has followed her, even here. She addresses the land, "The war began, and spread outside Beirut until it penetrated you. It permeated your moistened and boiling womb and lay with the seed, and the yield of that union was fire."⁷⁸ Violence is the fruit of war, fire the angry produce of conflict. But if Asmahan carries the war with her to the country, she also carries the land with her back to Beirut. The

⁷⁷ Ibid.

"لم أستطع تصوّر ها في ضيعتنا. أن تخيّل الطاومات عليها أغذية، وخادماً يحمل ورقة وقلماً. بدل . . . الصحراء الصغيرة عندما كنّا نذهب لنأكل بطيخاً أصفر لم يزل عجراً وقتاء. . . كنّا نصيح به «نصف كيلو» فيترك معوله ويأتي حاملاً بين يديه القثناء في أقصوصة جريدة، أو ورقة مزّقة من كيس ترابه. حتى الآن لن نسمع أذناي سوى أزيز الذناب حتى لو كان الأزيز يصدر عن آلات معمل الشوكولا."

⁷⁸ Ibid., 87.

"ما إن حدثت الحرب وامتدّت إلى خارج بيروت حتى تغلّغت هي بك. دخلت حتى ببطنك الذي كان يغلي ويروى ويضاجع البذر ويثمر ليضاجع الحرائق."

intimate links between these spaces work counter to anthropologist Hank Driessen’s contention that, “in many parts of the Mediterranean, cultural, class and ethnic distinctions were and still are mapped onto divides between the countryside/interior and the town/coast.”⁷⁹ These divides are certainly real, but Asmahan’s story reveals, layered atop them, persistent continuities. She continues her address to the land, writing, in the city, of her and her grandmother’s stubborn maintenance of country traditions in urban surroundings. “We still live as if we are near you. We eat from mismatched dishes and rusting brass spoons. We don’t care about the liquid floating in the salad, or about the flies that swirl around the milk and fall into it.”⁸⁰ Asmahan insists on her own organic qualities in the face of war and privation. The flies that buzz in her memory’s ears fall into the milk and are taken into her body. The war may indeed be all around her, but the land is *in* her. Her story is characterized by these mutual infections: city by country, present by past, all of life by the ongoing war.

Asmahan comes to figure the war as a fruitful, fruiting body, a personified antagonist. Her apostrophe to the war implicitly confirms her ideas of it as a living being. At the beginning of a letter to the war, she writes, “I will not address you as ‘my dear’ . . . you are not my dear.”⁸¹ She rails at the war for destroying her dreams of being an architect, and a moment later shudders to realize that she thinks of the war “with this warmth . . . this feeling that only a few could understand.”⁸² This intimacy derives from something more than proximity. The war is in the

⁷⁹ Driessen, 130.

⁸⁰ Al-Shaykh, 87.

"بقينا نعيش كما لو بقربك. نأكل في صحون مختلفة، ومعالق نحاسية تكاد تكون صدئة. لا نبالي بالماء الذي يعوم في السلطة ولا بالذباب الذي يحوم اللبن ويسقط فيه."

⁸¹ Ibid., 181.

"ان أطلق عليك عزيزتي . . . أنت لست عزيزتي"

⁸² Ibid.

"بهذه الحرارة . . . هذا الشعور الذي لن يستوعبه أحد غير القليلين."

land, in the produce of the land, in the food made from that produce, and in the bodies that consume that food. It is in Asmahan, it is a part of her being. When her Beirut apartment is shelled Asmahan, after making a joke about “shrapnel rice,” recites the poem where she encountered the phrase: “*My mother finally decided that if the missile entered our kitchen / she would pit it and drop it in the zucchini pot / she would cook it with shrapnel rice / and a handful of our pine nut fingers / and we would invite the fighters to a gourmet feast.*”⁸³ This idea, of cooking and eating the war, is at the heart of Asmahan’s relationship with the conflict, and the position she returns to at the novel’s close. It is her answer to the question of how to live with the war – if such a thing is possible. Internalizing the war as her daily bread represents a radical normalization of the violence.

In the airport with Jawad, when she tells him she is not going to France with him, Jawad describes the conflict as a drug, rather than a foodstuff, and accuses her, “‘you know, you’ve become addicted to the war.’”⁸⁴ But as she exits the airport, Asmahan offers a different explanation. “When the flight’s departure was announced, I left him standing alone in the line with his camera and bag in his hand. Vigor crept into my limbs once more, and my blood began again to flow through me, all the way to my fingertips. And so I will face anew the city that has made its war die of exhaustion.”⁸⁵ What is achieved on a small scale with the cooking of

⁸³ Ibid., 49.

قررت أمي أخيراً إذا دخل الصاروخ مطبخنا
 سنتفقه وتسقطه في طنجرة الكوسى
 تطبخه مع أرز الشظايا
 وكمشة من صنوبر أصابعنا
 وسندعو المحاربين إلى أشهى وليمة

The lines are taken from Yahia Jaber’s poem, “Memorial Images of the War.” (صور تذكارية) (للحرب). See bibliography.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 290.

”بتعرفي. انت صرت مدمنة على الحرب.“

⁸⁵ Ibid., 293.

shrapnel rice is here transformed into a strategy for defeating the war itself. Asmahan finds the solution to her dislocation by consuming the war, rather than being consumed by it. Before this realization, the war sticks in her throat, an indigestible fragment blocking her appetite. Now, however, she solves her dislocation by entering deeper into the war. She takes it into her, makes it her food, steals its energy to satisfy her hunger, and drives it away by refusing to be herself driven out.

Food and Not-Food

Muḥammad Shukrī's 1972 autobiography, *For Bread Alone* (*Al-Khubz al-ḥāfī*, lit: "plain bread") shares with Nigro's and al-Shaykh's works a questing, philosophical impulse, in this case emerging from the writer's own poverty and deprivation.⁸⁶ Born in 1935 to a poor family in the Rif mountains in Morocco, as a boy Shukrī moves with his parents to Tangier and thence to Tetuan, before briefly being left by his family in Oran's agricultural hinterland for employment during his adolescence, returning to Tetuan, and finally departing from the family home to settle alone in Tangier. Each locale presents a different level and kind of poverty, as departure from the Rif fails to guarantee the stability Shukrī's family searches for. Over the course of his peregrinations, Shukrī discovers the pleasures of sex and intoxicants while continually seeking to satisfy his hunger. His story takes the form of an autobiographical bildungsroman in which Shukrī narrates the process by which he emerges from the brutal circumstances of his childhood

"تركته يقف في الصف وحيداً مع الكاميرا وحقيبة يده عندما أعلن عن قيام الطائرة. وكان النشاط قد دبّ بأوصالي من جديد. وعاد الدم يتدفق بي ويصل حتى أظافري. فأنا سأواجه من جديد المدينة التي جعلت حربيها تموت من التعب."

⁸⁶ Paul Bowles' 1973 English translation, a collaboration with Shukrī, was followed, in 1981, by a French translation, *Le pain nu*. The Arabic original, composed in 1972, was finally published in 1982. Bowles' translation skips large segments of the Arabic text, and Shukrī added some elements prior to the publication of the French edition. I quote throughout from the Arabic edition. See Tanoukhi 2003 for a full textual history.

into adult self-possession and self-determination. In an inversion of Nigro's and al-Shaykh's cases, in which the former's desire for the Mediterranean idea and the latter's indecision about emigration find symbolic expression through encounters with the culinary, food is primary for Shukrī, who consistently understands his experiences in relation to the desires of his stomach. That is, food is not a lens through which we can analyze what Shukrī wants; food *is* what Shukrī wants, and his other desires are only legible through their entanglement with eating.

Food's role as Shukrī's primary heuristic becomes apparent in his early sexual encounters, beginning with simple metaphors in which body parts are compared to various fruits, and progressing to a complex understanding of sex as a form of consumption.⁸⁷ A woman's breasts move "like two clusters of grapes,"⁸⁸ or are "small, like two lemons."⁸⁹ During one revelatory episode, Shukrī marvels, "my right hand began to explore the orchard of her body. In her chest there are apples and oranges, in her rear there are pears and peaches, and between her thighs are persimmons."⁹⁰ These similes seem to be born from Shukrī's earliest sexual experience, with a neighbor, the girl whose breasts move like grape bunches under her clothing. In a small orchard next to his family's home, young Shukrī espies a pear tree from which he gleefully steals, not understanding that the pears belong to another.⁹¹ The girl's father catches him and locks him in a room until Shukrī's mother can be summoned to administer appropriate punishment, but while her father is away the girl rescues Shukrī and feeds him "a loaf of bread

⁸⁷ An admittedly common poetic technique, with echoes of the Song of Songs.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 21.

"مثل عنقودين من العنب."

⁸⁹ Ibid., 134.

"صغيران مثل ليمونتين."

⁹⁰ Ibid., 160.

"بدأت يدي اليمنى تنتزه في بستان جسمها: في صدرها برتقال وتفاح، قي مؤخرتها الاجاص والخوخ وبين فخذيه الكاكي."

⁹¹ This may be a deliberate reference to Saint Augustine's narration of the theft of a neighbor's pears in his *Confessions*.

dripping with molasses,” saying, “If you’re hungry, come back.”⁹² On a later meeting this girl brings Shukrī into her home. “I ate black bread with warm honey and butter. And she gave me a large apple, lightly brushed with red. She filled up my pockets with almonds. She washed my face and limbs. Was I her little brother?! Her son? Then she combed my wild hair.”⁹³ Already, the intimacies of eating and being fed are bleeding into the intimacies of family, bodily contact, and Shukrī’s desiring gaze. The honey this girl feeds him haunts Shukrī’s palate. After his family moves to a different part of Tangier, Shukrī hides in a fig tree from which he watches as another girl, in another orchard, undresses to bathe. He nearly chokes on a fig, and his mouth fills with a familiar flavor. “I taste honey in my mouth. My body prickles.”⁹⁴ Whenever Shukrī masturbates, the taste of honey returns.⁹⁵

In his adolescence, working at a Spanish vineyard outside Oran, Shukrī constructs for himself a masturbatory aid which physically fuses food and the female.

The trunk [of a small tree] was the circumference of my arms when they wrapped around it. I etched the outline of a woman onto the trunk and began the creation: you will have all a woman does. Over the course of a week I dug out two breast holes, and a mouth, and a hole between the thighs.

The tree-woman.

⁹² Ibid., 22.

"مدت لي رغيفاً يقطر بالعسل الأسود. «إذا جعت فعد إلينا»."

⁹³ Ibid., 27.

"أكلت الخبز الأسود بالعسل الدافئ والزبد. أعطتني تفاحة كبيرة ذات حمرة طفيفة. ملأت جيوبي باللوز. غسلت لي وجهي وأطرافي. كنت أراها الأصغر؟! إنها؟ مشطت شعري المنفوش."

⁹⁴ Ibid., 34.

"يتعسل فمي. يتدغدغ."

⁹⁵ Ibid., 62.

"يتعسل فمي."

In the breast holes I put two oranges, pierced so I could suck on them, or two apples, so I could bite one of them with my mouth. In the hole between the thighs I put a rag soaked with butter or oil. I began to imbue the tree-woman with the images of beautiful women.⁹⁶

The blending of sexual and alimentary consumption in this passage transcends the plane of metaphor. Shukrī's sexual desires are mixed up with his vision of the edible potential of the human body. The simultaneity of the fulfillment of his urges erases the distance between them. Shukrī does not differentiate between these two types of hunger; all wanting is equal. On one occasion, overcome with lust at a brothel in Oran, he nearly bites a woman's breast. "I filled my mouth with her breast and my tongue prickled with a powerful desire to bite down. . . . That night I dreamed I was breastfeeding on a woman's breast. Her milk gushed out onto my face with such force I almost drowned."⁹⁷ The body is thus triply rendered a source of nourishment: breast milk, the consumption of the tree-woman, and the temptation of human meat.

These episodes harken back to two of Shukrī's traumatic early memories. *For Bread Alone* opens with Shukrī as a young boy, still living in the Rif, crying desperately to his mother for bread. Shukrī's father enters angrily and shouts at his son, "You will eat your mother's heart, you son of a whore."⁹⁸ Watching his infant sister be preyed upon by insects, "at night the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 56.

"جذعها على قياس ذراعي حين أعانقها. رسمت على جذاها تصميم امرأة وشرعت في الخلق: سيكون لك ما للمرأة. خلال أسبوع حفرت في جذعها حفرتي النهدين، والفم وحفرة ما بين الفخذين. الشجرة - المرأة. أضع في الحفرتين برتقالتين مثقوبتين للمص أو تفاحتين للعض وإحدهما في الفم. في حفرة ما بين الفخذين أضع خرقة فيها زبد أو زيت. صرت أنقل إلى الشجرة - المرأة صور الجميلات."

⁹⁷ Ibid., 49.

"حينها ملأت فمي بنهدها ولساني يدغدغ حلمتها رغبة قوية حتى لا أعضها. . . . في الليل حلمتني أضع نهد المرأة. حليبها يفر في وجهي حتى كدت أختنق."

⁹⁸ Ibid., 9.

"سأكل قلبي أمك يا ابن الزنا."

mosquitoes and in the daytime the flies,” Shukrī is already understands the body as a source of food.⁹⁹ As a child, Shukrī, awakening in the middle of the night, overhears his parents having sex. “Panting. Kisses. Sighs. Panting. Kisses. Panting. Kisses. Sighs. They are biting each other. They are eating each other, licking each other’s blood.”¹⁰⁰ In Shukrī’s mind, sex is a consumptive act, and hunger begs for the violation of another’s body. When Shukrī, as an adult, steals a purse containing 3,000 pesetas, he uses the money to purchase both an extravagant dinner and a three-day bender in a brothel, manufacturing the same simultaneity of experience he achieved with the tree-woman.¹⁰¹ The coincident satisfaction of his desires underlines Shukrī’s inability to separate the one from the other. He reaches the transcendent through their merging. His vision of the edible body extends even to his own form, alongside these female objects of desire. When he is injured in a fight, he derives vivid pleasure from his own blood. “I licked at my wound. A long time had passed since I had seen my blood flow out with this sweet pain. Its taste was salt and sugar in my mouth.”¹⁰² The consumption of one’s self is sublime.

Aside from this instance of licking his own blood, Shukrī’s inclination to see the body as food does not cross the boundary into anthropophagy. He relies on an elaborate system to distinguish food from “not-food.” His education begins at an early age when he brings home a chicken during a period of particularly extreme privation, hoping his mother will cook it and assuage his hunger. Shukrī conscientiously says a *bismallah* over the bird, which he found dead on the ground while rooting through urban garbage for food, and even attempts to mimic

⁹⁹ Ibid., 25.

"في الليل الناموس وفي النهار الذباب."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 27.

"لهات. قبالات. تأوهات. لهات. قبالات. لهات. قبالات. تأوهات. يعضان بعضهم. يأكلان بعضهم يلعبان دمهما..."

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰² Ibid., 206.

"لحست جرحي. مضي وقت طويل لم أر فيه دمي يسيل بهذا الألم الحلو. طعمه ملح وسكر في فمي."

dhabīḥah (the method of slaughter prescribed by Islam) as he has seen adults perform it, though he must know that carrion is *haram*, or at least that there is no point in ritually killing a bird that is already dead. When his mother arrives home and sees Shukrī plucking the chicken, he lies to her, saying, “I found it sick. I slaughtered it before it died. Ask my brother.’ ‘You’re crazy!”” she replies, pulling the bird away from him. “People do not eat carrion.”¹⁰³ What people – Muslim or otherwise – *do* eat is never laid out with precision. Instead, prohibitions multiply. Shukrī lacks what seems to be, for others, an instinctive understanding of what counts as food. Visiting a cemetery, he finds “big clumps of greens growing there among the graves.” He brings some home to his mother:

“These greens are delicious. . . . Where did you gather them?”

“In the graveyard at Bou Arraqia.”

“From the graveyard!”

“Yes, from the graveyard. What of it?” Her mouth gaped. . . . She stopped eating. Her features tightened. I added, “There are a lot of these sweet greens around the neglected graves.”

“People do not eat what grows in cemeteries.”

“Why not?”

She contemplated me with bewilderment. I ate with gusto. I thought she might vomit. She took my plate away. She said, in Riffian, “Enough. Eat yourself.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ibid., 11.

«عثرت عليها مريضة. ذبحتها قبل أن تموت. إسالي أخي.»
«مجنون! الإنسان لا يأكل الجيفة.»

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

«هذي البقول لذيدة. . . من أين جمعتها؟»

Rather than offering her son an explanation for why food growing in a cemetery is to be avoided, Shukrī's mother shows surprise that he is not already aware of this restriction. The scornful colloquialism with which she concludes echoes his father's angry words on the memoir's first page, "Eat your mother's heart." In the earlier case, he wanted something, bread, which he could not have because of his family's poverty. In this instance, he wants greens that he *should not* consume because of their provenance. Although the details differ, the substitution suggested is identical: a body sarcastically offered in place of food, highlighting the impropriety of Shukrī's wanting. As in Hamsun's *Hunger* and among those finding refuge in the bomb shelter described in *Beirut Post*, hunger becomes itself a consuming agent, devouring the body of its sufferers: if Shukrī is so hungry he is willing to eat tainted greens from a cemetery, he might as well satisfy his hunger with his own body.

Shukrī evinces a similar ignorance of the rules governing sex. During his time living outside Oran, he befriends "a handsome, delicate youth, wearing shorts, with beautiful skin, rosy cheeks, and small, scarlet lips."¹⁰⁵ Taking the boy for a walk, Shukrī plies him with wine and cigarettes, and soon, drunk himself, makes advances on his companion.

Is he a boy? My thing rises. He is my boy. My eyes are shedding tears of pleasure.

I stroked his hand and he pulled it away, looking at me strangely. My eyes shed

«من مقبرة بو عراقية».

«من المقبرة!»

«نعم، من المقبرة. ماذا في ذلك؟» انفغر فمها. . . . تركت الأكل. انقبضت ملامحها. دمعت عيناها. أضفت:

«هناك كثير من هذا البقول حول القبور المنسية.»

«ما ينبت في المقابر لا تأكله الناس.»

«لماذا؟»

تأملتني بحيرة. أنا آكل بشهية. تخيلتها ستقيء. اخذت صحنِي. قالت بالريفية.

«اشفاش، أتشد أخفنش» (كفاك، لتأكل نفسك)."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 65.

"غلام وسيم، رقيق، يلبس الشروط، بشرته جميلة، وجنتاه موردتان، شفتاه قرمزيتان، صغيرتان."

tears of pleasure. He was afraid. He made as if to stand. I seized him violently by the hand. My body trembles. Madness in my head. He forcefully pulled away his hand, and stopped. He wanted to flee. I hugged his legs and pulled him under me with force and madness. . . . He bites my hand, and he bites the dirt.¹⁰⁶

As ever in Shukrī's memoir, sex and consumption – of food and of the body, literally and as a metaphor – are linked. When Shukrī's aunt hears of her nephew's actions, she is mortified. In his imagination, Shukrī plays out a conversation in which he attempts to understand the logic of his apparent transgression: “How should I be normal, aunt? How?” ‘Don’t do anything that is shameful,’” she replies, to which Shukrī responds, despairingly, “But I love the shameful, delicious things.”¹⁰⁷ Much later, freshly arrived in Tangier and all alone, Shukrī is propositioned by an old *maricon* who takes him on a drive outside the city, performs oral sex on him, and then pays him fifty *pesetas* before dropping him back off where they met. The Spanish words sprinkled among the Arabic highlight Shukrī's constant sense of dislocation, which naturally grows in the mixed city of Tangier, where Spanish colonial culture most immediately meets Morocco. Afterwards, Shukrī is full of unquiet questions. “Do all the ones like that old man suck? . . . Is it that the old man finds the same pleasure in sucking penises that I find in sucking women's breasts? . . . My genitals sold for fifty *pesetas*. What does that mean?”¹⁰⁸ Shukrī's

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 66-7.

“أنه طفل؟ شبيئي ينتصب. أنه طفلي. عياني تدمعان باللذة. لاطفت يده، سحبها وجلس ناظراً أليّ مستغرباً. عيناى دامعتان باللذة. خاف. . . . همّ أن يقف. أمسكته من يده بعنف. جسمي يرعش. الجنون في رأسي. سحب يده بقوة ووقف. أراد أن يهرب. عانقب ساقيه وجذبته بقوة وجنوب تحتي. . . . تارة يعض يدي وتارة يعض التراب.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 67.

«كيف ينبغي لي أن أكون عاقلاً يا خالتي؟ كيف؟»
«لا تفعل كل ما هو قبيح.»
«لكني أحب ما هو قبيح لذيد.»

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 107-9.

“هل كل من هم مثل هذا العجوز يمصون؟ . . . أذلك العجوز يجد في مص أزباب الناس نفس اللذة التي أجدها أنا في مصّ صدور النساء؟ . . . عضوي التناسلي يباع بخمسين بسيطة. ما معنى هذا؟”

uncertainty about sexual mores (and morality) mimics his apparent ignorance of food prohibitions.

Every sexual act depicted in *For Bread Alone* is, however common in reality, juridically *zina*: an unlawful sexual relationship, as are all sexual acts that fall outside the bounds of married heterosexual monogamy between two Muslims.¹⁰⁹ Shukrī's sexual activities position him in a zone of transgression that mimics his culinary crimes. In his landmark study of food prohibitions, *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss posits that the categories of "raw," "rotten," and "cooked" are dually natural and cultural categories, defined and delimited by natural changes in foodstuffs and by culturally mediated understandings of how humans act on the world in order to differentiate themselves from non-human entities. The rules Shukrī learns in *For Bread Alone*, in their slippage between what people "can" eat and what they "should," provide strong evidence for this duality: food restrictions are both what civilize humans in their various contexts and what make them humans in the first place. This idea is what underlies the disparaging comment Shukrī overhears someone make about Riffians' eating habits when a disease has spread among the Riffians' livestock: "We don't eat [those animals]. [The Riffians] eat them. They add disease to disease."¹¹⁰ It is also the source of his mother's concern and confusion about Shukrī's apparent ignorance of society's many alimentary rules. To not eat correctly endangers one's humanity and one's inclusion within the social contract..

In *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas eloquently expresses the stakes of this endangerment. Like Lévi-Strauss, Douglas believes that categorizing food is productive of

¹⁰⁹ An ample literature describes, for example, same-sex sexual encounters within Muslim lands, including a memorable Turkish episode in Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie*. For the history of modern Islamic examples, see Andrews and Kalpaklı 2005 and El-Rouayheb 2005.

¹¹⁰ Shukrī, 19.

"نحن لا نأكلها. هم يأكلونها. تزيدهم مرضاً على مرض.""

culture, and is particularly attentive to the way food restrictions are expressed as a reflection of natural law. Her focus is on pollution: the separation of “food” from “dirt.” “The laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code,” she writes. “The whole universe is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion.”¹¹¹ Categorization leads logically to understandings of delimited and prohibited foodstuffs as reflecting fundamental qualities of the natural world, instead of human decision making. This is precisely why Shukrī’s mother is so horrified when her son eats greens from the cemetery, and perhaps why she refuses to even explain to Shukrī why his actions are wrong. Disease adds to disease; death adds to death: the graveyard vegetation is too morally polluted to discuss, lest its pollution spread.

The danger of his unorthodox consumption habits reaches its height when Shukrī, alone in Tangier, finds himself more impoverished, and hungrier, than ever before.

I saw a kiosk selling *bessara*. For one peseta I could drink a cup. Walking on under the burning sun, I felt a harsh ache in my stomach. Mad with hunger and the summer heat, my eyes lost their ability to see clearly. I picked up a small, dried and trampled on fish. I sniffed it. Its odor was nauseating. I stripped off its skin. I chewed it with disgust. Its taste was rotten. I chewed and chewed it, without being able to steel myself to swallow it.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Douglas, 3.

¹¹² Shukrī, 100-1.

"رأيت هناك كشكاً لبيع البيصر. بسيطة واحدة وأشرب بيصرة. أحسست بوجع قاس في معدتي ماشياً تحت شمس كاوية. جنون الجوع والقيظ يفقدانني رؤية الأشياء في وضوح. التقطت سمكة صغيرة جافة ومداسة. شممتها. رائحتها مقبحة. سلختها. مضغتها باشمنزاز. طعمها نتن. أمضغها وأمضغها دون أن أقوى على بلعها."

Bessara is a Moroccan fava bean soup.

Shukrī soon gives up and spits out the fish. In his daze, he espies a fisherman sitting in a boat off the nearby dock, eating a loaf of bread. Silently, Shukrī wills the fisherman to throw something away, something that Shukrī might eat, and, as if by magic, the fisherman tosses some of his bread away into the water. “I stripped off my shirt and pants and jumped into the water. I emerged under the piece of bread. The fisherman laughed. I raised my head in his direction. . . . Pieces of shit swim around me. Patches of oil from ships. I swam towards the stone ladder. Other pieces of shit and bread float in front of me. Bread and shit blurred together in my mind. Filthy water seeped down my throat.”¹¹³ In despair, Shukrī picks another dry fish off the ground, fouler even than the first, and weakly vomits while attempting to swallow it. He is reduced to envy for a stray cat that can, he imagines, at least eat these rotten discards without throwing up. This disturbing episode unsettles Shukrī in both of Lévi-Strauss’ binaries: raw and cooked, and raw and rotten. His attempt to consume rotten food makes him uncivilized, and his immersion in water mixed with bread, excrement, and motor oil is a reverse baptism, ushering him out of civilization.¹¹⁴ In envying the stray cat, he declines his own humanity.

These articles – rotten fish and soiled bread, empirically found to be inedible – are emphatically not food, in the same category as the earlier greens Shukrī found in a cemetery and the carrion chicken, which he had to be taught to avoid. But Shukrī’s poverty leaves the imagined opposite – real sustenance – largely out of reach. If he lacks employment and does not wish to resort to theft, Shukrī can only make do by skirting the edges of these categories,

¹¹³ Ibid., 101.

"نزعت قميصي وسروالي وقفزت إلى الماء. طفوت تحت قطعة الخبز. ضحك الصياد. . . قطع الخراء حولي. بقع من زيت المراكب. سبحت نحو السلم الحجري. قطع أخرى من الخراء والخبز تطفو أمامي. اختلط في ذهني الخبز بالخراء. تسرب الماء القدر إلى حلقي. اختنق تنفسي."

¹¹⁴ This inverts the process by which Enkidu is civilized in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As he is brought into the shepherds’ camp, he is given bread and beer, and thereby remade from a wild creation into a man.

consuming what we might call “barely” or “almost” food. At one point, he eases his hunger by filling his stomach “with cabbage leaves, orange peel, and pieces of rotten fruit,” discarded scraps of sustenance.¹¹⁵ Later, he begins hanging outside cafés and bars to scavenge scraps while halfheartedly working as a street shoeshine. “I drank the dregs from cups of wine and soda and ate the leftovers from the small plates.”¹¹⁶ This form of consumption neatly mirrors Shukrī’s marginal status, his position on society’s borders. From this uneasy periphery, Shukrī’s hunger is both for food and for the stability whence food, Lévi-Strauss’ “cooked” material, emerges.

The question remaining is into which culture Shukrī should insert himself. Over the course of his formative years, he oscillates from countryside to coast, from port to port, navigating French, Arabic, Riffian, and Spanish milieux in Morocco’s mountain hinterland, Tangier, Tetuan, and Oran. *For Bread Alone* takes place during the waning years of the French (1912 – 1955) and Spanish (1912 – 1956/8) protectorates in Morocco and French colonial rule of Algeria (1830/48 – 1962). During Shukrī’s childhood, Algeria was a French possession, the Rif Mountains and Tetuan were controlled by Spain, and Tangier was an international zone jointly administered by France, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Shukrī’s travels entail routine crossings of the weak borders delineating these areas of European influence and control. The distinctions Shukrī makes between these various zones have little to do with external cartographies. To Shukrī, the Rif is one kind of Moroccan space, Tangier and Tetuan are another, and Oran is foreign, but inhabited by members of Shukrī’s own extended family. Freshly arrived in Tangier, he wonders, “Why did we leave the Rif when others stayed in their home country? . . . Why

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

"أكلت أوراق الكرنب، قشور البرتقال، بقايا فواكة عفنة."

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

"أشرب ثمالة كؤوس الخمر والمشروبات الغازية وبقايا الطعام في الصحون الصغيرة."

don't we have what other people have?"¹¹⁷ This second, plaintive question evinces yearning for both food and the stability of homeland. From the perspective of Oran, though, Morocco's coastal cities acquire a weak allure. Shukrī is happy to be away from the misery of his family life, but still misses Morocco. "Oran is a beautiful exile, and Tetuan is a beautiful prison. [I choose] prison in my homeland, not freedom in exile."¹¹⁸ These words line up neatly with Asmahan's sentiments in *Beirut Post*: even if the situation seems untenable, homeland exerts an overwhelming pull. Further, the element of choice redeems the broken sense of home. The privation attending Shukrī's prison, like the unending violence of Asmahan's war, is, in a personal but powerful way, ameliorated through being deliberately opted for. The assertion of choice, which is to say the assertion of power, helps both Shukrī and Asmahan to hold fast against the ravaging world.

Shukrī's isolation is maintained by his marginality, which is itself achieved by virtue of his ignorance of and refusal to follow the rules that govern his community – he will not accept the contention that the wrongness lies in him, rather than in the world. Soon after returning to Tetuan, Shukrī flees his father's rages for Tangier, where he will eventually make his name as a writer. In choosing Tangier, he maintains his urban, coastal position even while rejecting the attachments of his youth. His memoir is built on a pair of foundational agonies: hunger and dislocation. The desires of his stomach are what make his other urges legible; the search for food leads him to the orchard where he is sexually awakened, and through a variety of urban and rural spaces until his hungers are satisfied.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

"لماذا نهجر نحن الريف ويبقى آخرون في بلادهم؟ . . . لماذا لا نملك ما يملكه غيرنا؟"

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 68-9.

"وهران منفى جميل وتطوان سجن جميل. سجن الوطن ولا حرية المنفى."

*

These texts are linked by their narrators' persistent unease with their environments. Shukrī explicitly rejects the known, abandoning his volatile family, while Asmahan declines to escape her country's conflict in favor of a more difficult, solitary path. Nigro, beginning from a much more secure position, follows his restlessness into a sought-after anxiety over his place in the Mediterranean. I do not wish to equate these texts, and even less their protagonists' experiences: Shukrī's poverty is far removed from Asmahan's wealth and war, which is equally distant from Nigro's intellectual fascination with the Mediterranean idea. Still, the shared, questing quality of their movements and the quality of dislocation that permeates each text suggests the possibility of distilling from these stories a sense of the meaning of hunger in the Mediterranean, a zone often defined by its culinary bounty.

Shukrī's poverty is a valuable corrective to the assumption of Mediterranean plenty, but even he does not limit his desires to food. Like Nigro and Asmahan, he stands outside society looking curiously at its rules. These texts demand that we question received ideas of the Mediterranean and its food, forcing the juxtaposition of "the Mediterranean diet" with Shukrī's commingled bread and excrement, Asmahan's living, growing war, and Nigro's blandly international pizza to remind us of the imperative of situating poverty, violence, and globalization within the Mediterranean imaginary. Discussions of Mediterranean food must also refer to lack and want, and to the perpetual Mediterranean question of how open one should be to the world that enters through its ancient ports. Hunger is linked to, if not directly born of, a sense of dislocation in a world that does not conform to one's desires. Its navigation requires solitary

movement along archetypal Mediterranean routes, from port to port or from coast to hinterland and back.

CHAPTER V

Against Fusion: A Case Study of Sephardi Food

There are ample reasons to resist the national, ethnic, or linguistic siloing of literary study. In this dissertation I have analyzed materials drawn from an eclectic, though not random, assortment of Mediterranean literatures, in an attempt to do work that draws lines tangent to the ruts of north-south and east-west comparison, that does not fetishize individual authors or national literary traditions, that skirts both colonial and postcolonial perspectives on the contemporary period and the over-determined relationships between peoples and nations they entail. My core concern is both very large – what does food mean to migrants and travelers in the vast Mediterranean space? – and quite intimate, on the level of individual stories of engagement with the culinary. For this reason I have not, thus far, concentrated much on historical or political perspectives. Working on a small, human scale, story by story, is precisely what has allowed me to derive the broad theories of the Mediterranean literary-culinary that are the focus of this dissertation's first chapters. The fact that I have been able to do so is, in itself, an argument against the dismissal of the Mediterranean as a powerful critical category in the contemporary era. In seeking out texts that dwell on food, I have found a repetition of themes that suggests the productivity of bringing a Mediterranean perspective to bear in the contemporary period.

These recurring themes are the focus of my arguments in the prior chapters of this work. Following the introduction, in chapter two I examined how food can be used to actively – in contrast to the passivity suggested by the archetype of Proust's madeleine – maintain exiles'

links with the past. In chapter three I turned to characters who reject the past by ardently embracing the present, and described how the process of what I call “narrative identification” allows one to make oneself other. The fourth chapter explored migrants’ hunger, showing how the physical desire for food is linked to other, mental or intellectual desires for certainty and self-determination, which are exposed and processed through the tracing of Mediterranean orbits. To elaborate these theoretical points I deliberately selected stories that manifested pure, or nearly pure, connections to just one of these three perspectives. The vast majority of texts are not, I believe, so easily categorized. I would expect, rather, to find that in many cases Mediterranean migrants eat both to remember the past and to position themselves in the present, and that the isolating realities of hunger inevitably blur when confronted with the pull of communal and other affiliations.

This final chapter focuses on these overlaps, brought into focus via a case study drawn from the literature of Levantine Sephardi Jews.¹ These Sephardim are in many respects a paradigmatic Mediterranean people, whose literary output is characterized by all the tropes one expects to encounter in the Mediterranean: multilingualism; involvement in trade and communication networks that span the sea; participation in complex cosmopolitan and imperial milieux; subject to a long history of exile and displacement; performing as mediators between the Mediterranean and its proximate others, Europe, Africa, and Asia; with, of course, a great love of eggplants and a cuisine drenched in olive oil. Over the following pages I examine *Vidal*

¹ For the purposes of this discussion, I define the Levant roughly, as the eastern half of the Mediterranean basin. “Levantine” is, however, in addition to a demonym, a cultural and historical category. For discussions, see Kamal 2017, Shlala 2016, and Lehmann 2008. By “Sephardi” Jews I refer to those claiming descent from the Jewish communities expelled from Iberia in the late 15th century. It is unusual to include Egypt in the Levant, but as I am focused narrowly here on Alexandria, a quintessentially Levantine city, the term seems appropriate.

and His Family (*Vidal et les siens*, 1989) a blended work of biography and criticism by the French Sephardi philosopher Edgar Morin, son of Salonican émigrés, and consider how its depiction of Sephardi foodways is echoed in what is perhaps the best-known memoir of a Levantine Jew, André Aciman’s *Out of Egypt* (1994). Beyond finding interlocking expressions of this dissertation’s major themes in these two works, I argue that the patterns of memory, narrative identification, and hunger that, in general, characterize Mediterranean writing on food and migration illuminate, in these Sephardi texts, a pattern of accretion. Languages, citizenships, and, of course, foods stack upon one another with every step of the Levantine Sephardi journey, as the pull of the past competes with that of the future. In positioning this chapter “against fusion,” I open space for careful description of the bonded, but distinct, affiliations and identifications of Levantine Sephardim.

Historical Background

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the entire story of the Sephardim in the Mediterranean, it may prove useful to outline a few major turning points in Sephardi history.² The Jewish presence in the Iberian peninsula (*Sepharad* is the Hebrew name for Spain) dates at least to Roman times. The Jewish community flourished – relative, at least, to Jewish populations in less tolerant polities – under both Muslim and Christian rule, from the Arab invasions in 711 to the *Reconquista* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³ Already at the beginning of the thirteenth century, popular and Catholic institutional sentiment had begun to turn against Jews and Muslims, with discriminatory measures promulgated by the Fourth Lateran

² For a detailed history of the Mediterranean Sephardim, see Benbassa and Rodrigue 2000.

³ Benbassa and Rodrigue, xxvi. This flourishing should not be taken as support for the near-mythical dream of Andalusian *convivencia*. See Wolf 2009.

Council in 1215.⁴ By the end of the thirteenth century, the zealous drive to Christianize Europe had “spilled south [of the Pyrenees] and began to affect public life in the Iberian peninsula.”⁵ Popular anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiment was inflamed by an economic crisis at the end of the fourteenth century, at which point pogroms swept through Iberia.⁶ From this point, the decline of Jews’ and Muslims’ standing accelerated precipitously. Thousands converted or were pressured to convert to Christianity in the fifteenth century, leaving the community “a pale shadow of its former self.”⁷ The “New Christians” were a favorite target of the Inquisition, which, in Spain, “crystallized as a specific means to combat the problem of Marranism,” crypto-Judaism practiced by converts.⁸ In their authoritative history of the Sephardim, Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue explain the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the subsequent forced conversion of Jews and Muslims in Portugal in 1496/7, and the forced conversions of Muslims in Spain between 1500 and 1526 (though the efficacy of these conversions was never trusted; the Moriscos were themselves expelled in 1609) as the result of these mounting pressures:

As the decree [of expulsion] itself states, it was the Jews who were seen as aiding and abetting the “New Christians” to lapse back into Judaizing, and, hence, to continue in heretical behavior in the Iberian peninsula. One “elegant” solution was to remove the Jews as a presence from society, which would also remove the temptation and the means for any lapse among the “New Christians.” Hence both the establishment of the Inquisition and expulsion of the Jews can be seen as addressing the same problem . . . At the same time, it was indubitably true that the

⁴ Ibid., xxx.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., xxxii.

⁷ Ibid., xxxiii.

⁸ Ibid., xxxv.

fall of Granada [to Christian forces in the final, belated movement of the *Reconquista*] represented the end of an independent non-Christian presence in Spain and heralded the end of the much-touted *convivencia* that had at least ostensibly characterized the relationship between members of the three faiths in the Iberian peninsula. The scene appeared set to bring to a logical conclusion the Christianization and missionizing efforts that had been gathering momentum since the thirteenth century and to begin the construction of a religiously united Spain under an increasingly centralizing monarchy.⁹

From two directions, then, pressure rose to create a Christian space in Iberia by removing the Jews, both because they tempted New Christians to return to Judaism and because their presence interfered with the dream of an Iberian Christian monoculture, as did the presence of unconverted Muslims. The last day for Jews to depart Spain in 1492 fell on the anniversary of the destruction of the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem (the ninth of Av, in the Jewish calendar). This historical echo deepens the expulsion's mythical status in Sephardi history. It is a founding and shaping event, constitutional for Sephardi identity, especially as such an identity exists in conflict with ethnonational monocultures and non-Jewish majorities.

Sephardi Jews spread across Europe and the Mediterranean following the expulsions, with the majority coming to rest in the Ottoman Empire over the course of the sixteenth century, while smaller communities developed in France, the Italian principalities, the Low Countries, and North Africa. Among the Ottomans an "Eastern Sephardi heartland" emerged, with the Jews as one part of the multi-ethnic mosaic of the empire.¹⁰ This should not be construed to indicate

⁹ Ibid., xxxvii. See also Harvey 2005.

¹⁰ Ibid., xix.

anything like the modern ideal of religious equality, but rather that the Ottoman Empire provided a space for the Sephardim, whose culture and numbers soon dominated those of the small existing populations of Romaniote Jews, to thrive as one among the many peoples the empire embraced. I highlight this point in order to stress how “ill-prepared” were the Sephardim “to meet the nation-state” when, after a long span of relative harmony and a notable period of prosperity under the empire’s millet system, nationalism encroached on the Ottomans, making its way from western Europe through the Balkans in the in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹

From this point, our focus narrows from the Sephardim qua ethnic or ethnoreligious group to a particular subset thereof, the Levantine Sephardim. Benbassa and Rodrigue describe them in glowing terms:

Multilingual, multicultural, Westernizing Sephardim, with diverse cultural repertoires in different social settings, were, together with the Greek, Armenian, and other diasporas, an indispensable element in the making of the cosmopolitan tenor of life in the major cities and towns of the Levant in modern times.

Negotiating with multiple local and international influences, and yet maintaining their identities as Jews within the framework of plural cultures, the Sephardim were the quintessential “Levantines.”¹²

This description seems, to me, to blur the lines between Sephardi and Levantine, and between Levantine and Mediterranean, with the Sephardi population coming to stand in for an entire Mediterranean imaginary of cosmopolitan engagement, a sort of new and enduring *convivencia*

¹¹ Ibid., 89. The question of the extent to which Jews anywhere, Sephardi or otherwise, were prepared “to meet the nation state” is recurrent in Jewish Studies.

¹² Ibid., xvii.

of the Levant with the Sephardim at its heart.¹³ The crux of Sephardi difference is exposed in the absence of a national home to retreat to when the imperial world order was replaced by nationalism.¹⁴ In place of a physical territory, Sephardim cling to the memory of expulsion, especially as a manifestation of a recurrent pattern in Sephardi and Jewish history. In Matthias Lehmann's words, the Sephardim, like any diaspora, "establish ethnic boundaries in terms of their being from somewhere else, and in fact explicitly in terms of their not being at home."¹⁵ Diasporas are, Lehmann suggests, "no less 'imagined communities' than nations and nation-states."¹⁶ It follows, then, that each generation," as Benbassa and Rodrigue put it, "was obsessed with the question of continuity."¹⁷ Having replaced space – the paradisiacal and equally mythical dreams of *Sepharad* and the Land of Israel – with time – the memory of diaspora – the Sephardim were left adrift when nationalism came to the Levant.

John Wansbrough's concept of "orbits" is helpful to our understanding of the Sephardi relationship with time. Wansbrough explains that in his vision of communication in the Mediterranean, "the question is thus location of orbits, in the sense both of geographical route and channel of cultural dominance."¹⁸ Orbits help explain the apparently fluctuating distances between locations that remain geographically stable: why are some places "distant," and others

¹³ Benbassa and Rodrigue's "Levantine" is both a geographical and a cultural category. One might substitute "cosmopolitan" for "Levantine."

¹⁴ This changed, to a degree, following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. But Sephardi attitudes toward Israel were – and remain – ambivalent, and their intricacies are largely outside the scope of this project. In my discussion of Edgar Morin's *Vidal and His Family* below, I detail one example of a sort of Sephardi skepticism about what an Israeli homeland offers.

¹⁵ Lehmann, 100. Lehmann goes on to show how a specific Sephardi community – that in Ottoman Palestine – could, over time, come to think of itself as indigenous to the place where it eventually settled. This example is uniquely complicated by the fact that Ottoman Palestine would, geographically, also be the location from which the original Jewish diaspora spread.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷ Benbassa and Rodrigue, 13.

¹⁸ Wansbrough, 6.

“close?” Wansbrough’s analysis closely follows Braudel’s discussion of how news traveled in the early modern Mediterranean. Braudel writes,

If one took the distance from Venice to Paris as a radius and described a circle with Venice as its centre, one would be in theory defining an *isotropic* circular area within which news (like light, but slower) would travel at an identical speed from all points on the circumference to the centre. But of course what we have is nothing of the sort. News was held up by natural obstacles, such as the Alps, the Straits of Dover, the sea. Fast speeds depended on the goodwill, calculation, and needs of men.¹⁹

Wansbrough rewrites Braudel’s isotropic lines as orbital paths, adding a new layer to how we consider movement around the sea. “Granted that, say, Venice and Alexandria are stable features of Mediterranean topography, their recorded variation in distance (time) one from the other is the more important factor for historical analysis.”²⁰ Orbits expand and contract, but their nodes remain relatively fixed. Where both Braudel and Wansbrough understand space through time, we might make the reverse move, and understand time through space. That is to say, on a conceptual level for Levantine Sephardim, *Sepharad* always remained extraordinarily close, the past barely removed from the diaspora’s present. With this in mind, we may observe, in Edgar Morin’s *Vidal and his Family*, how one Salonican Sephardi clan confronted the arrival of modernity in the Balkans: by leaving. Departure inscribes Salonica on the ever-growing list of “homelands” claimed by the Sephardi diaspora, stacking “Salonican” atop Spanish and Jewish affiliations to make room for a new identification, in a new place. In the case presented by André Aciman’s

¹⁹ Braudel, 363. See Braudel’s *Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1, part 2, chapter 1, “Economies: The Measure of the Century,” esp. pp. 360-370.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

memoir, *Out of Egypt*, the Aciman family delays their departure from Alexandria, refusing to acknowledge the changed world, even though their resistance eventually leads them to the same growing stack of affiliations that characterize Vidal's story.

Beaujolais and Turkish Coffee

Edgar Morin's biography of his father, Vidal Nahum, begins, like many Sephardi stories, in the fifteenth century.²¹ Morin's prologue presents a capsule history of the Sephardi diaspora, starting with the expulsion from Iberia, dipping further back to extol the imagined *convivencia* of the Iberian middle ages, then zooming forward through Salonica's evolution as a Sephardi city on the Aegean. In its length and careful detail, this prologue suggests that Vidal's life cannot be understood – or that Morin, from the vantage point of late 20th century France, cannot understand it – without reference to his people's history. More than establishing the immediate context of Vidal's birth and youth, the prologue situates Edgar's father against the larger background of the Sephardi diaspora, conceived as a painful doubling of the original dispersal of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel. Morin therefore constructs Salonica, through his father's eyes, as the new-new-Jerusalem, the third in a series of Jewish paradises stretching from ancient Palestine through medieval Iberia to Salonica in the modern period, “a new Sepharad, in a reduced space.”²² Even readers lacking familiarity with the collapse of the Sephardi world in the middle of the last century can foresee this Eden's doom. It is history with the texture of literature: all paradises fall.

²¹ As I noted in my discussion of Claudia Roden's work in chapter one, Sephardi cookbooks similarly rehearse claims to direct descent from Iberia. See also: Angel 1986, Goldstein 2000, Miner 1984, Stavroulakis 1986, Steinberg 1996, and Twena 1998).

²² Morin, 13. “en un espace réduit, une nouvelle Sefarad.”

After the arrival of waves of Sephardi immigrants in the Levant, for three centuries the Sephardi community, “a unit distinguished by its language, religion, and culture, was an integral part of the Ottoman ethnic-religious mosaic.”²³ The various centers of Sephardi life were increasingly linked by the end of the nineteenth century by the fast-growing Ladino press. In Istanbul, Sofia, Izmir, and Salonica, newspapers and periodicals proliferated.²⁴ The last of these cities, Salonica – called “the Mother City in Israel,” “Citadel of Judaism,” and “Shabbatopolis,” among other monikers – was unique by virtue of the size and dominance of its Jewish population.²⁵ “From the end of the 1520s through the early twentieth century, Jews formed a majority, or at least half, of the city’s population,” and the vast majority of these were Sephardim.²⁶ Salonica was, by population, the only major Jewish city in the world, though it existed in the context of Ottoman tolerance.

Where Morin traces a one-way journey from Iberia to the Aegean over the course of centuries, and, later, a second path within his father Vidal’s lifetime from Salonica to France, Wansbrough might mark a long orbit from the Ponent to the Levant and back, itself predicated on an earlier westward migration by those who became the first Sephardim. I favor the latter perspective, as it permits recurrences and returns disallowed by unidirectional movement and represents, in its multi-generational span, a kind of Braudelian *longue durée*. In its guise as the dream of return, the past lingers in the present and weaves through the future. Thus, when Morin writes of the Sephardi experience in Salonica, “some Turkish words entered *djidio* [Morin’s term for Ladino], music was Turk-ified, and a gastronomic osmosis was effected between the related

²³ Benbassa and Rodrigue, 65.

²⁴ Borovaya, 24.

²⁵ Naar, 235.

²⁶ Borovaya., 75.

Mediterranean cuisines of Spain and the Orient,” I must object to the term “osmosis.”²⁷ Just as Ladino’s vocabulary grew with the addition of Turkish words, the Sephardi culinary repertoire was augmented by Levantine dishes. These did not replace Iberian flavors, nor were the two combined via mutual osmotic exchange. Sephardi cookbooks clearly demonstrate how egg-based desserts and dishes flavored with almond and orange blossom remain recognizably Iberian in origin while spinach and cheese pies are just as obviously Levantine.²⁸ Sephardi culinary culture is, like the Ladino language and like Vidal Nahum’s narrative identification, characterized by accretion and overlap. Orbital returns remain possible even as new destinations are added to the Sephardi itinerary, and new dishes come to be cooked in Sephardi kitchens.²⁹

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, amidst an economic renaissance, the Jewish community of Salonica began to look to the West for cultural models which challenged both Jewish and Ottoman traditions. In his landmark monograph on Salonica, Mark Mazower explains, “By the final third of the nineteenth century, ‘Frankish’ [Western] values spread

²⁷ Morin, 15. “quelques mots turcs entrent dans le *djidio*, la musique se turquise, et une osmose gastronomique s’effectue entre les cuisines méditerranéennes parentes d’Espagne et d’Orient.” *Djidio* is the Salonican pronunciation of *djudio*, a word meaning, simply, “Jewish,” used to refer both to the people and their language.

²⁸ See note 21.

²⁹ My objection to the term “osmosis” echoes recent postcolonial scholarship’s criticism of the idea of “hybridity.” In his monograph, *Questioning Hybridity* (2011), Amar Acheraïou describes the use of the term thusly: “With its adoption by [Homi] Bhabha and, more generally, by postcolonial scholars, the concept of hybridity has seen its semantics rehabilitated and widely inflected to stand for inclusiveness, dialogism, subversion, and contestation of grand narratives. For most scholars in postcolonial and cultural studies hybridity represents a crucial emancipatory tool releasing the representations of identity from as well as culture from the assumptions of purity and supremacy that fuel colonialist, nationalist, and essentialist discourses” (5-6). The problem, to Acheraïou’s mind, arises in the fact that, “hybridity, as conceived by Bhabha, was not only a key feature of colonial cultures, but was also deeply inscribed in the very structure of colonial discourse and power” (95). That is, hybridity may be inevitably inscribed within the colonial system. Acheraïou is not contesting whether hybridity is a real phenomenon, or even arguing against its value; he merely casts doubt on whether it is as subversive or emancipatory as postcolonial theory has claimed.

quickly throughout Salonica. . . . A wealthy Greek and Jewish ‘aristocracy’ challenged the power of their own religious leaders: founding schools and newspapers, they subsidized European languages, learning and ideas. . . . For Salonica was escaping the gravitational pull of Istanbul and establishing profitable connections with Western Europe.”³⁰ Pace Braudel and Wansbrough’s relativistic ideas of space and time, Mazower notes, “A letter traveling from Salonica to Paris in the early part of the nineteenth century took a good month, no different from Roman times. By the 1860s this had been cut to about two weeks by steamboat, and rail cut it further to sixty-three hours [by the century’s close].”³¹ The time, and the distance, between Salonica and Western Europe were shrinking drastically.

This was the milieu in which Morin’s father, Vidal Nahum, was raised. The most salient manifestation of westernization in the life of a young Salonican Jew at the end of the nineteenth century was a major shift in educational practices. Schools sponsored by the French Alliance Israélite Universelle, a Paris-based organization devoted to the modernization and “regeneration” of “Oriental” Jews, quickly supplanted Salonica’s old Talmud Torah. “The Alliance was instrumental in bringing about a major cultural reorientation of the Levant Sephardim. The generations of Jews who attended its schools came to admire France and French culture, and many became fully Francophone.”³² The first Alliance school opened in Salonica in 1873. “By 1912 the Alliance was responsible for educating more than four thousand pupils, over half the total number of children in Jewish schools.”³³ Vidal himself attended what Morin describes only as “the Franco-German school” (a private institution apparently affiliated neither with the

³⁰ Mazower, 211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

³² Benbassa and Rodrigue, 88.

³³ Mazower, 220.

Alliance nor with the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, the Alliance's German counterpart and rival, though seemingly born out of the same Westernizing cultural currents), eventually earning "a diploma that seems to have been equivalent to the *baccalauréat*, since it allowed Vidal's schoolmates to pursue their further education in France."³⁴

In a sense, then, Vidal must have been prepared to adapt to life in France when he immigrated there in 1915 – against his will, initially, for reasons I will explain shortly – having come of age in a city that was increasingly Westernizing, especially among the upwardly-mobile and elite segments of society.³⁵ But Benbassa and Rodrigue caution, "Gallicization represented a complex spectrum. . . . The ideology of emancipation [the Sephardim] imbibed in the Alliance schools proved to be largely irrelevant in a Levant where group distinctiveness remained paramount and the equality of citizenship problematic."³⁶ Salonica's Jews reacted uncertainly to political turbulence in the Balkans at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1878, the Treaty of Berlin "established new Balkan states and insisted on religious equality in them."³⁷ The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 belatedly brought nationalism to Salonica, as the city was claimed by Greece and, following its capture during the First Balkan War in 1912, formally incorporated into the Greek kingdom by the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest, which resolved the territorial disputes at the heart of the Second Balkan War.³⁸ Coming on the heels of the Young Turk revolution (1908) and a failed counter-revolution (1909), Salonica's population – Jewish and otherwise –

³⁴ Morin, 30.

³⁵ Mazower, 211.

³⁶ Benbassa and Rodrigue, 88-9.

³⁷ Ibid., 90.

³⁸ Mazower, 281. Some Jewish leaders agitated, fruitlessly, for the establishment of an "autonomous Jewish statelet" under the shared jurisdiction of the Great Powers.

must have felt a kind of historical whiplash when confronted by the sudden change in their city's rule.

Newly Greek – by residence, if nothing else – it was not long before Salonica's populace, as a result of a complicated episode in Greek political history, found itself “once again effectively under military occupation” during the First World War. King Constantine, favoring the Central Powers, was at odds with his prime minister, the Entente sympathizer Eleftherios Venizelos, who, without the King's knowledge and against the King's will, had invited Entente forces to use Salonica as a mobilization point for troops marching north to defend Serbia against the new alliance of territory-hungry Bulgaria with Germany and Austria. King Constantine was so angry at Venizelos' actions that, after forcing Venizelos to resign, the king followed through on a threat to voluntarily cede eastern Macedonia to German and Bulgarian troops. With the Central Powers at Salonica's doorstep, “on 3 June 1916, [French forces] declared martial law in Salonica.”³⁹ Later that year, a Venizelist faction briefly declared an independent Macedonia. Mazower observes, “these fractious twists and turns left much of the city's population unmoved. . . . People generally were tired of war.”⁴⁰

The bulk of *Vidal and His Family* concentrates on the adaptations of the Nahum and Beressi clans (the latter being the family of Vidal's wife, Morin's mother) to life in France following their staggered emigration from Salonica during and after World War I. In a series of miniature orbits Vidal leaves and returns to Salonica twice before his final settling in France. He embarks on failed ventures in Vienna in 1911 and Paris in 1913; in 1915 he is shipped to France against his will, where he is confined. Already exerting power before formally occupying

³⁹ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 290.

Salonica, France, acting on behalf of Italy, intended to force all young Salonican men with Italian nationality – really, Sephardi Jews who acquired Italian papers in the course of their or their ancestors’ migrations – to join the war effort of the Allied Powers.⁴¹ Vidal, however, because he had been engaged in business with Germany (the sale, arranged in 1912 and never carried out, of downgraded Turkish arms), is imprisoned in Marseilles. He remains there until 1916, when he is able – with the help of extended family connections and of his own immediate family, several of whom have traveled to Marseilles to assist in obtaining his release – to convince the French government to officially register the Nahums as of “Salonican” nationality, which is to say, functionally non-national, and therefore conveniently exempt from mandatory military service.⁴² Morin explains, “If they declared themselves Italians, they would be made to join the Italian army, if they declared themselves Greek, they would be made to return to Salonica; if they declared themselves Turkish, they would be arrested as enemy nationals . . . Hence the logical necessity of declaring themselves nationals of what was, in fact, their little homeland, the city of Salonica.”⁴³ A year later, this nationality is officially changed to “Levantine Jew.” Morin is attentive to the simultaneous importance and irrelevance of

⁴¹ The Venizelist government did not begin conscripting Jews into the Greek military until 1916, prompting a “wave of emigration among Jewish men who sought to evade military service” (Naar, 3). By that point, Vidal had already left Salonica, subject to a different fate as a result of his Italian citizenship. Naar’s book does not address the circumstances of Jewish protégés and foreign nationals in Salonica.

⁴² One might compare these a-national Salonican Sephardim with the “undetermined Venezia Giulians” and “undetermined Dodecanese” categories employed by the International Refugee Organization after World War II. See Ballinger, Pamela “History’s ‘Illegibles’: National Indeterminacy in Istria,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 43 (2012): 116-137.

⁴³ Morin, 86. “Se déclarer italiens, c’était se faire envoyer dans l’armée italienne, se déclarer grecs, c’était se faire renvoyer à Salonique; se déclarer turcs, c’était se faire arrêter comme ressortissants ennemis . . . D’où la nécessité logique de se déclarer nationaux de ce qui était en fait leur petite patrie, la cité de Salonique.

nationality to Salonican Sephardim. It is a kind of game they play of , picking up citizenships based on circumstance and convenience, and discarding them with equal facility.⁴⁴

In her recent monograph on Sephardi extraterritoriality, Sarah Abrevaya Stein explains, “At times (if, for example, it might insulate one from state conscription efforts) individual protégés saw it in their interest to interpret ‘protection’ in the broadest possible fashion; at other times (if, in another configuration, it might insulate one from state conscription efforts), a more constrained interpretation proved desirable.”⁴⁵ Stein pushes us to consider “citizenship as a spectrum: a range of conditions or positions that Jews could access rather than a singular possession they could or could not claim.”⁴⁶ Morin believes that these easy exchanges are rooted in Vidal’s incomprehension of nationalism and his non- or a-national identity: “He is touched only by his city, moved only by his tribe.”⁴⁷ The Sephardi narrative of displacement by early modern Spain’s mono-cultural ambitions excludes identification with the ethnonational states that emerged in the twentieth century. Simultaneously, Salonican Sephardim were broadly engaged in an effort to make a homeland of their city, on their own terms. Naar writes, “Following the Balkan Wars, many Salonican Jews dispersed across the globe as ‘exiled sons’ in the wake of the capture of their ‘motherland,’ Salonica, by Greece.” They thought of their situation as a “temporary exile.” After World War I, some Salonicans argued that the “‘principle of nationalities,’ which underpinned the concept of ‘self-determination’ championed by US President Woodrow Wilson, should be applied to Salonica like everywhere else – and thus Jews, who formed the predominant ‘national’ demographic element in the city, ought to reign

⁴⁴ For comparison, see Fahmy 2013 on “legal code-shopping.”

⁴⁵ Stein, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷ Morin, 84. “Il n’est ému que par sa cité, mû que par sa tribu.”

sovereign.”⁴⁸ Echoing Morin’s explanation of the ardency of Vidal’s affiliation with Salonica, Naar continues, “City-based identity constituted in the case of Salonica a legitimate and modern mode of self and collective expression that competed with other categories of belonging, such as nation, religion, class, or ideology, sometimes complementing these later affiliations, at other times challenging them.”⁴⁹ To a populace for whom “nation” was a foreign concept, the “little homeland” of Jewish Salonica offered just as rational a lodestar for identification.

The Nahums, finding Marseilles much to their liking during the tumultuous war years, remained there, though they were for a long time hesitant to take up the mantle of French identification. Morin describes their feeling of Mediterranean familiarity, “Marseilles is a Salonica, but French instead of Sephardi.”⁵⁰ In 1921, Vidal and many of his relatives relocated to Paris, whence various cousins would, in Morin’s words, “go a bit further into diaspora,” settling in Liverpool and Avignon.⁵¹ Diaspora, here, is relative to Salonica as a location and an idea and a period of time, a memory of tightly bound community and family life. Sometime around 1925, an unnamed French official awakens to the fact that the nationality of “Levantine Jew” is a fiction, and Vidal is made to regularize his identity card. Nostalgic for Salonica, at this juncture Vidal takes Greek nationality, which he retains until finally becoming a naturalized French citizen in 1931, sixteen years after his arrival in Marseilles. Similarly circuitous routes to French citizenship were taken by a number of Levantine Jewish immigrants to France, who were given a range of *ad hoc* legal nationalities upon their arrival in the Hexagon in order to allow them to legally reside there during hostilities with the Ottoman Empire. During the interwar years, many

⁴⁸ Naar, 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁰ Morin, 90. “Marseille est une Salonique non pas séfarade, mais française.” This contrast underlines the idea of Salonica as a Sephardi city.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 142. “s’est diasporée un peu plus”

of these various designations were gradually normalized under the national system.⁵² From the point when Vidal attains French citizenship, the story begins to track the dissolution of his internal Salonica, and of Salonica as a manifestation of the idea of Sepharad, when confronted with modernity. After becoming French, the Nahums' Sephardi affiliation is gradually attenuated.

At intervals throughout the text, Morin gauges this attenuation via changes in the Nahums' and Beressis' culinary practices. The Beressis' emigration from Salonica to France unfolds as a series of encounters with foreign food.

During their voyage by ship, Myriam [Vidal's future mother-in-law], Luna [Vidal's future wife and Morin's mother], and Corinne [Luna's sister, whom Vidal will eventually marry after both Corinne and Vidal have been widowed] discovered a very strange cheese with holes in it. On arriving in Marseilles after two days on a train, Myriam was very disoriented to not understand how to make coffee. After trying in vain several times, she sent Corinne to the concierge, who taught her the western way of doing it. Corinne was also very surprised to see that women, and not men, did the marketing, and she was horrified to see tripe and lungs hanging on the butchers' hooks.⁵³

⁵² Stein, 84-6. Those who retained an irregular nationality into the Second World War had their legal residency revoked under Vichy, after which the majority were rounded up by German forces and sent to concentration camps. For more on this chapter of French Jewish history, see Amipaz-Silber 1995.

⁵³ Ibid., 104. "Au cours de ce voyage en bateau, Myriam, Luna et Corinne découvrirent un fromage très étrange qui avait des trous. A l'arrivée à Marseille, après deux jours de train, Myriam fut très désorientée de ne pas comprendre comment faire le café. Après de vains efforts, elle envoya Corinne chez la concierge, qui lui enseigna l'usage occidental. Corinne fut aussi très étonnée de voir que les femmes et non les hommes faisaient le marché, elle fut horrifiée de voir tripes et poumons sur les crochets des bouchers."

Morin's amused tone when describing the Beressi women's first taste of Swiss cheese fades to sympathy for Myriam's confusion when confronted with a French coffee maker. A woman accustomed to brewing coffee in the manner generally known as in the West as "Turkish," in which coffee grounds, often blended with cardamom in the beverage's Arab iteration, are boiled with sugar and water until foamy several times in a narrow, long-handled vessel on the stove – a method common throughout the Levant, jealously claimed as "Turkish," "Greek," or "Arabic" depending on the place in which one drinks it – would naturally have been stymied by what was probably a French *percolateur*, used to make filtered coffee.⁵⁴ Coffee is a ritual food, and Turkish coffee, by whatever name, is a totem food of the Levant. Learning to make it in a new manner verges on partaking in a sacrament of conversion. The coupling of Myriam's jarring encounter with a French coffee maker with Corinne's revelations about French marketing practices signposts the disorientation attending their departure from the Orient.

Food next appears in the text after Vidal and Luna have been married, when Morin describes their young family's daily life. His accounts of their culinary practices are strikingly detailed. I reproduce one here in full, to give an accurate impression of the profusion of Salonican and Sephardi dishes the family matriarchs continue to serve in France.

The couple's cookery includes the West and the East. Their everyday diet is rather westernized. For family meals, however, at Myriam Beressi's house or at Henriette Hassid's [née Nahum, Vidal's sister] (where Vidal's mother does the cooking), Sephardic-Salonican food is mandatory. Sometimes there is some *raki* as an aperitif, with hard-boiled eggs or, better, duck eggs roasted in the oven (*uevos de baba ahaminados*), and fresh cucumbers cut lengthwise, crunchy with

⁵⁴ Roden 1977, 87.

salt, then, for the first course, the traditional *pastellico* made with cheese, eggplants, or spinach in a large pastry that had to be cooked in a baker's oven, baked grey or red mullet, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers stuffed with meat (lamb or a lamb-veal mixture), chicken with spinach stalks, *arroz con fijones* (rice with white beans) that each diner mixes together according to his taste, *kashkaval* (Balkan sheep's cheese), and *sotlach* (cream of milk and Maïzena flour cooked in the oven). At Myriam Beressi's house there are always some sweet treats, *rosquitas*, *charopes*, *toupichtis*, that she makes herself. This cuisine has its own original elements within the Balkan ensemble, and it preserves some Spanish traces, like the *rosquitas* or the delicious *bunuelos*, soaked in honey.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Morin, 132. "La gastronomie du couple couvre Occident et Orient. La cuisine quotidienne est assez occidentalisée. Mais, dans les repas de famille, chez Myriam Beressi ou chez Henriette Hassid (chez qui la mère de Vidal fait la cuisine), la gastronomie séfarade-salonicienne s'impose. Parfois, du *raki* en apéritif, avec œufs durs, mieux, œufs de cane rôtis au four (*uevos de baba ahaminados*), cornichons frais coupés en long et croqués au sel, puis, en entrée, le traditionnel *pastellico* di fromage, d'aubergines ou encore d'épinards en une grande galette que l'on fait cuire au four du Boulanger, mulets ou rougets de Marseille au four, tomates, Aubergines, poivrons farcis de viande (agneau ou mélange agneau-veau), poulet aux queues d'épinard, *arroz con fijones* (riz avec haricots blancs) que chacun mélange selon son goût, *cachcaval* (fromage de brebis balkanique), *sotlach* (crème de lait et Maïzena au four). Chez Myriam Beressi, il y a toujours des gâteries sucrées, *rosquitas*, *charopes*, *toupichtis*, qu'elle fait elle-même. Cette cuisine a ses originalités propres dans l'ensemble balkanique et elle conserve des traces hispaniques, comme la *rosquitas*, ou les délicieux *bunuelos*, trempés dans du miel."

The red mullets or surmulletts (family *mullidae*, two species) are one of the most prized fishes of the Mediterranean, and are particularly beloved in Sephardi cuisine. Grey mullet (family *mugilidae*, many species), often called "goatfish" or, simply, "mullet," are more widely distributed. The French common name *mulet* embraces several species outside the *mugilidae* family as well, while the two species of red mullet, called in French *rouget*, are always distinguished from the various other mullets. The corn-based *sotlach* Morin describes is a variant of what is rendered in Turkish as *sutlaç*, a rice pudding. *Rosquitas* and *bunuelos* are donut-like desserts, *toupichtis* are small cakes, and *charopes* are syrups. Throughout this section I have retained Morin's spellings for all of these foods (except *kashkaval* cheese, which he renders *cashcaval*), though the case of *sotlach/sütlaç* is a good example of the degree of variability in how these dishes are known around the Mediterranean.

Morin's habit of distinguishing Spanish foods from Balkan foods, and both from everyday French cuisine, works against his claim of "culinary osmosis," speaking instead to the additive nature of Sephardi narratives of identification. Foods annexed to the repertory at different points along the Sephardi orbit are distinguished from one another by the languages in which they are named, the occasions at which they are served, and even the courses during which they are placed on the table. Salonican dishes generally dominate the savory courses at family meals, while Spanish flavors rule in desserts. Rather than osmosis, this way of eating constantly attempts to maintain the separateness of each element of the family's history, though these effortful distinctions are haunted by the unmentioned fusion that inevitably occurs within each digesting body. For this reason, the names of each food are exhaustively catalogued and honored in the text. Morin constantly guards against the loss of any detail of this history.

Morin inserts himself into the scene, writing in the third person about Vidal and Luna's young son who is delighted by this cuisine and, "as a child, falls in love with eggplants."⁵⁶ Morin thereby positions himself as the next link in a chain of Sephardi culture that persists in food even in a time of increasing secularization. Vidal himself is "vaguely deist," rather than observantly Jewish, but retains a strong cultural affiliation with Judaism.⁵⁷ "Whatever remained from his ancestors was concentrated in the maternal foods that were served at family meals: hard-boiled duck eggs, cucumbers with salt, *pastellicos* and *borekitas*. These foods were present, as delicious as ever, at every weekly meal at his sister Henriette's, where his mother made Salonican cuisine."⁵⁸ Are these weekly meals part of a Shabbat ritual? The text does not specify, but *uevos*

⁵⁶ Ibid. "qui, tout enfant, épouse d'amour l'aubergine."

⁵⁷ Ibid., 169. "vaguement déiste"

⁵⁸ Ibid., 170. "ce qui restait des ancêtres se concentrait dans les nourritures matricielles qu'on servait aux repas de famille, les œufs durs de cane, les cornichons au sel, les *pastellicos* ou

ahaminados, at least, are characteristic of the Sephardi Sabbath table. Just as I argued in chapter two, where I discussed characters who eat both to remember the past and to keep the past alive in the present, the persistence of Sephardi food in France indicates more than nostalgia. While French cuisine may have become the quotidian base of the Nahums' and Beressis' diets, the ritualized consumption, whether on the Sabbath or not, of Sephardi dishes suggests that these immigrants maintain an ongoing relationship with the past as part of the vital material of the present.

After the death of Vidal's mother, Sephardi food further recedes from regular consumption. Morin writes, "The Frenchification of the Nahums was intensified in their eating habits upon the death of their mother, who, until the end of her life, prepared Salonican food for her family. Afterwards, they would sometimes seek out in restaurants the Salonican cuisine that, apart from the *pastellico*, had become scarce within their homes."⁵⁹ Even this persistent *pastellico* has been altered from its prior form. The women who make it now prefer to use "fromage blanc or *demi-sel*" in the tart, instead of a brinier, feta-style cheese.⁶⁰ At the same time, Vidal grows enamored of the offerings at an Alsatian delicatessen, where he buys "ham on the bone, Strasbourg sausages, corned beef, and especially smoked tongue."⁶¹ Vidal's unconcern for the regulations of kashrut notwithstanding – we already know his affiliation with Judaism is

borekitas; ces nourritures, elles étaient présentes, toujours aussi savoureuses, à chaque repas hebdomadaire chez sa sœur Henriette où sa mère faisait la cuisine salonicienne."

⁵⁹ Ibid., 187. "La francisation des Nahum s'est accentuée dans la nourriture, après la mort de leur mère, qui, jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, faisait la cuisine salonicienne pour les siens. Alors on va désormais rechercher dans les restaurants cette nourriture, qui, à part le *pastellico*, s'est raréfiée et résidualisée au foyer."

⁶⁰ Ibid. "fromage blanc ou du *demi-sel*," types of soft white cheese.

⁶¹ Ibid. "le jambon à l'os, les saucisses de Strasbourg, le pickel-fleisch, et surtout la langue fumée." *Pickel-fleisch* appears to be Morin's speculative Germanic rendering of the Yiddish *pekel-fleysh*.

more cultural than strictly religious – Morin uses the ebb of Sephardi cooking and its complementary replacement by French foods to mark Vidal’s location along the spectrum of integration. Of interest, as well, is the change the Nahum women have made to their *pastellico* recipe. This, more than anything else in *Vidal and His Family*, provides evidence for Morin’s contention about Sephardi “culinary osmosis.” While white cheese is identified more with Levantine dairy production than French, a *pastellico* made with *fromage blanc* or *demi-sel* may indeed be a kind of fusion cuisine, reflecting the influence of western tastes or modern concerns about sodium content on an old eastern specialty. This being the only instance Morin documents of such an adaptation, I stand by my assessment of “osmosis” as a misleading term for the processes by which Sephardi migrants in the Mediterranean add new foods to their repertoires. Even at this juncture, French food and Sephardi food remain distinct entities, and play distinct roles in the Nahums’ and Beressis’ eating habits.

The story of Vidal’s becoming French reaches a turning point when he takes his first drink of Beaujolais. In 1940, Vidal, having become a French citizen in 1931, is summoned to perform military service during World War II. He is stationed in a munitions factory, where “an important step in Vidal’s Frenchification [occurs]: his fellow soldiers introduce him to Beaujolais.”⁶² Beaujolais becomes Vidal’s own sacramental wine, a belated mirror of his wife’s family’s encounter with a French coffee maker just after having arrived in Marseilles. For Vidal, the sacrament is delayed, just as his citizenship was delayed. He is halting and ambivalent in his assimilation, but the coupling of the Beaujolais with military service seems to accomplish what an oath of citizenship on its own could not. Wine being Barthes’ own example of a French totem

⁶² Ibid., 201. “Étape importante dans la francisation de Vidal : ses copains lui font découvrir le beaujolais.”

food, we may say that this episode marks a new station along the route of Vidal's integration. Vidal falls in love with French wine, and no more is heard of *raki*. There are pragmatic reasons for this assimilation. As anthropologist Annie Benveniste has it, "Unlike the Ottoman Empire, composed of a mosaic of peoples, France is not a multi-ethnic nation."⁶³ In spite of Vidal's resistance to the idea of the nation, the regularization of his citizenship does seem to correspond with rising national feeling.

Decades later, when Vidal and Corinne are married and both are old, Morin relates what seems to be the death of Sephardi food in the Nahum and Beressi families. "Corinne," Morin relates, "has progressively abandoned the Salonican custom of preparing several dishes in advance in case someone visits. She has also, little by little, stopped making the spinach or eggplant *sfontatticos*, the cheese *pastellicos*, and the veal and lamb *keftes*, of which she always reserved a portion for her children and Edgar."⁶⁴ This appears to be a story of Sephardi food's slow decline in an immigrant population, a drawn-out version of the tales of narrative identification we encountered in chapter two. In this light, the phenomenon of eating to remember is slowly replaced by that of eating to become. There is even a manifestation of the name changes undergone by Amedeo and Emma (the protagonists of *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* and *I Am Love*, works I examine in chapter three): long before Edgar takes the last name Morin as a cover for his work with the resistance during World War II, Vidal Nahum is inadvertently remade as Vidal Nahoum, the result of a mistake by the police

⁶³ Benveniste, 171.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 308. "Corinne a progressivement abandonné la coutume salonicienne de préparer plusieurs plats à l'avance en vue d'une visite éventuelle. Elle a aussi progressivement cessé de faire les *sfontatticos* d'épinards ou d'aubergines, les *pastellicos* de fromage, les *keftes* de veau et agneau, dont elle gardait toujours une portion pour ses enfants et Edgar."

captain who made out his residency card.⁶⁵ Increasing Frenchification is foreordained from this point, names always seeming to contain, in these migration stories, a bit of destiny.

Complicating this vectoring movement towards France is the strange and unexplained phenomenon of Vidal's hunger. We first get word of this oddity when Morin tells us that Vidal favors a particular restaurant, the Conti, "where the servings are generous. He hurries there as soon as it opens, is served first, and eats very quickly, with an enormous appetite. As soon as his dish is finished he plunges his fork into his son's plate."⁶⁶ During the war, when Vidal finds refuge in Nice, Morin writes, "In Nice [Vidal] feels safe, but he is not eating enough. He goes to two restaurants in a row for lunch."⁶⁷ Back in Paris after the war, his hunger grows. "At first he eats lunch around twelve thirty, then at noon, and finally, during the seventies, at eleven thirty and at eleven o'clock."⁶⁸ By the 1970s, Vidal's eating habits have become entirely bizarre. Morin describes his father's behavior when the family dines out:

At the restaurant he is anxious to consult the menu, demands bread in the meantime, is in a hurry to order, orders first, asks to be served as quickly as possible, and then, having ordered, his eyes watch the waiter and, at the first opportunity, he flags the waiter down to demand his dish. As soon as the dish arrives, his head bends over his plate. He eats greedily, as if he is suffering from

⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 212. "où les plats sont copieux. Il s'y précipite dès l'ouverture, est servi le premier ; il mange très vite, avec un énorme appétit et, sitôt son plat terminé, plonge sa fourchette dans l'assiette de son fils"

⁶⁷ Ibid., 215. "A Nice, il se sent en sécurité, mais il ne mange pas assez. Il fait deux restaurants à la file pour déjeuner."

⁶⁸ Ibid., 256. "Au début, il déjeune vers midi et demi, puis il passe à midi, et enfin, dans les années soixante-dix, à 11 heures et demie et à 11 heures. Sitôt rentré . . . il presse Corinne de faire chauffer les plats, commençant par piquer dans le réfrigérateur un œuf dur et, en saison, des petits cornichons qu'il croque au sel."

famine, with the absolute concentration of an animal. He neither hears nor sees anything, though, from time to time, instinctively, like his hominid ancestors did before the invention of fire one or two million years ago, his eyes sweep across his field of vision as if to confirm the absence of any enemy who might come to seize his meal. He continues until the dish is entirely dispatched. Although he is now somewhat reassured, he still awaits the main course with impatience. It is only once this, too, is finished that he lifts his head, beaming, and looks immediately around him at the others' plates to see if here or there remains anything to steal. He will gulp down some wine, and begin to participate in the conversation, profiting from Corinne or his son's distraction by nicking something from their plates.⁶⁹

In the text's epilogue, Morin speculates that Vidal's fixation on food was "undoubtedly linked to preservation of his childlike nature," related to the parts of Vidal's character which demanded constantly to be taken care of.⁷⁰ Without entirely discarding Morin's analysis of his father, I see in Vidal's hunger a certain dissatisfaction, a sense that his life is somehow not enough for Vidal.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 308-9. "Au restaurant, il a hâte de consulter la carte, réclame du pain en attendant, est pressé de commander, commande le premier, demande qu'on le serve au plus vite, puis, la commande passée, son regard guette le garçon et, à la première occasion, il le hèle pour réclamer son plat. Dès que le plat arrive, son visage se penche sur l'assiette, il mange goulûment, comme s'il souffrait de famine, avec une concentration absolue d'animal. Il n'entend et ne voit plus rien, mais, de temps à autre, instinctivement, comme le faisaient ses ancêtres hominien avant l'invention du feu, il y a un à deux millions d'années, ses yeux balaient le champ visuel, comme pour vérifier l'absence d'un ennemi qui viendrait s'emparer de son repas, et continuent jusqu'à ce qu'il ait tout liquidé. Bien qu'un peu rasséréiné, il attend encore avec impatience le plat principal. Ce n'est qu'une fois celui-ci terminé que son visage se redressera, épanoui, qu'il regardera autour de lui, d'abord les assiettes des autres, pour voir s'il y a de quoi piquer ici et là, boira une bonne lampée de vin, et commencera à participer à la conversation, profitant d'une distraction de Corinne ou de son fils pour piquer un morceau dans leur assiette."

⁷⁰ Ibid., 348. "Son incroyable fixation sur le manger est sans doute liée à la conservation de son enfance."

In spite of his baptism by Beaujolais and Salonica's re-formation as the Greek city of Thessaloniki, Vidal never stops dreaming of a final return to the Levant. In their old age, Vidal and Corinne celebrate Passover in the company of other Salonicans. "Every Passover," Morin tells us, "[Vidal] thought, imagining a pilgrimage there rather than a full return, not 'Next year in Jerusalem,' but 'Next year in Salonica.'"⁷¹ In addition to affirming my understanding of Salonica as a third Jerusalem for that city's Sephardi community, Vidal's persistent dream of revisiting his home provides a solution for the puzzle of his hunger. We may see his gustatory dissatisfaction, now, as an indication that he has become no longer Salonican but not yet properly French, restlessly seeking the place of his belonging.

When Vidal's hunger spikes in the 1970s, he undertakes a series of pilgrimages. Visiting Málaga, within old *Sepharad*, by wild coincidence Vidal's hotelier is a Sephardi Jew who guesses at Vidal's ancestry and greets him in Ladino, "*Soch ben amenou?*"⁷² Are you one of our people? On another trip, when his dream of revisiting Salonica is realized, Vidal is disappointed to find "an entirely Greek city, having retained only a few rare traces of the Sephardi population that had been dispersed, and then exterminated."⁷³ The Great Fire of 1917 had remade the city soon after Vidal was transported to Marseille, and the Nazis had deported almost the entire Jewish community to Auschwitz in 1943, where they were murdered. Traveling to Israel, Vidal is "moved and happy," but finds few Salonicans there among whom he can recreate the world of his childhood – it is clear that whatever national space he is seeking, it is still defined on the level of a city, people, and language that are not replicated by the Israeli

⁷¹ Ibid., 354. "à chaque Pâque, il pensait, pour y pèleriner plus que pour y retourner, non pas : «L'an prochain à Jérusalem » mais : « L'an prochain à Salonique »."

⁷² Ibid., 298.

⁷³ Ibid., 297. "une ville intégralement grecque, n'ayant gardé que quelques rares traces de la population séfarade dispersée, puis exterminée."

state.⁷⁴ A Jewish homeland in Israel remains, for Vidal, the fulfillment of someone else's dream.⁷⁵ Livorno, another stop on the Sephardi route and where many Sephardim acquired Italian papers during the long emigration from Iberia, was "delightful" for Vidal as well, not least because of the "rustic [and] Mediterranean" cuisine there, but despite these pilgrimages, Vidal never finds a place that truly recalls his home.⁷⁶ When he dies, it is Edgar who decides to have him buried in Monaco, in a cemetery poetically overlooking "the sea that unites Spain, Italy, Salonica, and France."⁷⁷ In death, Vidal returns to the Mediterranean.

What appears to be a story of the decline of Sephardi cuisine and Sephardi identity is revealed as itself an orbit, lengthening away from Salonica and returning to it, in spirit, over the course of generations. Edgar, the young boy who developed a love of eggplants, explains in the

⁷⁴ Ibid. "ému et heureux"

⁷⁵ Vidal and his family left Salonica before Zionism grew prominent there. Even after their departure, though, Zionism never achieved the type of dominance in Salonica it enjoyed elsewhere in Europe. Mark Mazower explains, "The 1917 fire [in Salonica], by destroying the neighborhood synagogues around which local networks of power and authority had formerly been based, also helped to foster the new kind of ethnic (rather than strictly religious) definition of community which the Zionists espoused. Yet even though Jews began to emigrate from 1910 onwards, they went mostly to France and Italy, or across the Atlantic. The figures are uncertain, but by 1930 thousands of Salonican Jews had settled in Paris, and there were smaller communities everywhere from New York to Naples. Some dock-workers, *hamals* and fishermen did make their way to Haifa and Tel Aviv, and there was a spurt of departures after anti-Semitic disturbances in Salonica in 1931. But the actual numbers involved were probably relatively small. As many as 20-25,000 Jews emigrated from the city before the [Second World] war but probably only about a quarter of these, if that, ended up in Mandate Palestine. Well before the Arab Revolt of 1936, the sense had grown that Zionism did not have the answer to the problems of Salonican Jewry. The economic slowdown was just as acute in Palestine as in Greece, and the British were only issuing about two hundred permits annually. Moreover, the Greek authorities themselves did not want the Jews to leave" (379).

⁷⁶ Morin, 298. "La nourriture était rustique, méditerranéenne, exquise pour Vidal." Robert Mabro explains, "Many Jewish families obtained Italian nationality on the grounds that ancestors (not necessarily direct ones) had migrated from Livorno to the Eastern Mediterranean in centuries past" (Mabro, 251).

⁷⁷ Morin, 344. "la mer qui unit L'Espagne, L'Italie, Salonique, la France."

text's epilogue that Sephardi-Salonican food persists in his life. He writes of himself in the third person:

This Parisian enjoys French food, he likes *andouillette* and sweetbreads, but he prefers Mediterranean food made with olive oil, and above all else he loves eggplant *gratins* and Salonican *pastellico*. For as long as Corinne enjoyed cooking, when she prepared *gratins* or *pastellico* she always kept aside a portion for Edgar. He taught the eggplant *gratin* to Edwige [Edgar's third wife, whom he was married to from 1982 until her death 2008], a Nordic child with blue eyes, and when she wants to please him, when he returns from a trip, she makes a *sfontattico* for him. Corinne taught the *pastellico* to Irène [Edgar's first daughter], and Liliane [one of Edgar's cousins, a daughter of Vidal's sister, Henriette] taught the *pastellico* to Vèronique [Edgar's second daughter], who makes it when she invites friends over and especially when she invites her father.⁷⁸

The passing of the Sephardi culinary torch to future generations indicates how Salonica continues to be a site of return even as Morin's family begins to identify as fully French. In receding from the everyday table, certain dishes and recipes gain symbolic power as nodes on the family's historical itinerary, and are respected as such even by Morin's "Nordic" wife, who accesses Sephardi food from a further remove. The matrilineality of most of these inheritances

⁷⁸ Ibid., 364. "Ce Parisien aime les cuisines françaises, il adore l'andouillette et le ris de veau ; mais il préfère la cuisine méditerranéenne à l'huile d'olive, et ce qu'il aime par-dessus tout, c'est le gratin d'aubergines et le *pastellico* de Salonique. Tant que Corinne eut le goût de faire la cuisine, elle prépara les gratins ou le *pastellico* et en réservait toujours une portion pour Edgar. Celui-ci enseigna le gratin d'aubergines à Edwige, enfant nordique aux yeux bleus, qui, quand elle veut lui faire plaisir, à ses retours de voyage, lui prépare le *sfontattico*. Corinne enseigna le *pastellico* à Irène. Liliane enseigna le *pastellico* à Vèronique, et celle-ci prépare un *pastellico* quand elle invite des amis et surtout quand elle invite son père."

recalls a model of the Sephardi household that has otherwise been discarded. Culinary inheritance implies the recreation of a whole world, not just a single dish. As Claudia Roden succinctly observed, “There is really no such thing as Jewish food. . . . Local regional food becomes Jewish when it travels with Jews to new homelands.”⁷⁹ What we see here is the addition of *pastellico* and *sfontattico* to the Sephardi culinary vocabulary, taking their place alongside dishes bearing the orange and almond flavors that originated in Iberia. The teleology of Morin’s account of his father’s life becomes unavoidable: for Morin, writing as a Frenchman, the evolution towards French-ness is a *fait accompli*. We may also, projecting into the future, imagine a time when sweetbreads or *andouillette* could become, in their turn, Jewish foods for members of a Morin/Nahum family who leave France and take their love of these dishes with them. Each dish in the Sephardi cookbook encodes a stop on the Sephardi itinerary in an additive process of identification: Beaujolais *and* Turkish coffee, not one or the other; *pastellico* and sweetbreads and *sotlach* and *bunuelos*, together telling the story of an unfolding Sephardi journey.

Passover *Kadaif*

André Aciman’s 1994 memoir of his childhood in Alexandria, *Out of Egypt*, substitutes the steady chronological progression of *Vidal and His Family* for a complicated structure in which the linear narrative of André’s youth in Egypt is interspersed with discursions on his family’s past and excerpts set in André’s own present. The history that Aciman excavates stretches over decades, not the long centuries reaching back to *Sepharad*; the events covered in

⁷⁹ Roden 1996, 9. One might quibble here, arguing, for example, that Turkish Sephardi food does tend more towards sour flavors than Turkish food otherwise, but the sentiment, in general, stands.

the book take place over ninety years, at most. The first sixty of those years are set in Egypt, from 1905, when Aciman's great uncle brings the family from Istanbul to Alexandria, to 1965, when the last members of his family leave the country. Aciman was born towards the end of this period, in 1951. His childhood in Egypt lasted 14 years, after which he and his family moved to Italy and then settled in New York. The portions of the memoir set in Aciman's present narrate visits to his scattered extended family over the decades between 1965 and the memoir's publication in 1994. Most of the dates in the memoir are imprecise, except for certain key markers in the family's disrupted history: the 1905 move from Istanbul to Alexandria; the 1956 nationalization of foreign-owned (including non-Egyptian Jewish) property and businesses by Nasser's government; and, of course, Aciman and his parents' departure in 1965.⁸⁰ This, the final primary source I address in this project, overlaps with the very first: Claudia Roden's childhood in Egypt as narrated in her *Book of Middle Eastern Food*. Roden was born in Cairo in 1936 and left for art school in Paris the very year of Aciman's birth. Her family joined her in England five years later; Aciman's left Egypt for Italy ten years after that.

The events that take place in Egypt occur during a rarefied period in that country's history, a "cosmopolitan" interval lasting roughly from 1850 to the 1960s which was also the context in which Claudia Roden grew up, albeit in Cairo, not Aciman's Alexandria.⁸¹

Alexandria's cosmopolitan character was quite different from that of Vidal's Salonica. Instead of a Jewish majority, Alexandria played host to a pan-Levantine minority which, alongside British and French colonial and imperial figures, dominated the middle and upper classes of the city.

This cosmopolitan milieu was, by and large, entirely separated from that of the native Egyptians,

⁸⁰ For more on this history, see my discussion of Claudia Roden in chapter one of this dissertation.

⁸¹ Mabro, 247.

whom the cosmopolitan Levantines – Sephardi Jews, Greeks, Italians, and Syrian Christians, for the most part– mainly encountered in streetcars and service positions.⁸² In Robert Mabro’s estimation, “the foreigners, even those who were poor or illiterate, as many were, and even those who came from the Levant and were Arabophones, considered themselves to belong to a superior breed. This was partly the result of the political balance of power. Egypt had been ruled by foreigners since long before the British intervention of 1882, which resulted in a *de facto* protectorate.”⁸³ Mabro distinguishes between four types of foreigners in Alexandria. First, immigrants, mainly Muslim Arabs, who integrated early into Egyptian society. Second, those Ottomans who took Egyptian nationality following Egyptian independence in 1922, at which time “the [Egyptian] government . . . offered to all residents of Ottoman origin (*min asl ‘uthmani*) the right to opt for citizenship. This enabled a large number of Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Jews from Asia Minor, Ottoman Greeks, Armenians and Turks to obtain Egyptian nationality. Those who took up this option genuinely considered themselves to be Egyptians.”⁸⁴ Third, foreigners of Ottoman origin who had “managed to obtain protection, or a passport, from a European power.”⁸⁵ This is the group to which Aciman and his family belonged. Fourth,

⁸² The local Egyptian Jewish population was not generally welcomed in the upper classes. In his monograph on Egyptian Jewry, Joel Beinin notes, “there were also thousands of indigenous, poor, Arabic-speaking Jews in Alexandria whose existence has generally been ignored because the cosmopolitan and commercial elements of the community were so prominent. . . . The Jew of Egypt were always already a heterogeneous community of cosmopolitan hybrids” (5-6).

⁸³ Mabro, 249.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 250. In Mabro’s estimation, theirs is the true tragedy. “They discovered, in the 1940s and 1950s, that they were not fully recognized as Egyptians. . . . Their attempted integration was undone: first by the rise of nationalist demands for jobs, economic positions, improved standards of living in Egyptian society – a phenomenon which was very perceptible in the 1940s; secondly by the Arab-Israeli conflict; and thirdly by the Arab socialist laws and the nationalization of economic assets enacted by President Nasser in the early 1960s” (252). These facts would affect Aciman’s family as well.

⁸⁵ Mabro, 251.

“foreigners to whom integration into Egypt did not seem meaningful or attractive” – that is, European citizens.⁸⁶ Cosmopolitan Alexandria consisted mainly of the members of the third and fourth groups, bound to one another by “the common characteristic of ‘not being Egyptian.’”⁸⁷

The internal dynamics of cosmopolitan Egypt permitted social mixing but generally prohibited exogamy. The different groups could and did associate with one another but almost never intermarried.⁸⁸ As Pamela Ballinger notes, contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism often explicitly or implicitly oppose it to nationalist frameworks.⁸⁹ Pre-independence Alexandria presents something quite different: cosmopolitanism and nationalism operating side-by-side, as members of various groups interact but decline fusion, vigorously maintaining their own distinctiveness. This milieu disintegrated with the rise of Egypt’s own ethno-nationalism – Nasser’s Arab Nationalism – which had been forestalled by British imperial power for several decades after similar forces swept through the Balkans.

In this dissertation’s second chapter, I noted in my discussion of Claudia Roden’s work the question of whether, and how, she can be considered Egyptian. The historian Khaled Fahmy, in his analysis of Aciman’s memoir, goes much further, accusing Aciman of “despicable racism,” and describing *Out of Egypt* as a testimony to the “two essential characteristics of the discourse on Alexandrian society in the golden age: elitism and exclusion.”⁹⁰ Fahmy’s aim is to question whether “cosmopolitanism” is the appropriate discourse for describing a social world built on racism – he takes Aciman’s memoir as the primary example of a group of writings in

⁸⁶ Ibid., 252. Mabro suggests that a possible fifth group might include “full-blooded Egyptians who had been immersed in French or English culture, or who had married foreigners, and felt somewhat distanced from their own Egyptian identity” (253).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁸⁸ The prohibition of intermarriage militates against a different kind of cultural “osmosis.”

⁸⁹ Ballinger (2003), 90.

⁹⁰ Fahmy, 276.

which Egyptian Arabs are elided.⁹¹ I do not intend to argue Fahmy's well-taken point, nor do I find it productive to ask whether Aciman, like Roden, can truly claim to be "Egyptian."⁹² Rather, I suggest that his work is defined by its Sephardi qualities. The only rubric through which Aciman's claim to an Egyptian, or even an Alexandrian, identity is legible is that of the precariously stacked affiliations of the Levantine Sephardim. Highlighting this dimension of Aciman's writing helps reinforce my contention about *Vidal and His Family*: the foodways of Levantine Sephardim reveal a particular pattern of identity accretion.

By the time Aciman left Alexandria in 1965, the majority of his extended family had already fled to Paris in scattered bursts over the preceding decade. Aciman does not explain why his immediate family went instead to Italy and thence New York, but this decision was almost certainly a function of their Italian citizenship, acquired via a claim to their ancestors' passage through Livorno on their way from Iberia to Istanbul. Other members of the family had managed, instead, to wrangle French nationality, but their differing citizenships were largely inconsequential until it became necessary for them to leave Egypt.⁹³ Aciman himself does not even realize his passport is Italian, rather than French, until the events of 1956 – when Egypt's

⁹¹ Most French- and English-language memoirs of Egypt fall into this category. See, for example, Lucette Lagnado's *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* and Collette Rossant's *Apricots on the Nile*.

⁹² I will note, however, that in Aciman's 2000 essay collection, *False Papers*, he writes, "my family forgot to remember the obvious – that Egypt was never our home, that we should never have come back after Moses, that we didn't even know where our home was, much less which language was ours. We had borrowed everyone else's. Some of us forgot we were Jews. Alexandria was our mirage – in the desert, we dreamed awhile longer" (110). Perhaps some of the criticism of *Out of Egypt* struck home.

⁹³ Notably missing from the list of possible destinations is Israel. Joel Beinin explains, "Except for the Zionist minority, the Francophone children of the Jewish middle classes, especially the Marxists and other leftists among them, generally saw themselves as part of Egypt" (52). When continuing in Egypt was no longer viable, western Europe was a more logical destination for these Francophones than Israel.

nationalization of foreign property began, but also the year of the Suez Canal crisis and the accompanying decisive break between Egypt and European colonial powers – force the family to begin discussing the possibility of departure. In Sarah Abreyava Stein’s evocative phrase, “extraterritoriality was a reverie,” a short-lived period of flexibility in identification that in most places ended, as we saw in Vidal’s story, during the interwar period, when the “Levantine Jew” was made, finally, French.⁹⁴ There was a brief moment, when the imperial regime was crumbling but the national regime which replaced it had not yet fully developed, during which Aciman’s ignorance of what nation issued his passport was possible. Where Vidal Nahum left Salonica before the final destruction of that city’s Jewish character at the hands of the Nazis, Aciman is in the unusual position of having remained in Alexandria *after* the events of 1956, which commonly mark the end of Alexandria’s role as a Mediterranean entrepôt and the final fading of the “reverie” Stein describes.⁹⁵ Aciman’s immediate family continued to live in Alexandria after 1956 simply because his father’s factory had not yet been nationalized. When, nine years later, that inevitably came to pass, they quickly departed.

Like Morin’s biography of his father, *Out of Egypt* is a story of accretion, the building up of an Egyptian identification atop Istanbuli, French, and Italian affiliations and a Levantine Sephardi core. But where Morin explicitly links the fragments of his father’s story into a grand Mediterranean whole, Aciman makes no attempt to resolve his family’s multiplicity. He sees, instead, difference: between Sephardi Jews and other foreigners in Alexandria, between

⁹⁴ Stein, 128.

⁹⁵ Almost all of Claudia Roden’s family, in contrast, followed the typical pattern of leaving Egypt in the immediate wake of the Canal crisis. Memoirs have been the signal production of members of Egyptian’s departed Jewish community; Claudia Roden’s work can be considered part of this body of literature, along with Collette Rossant’s cookbook memoir *Apricots on the Nile* (first published as *Memories of a Lost Egypt*, 1999), and Lucette Lagnado’s *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007).

foreigners in Alexandria and those who came to think of themselves as not only Egyptian, but Egyptian nationals, and between Alexandrian Sephardim, recently arrived Ashkenazim, and the older Egyptian Mizrahi community. Within this framework, every culinary choice I discuss below represents a claim to a specific identification. These claims, which can be used to acknowledge in-group similarities or insist on distinction, are the material with which Aciman tells the history of his family's orbits around the Mediterranean, and constructs their particular narratives of identification.

But an insistence on distinction is not always sufficient to fortify the blurry boundaries between these groups, as when André, visiting his Uncle Vili in England as an adult, is amused to see that Vili still makes “Turkish coffee” in the Egyptian fashion, using a coffee pot he had specially made for him by a Greek merchant in Manchester. “When the coffee was ready, he took out two demitasses and proceeded to pour, holding the pot precariously high above the cups and aiming the coffee into them, the way good Arab servants did, to allow the brew to cool somewhat as it was being poured.”⁹⁶ Though Aciman may call the beverage “Turkish coffee” and makes a point of telling his reader about the Anglo-Greek from whom Vili purchased the brewing vessel, he pins Vili's serving technique to memories of Arab servants, much as Roden pins her memories of *ful* to experiences of sneaking out to eat with her family's servants. The juxtaposition of these affiliations brings to the fore both the strict class separations of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism and the difficulty of creating an individualized narrative of selfhood out of a drink that is beloved throughout Levant. The same difficulty troubles Aciman's observations about the singular smells of various Levantine households in Alexandria:

⁹⁶ Aciman 1994, 34.

It would never have occurred to [my family] that all homes bear ethnic odors, and that anyone born in Alexandria would just as easily have sniffed out a Sephardi household like ours, with its residual odor of Parmesan, boiled artichokes, and *borekas*, as they themselves could recognize an Armenian kitchen by its unavoidable smell of cured pastrami, a Greek living room by the odor of myrrh, and Italians by the smell of fried onions and chamomile.⁹⁷

These are all, of course, the households of various Levantine migrants and diasporic subjects, and though one may bear the added scent of artichokes and another of Armenian *basturma*, it is likely they uniformly smell of garlic and thyme and olive oil. But Aciman's point is distinction. His depiction of Alexandria as a mixed milieu insists on the irreducibility of its elements. He writes affectionately of Greek and Italian friends and acquaintances, but is adamant in holding the Sephardi community apart. His contention is that the smell of Armenian *basturma*, in its uniqueness, is more important than the garlic and thyme the Armenians might share with their Greek neighbors. The particular elements of the smell of a Sephardi home are a function of the length – in time and distance – of the Sephardi orbit: a love of Parmesan cheese acquired in Italy meets *borek* recipes from Turkey, and shares a plate with the artichokes consumed throughout much of the Mediterranean. All household odors reveal ethnic backgrounds, but the smell of a Sephardi house also indicates the long orbits of its inhabitants' ancestors.

Even within the Sephardi world, Aciman is attentive to difference. Aciman's father's family came to Alexandria directly from Constantinople, but his mother's family migrated to Egypt by way of Aleppo, and the text hints that Aciman's maternal grandfather, "a Jew born in Aleppo who spoke no Ladino," whom his maternal grandmother left Constantinople to marry, is

⁹⁷ Ibid., 105.

Mizrahi, not Sephardi, or at least of a Sephardi family that had been more fully absorbed into Syria's Arabic-speaking Jewish community.⁹⁸ These varied roots generate resentments, which begin to simmer when Aciman's maternal grandparents are, as inferior "Arab Jews," not invited to a society function hosted by his paternal grandparents, and come to a full boil in the kitchen when Aciman's mother and paternal grandmother rage at one another over the proper recipe for a Passover *haroset*.⁹⁹ "'Here are your damned prunes,' shouted my mother. 'Damn yourself, damned ingrate,' retorted my grandmother, her voice cracking with emotion. 'Who did you think I was trying to cook it for? For me?'" The rest was sputtered in random fragments of Turkish, Ladino, and Greek."¹⁰⁰ The women alternate between screaming insults at each other and sobbing, until Aciman and a servant are able to separate them.

Finally . . . I discovered how the quarrel had started. Mother and daughter-in-law disagreed on the recipe for *haroset*, the thick preserve made from fruits and wine that is eaten at Passover. My mother wanted raisins and dates, because *her* mother used raisins and dates, but my grandmother wanted oranges, raisins, and prunes, because this had been her family's recipe for as far back as she could remember.¹⁰¹

The *haroset* recipes encode itineraries: a blend of raisins and dates exactly matches Claudia Roden's memory of the *haroset* Roden's Aleppan Sephardi family made during her childhood in Cairo, while the orange which is often included in Turkish Jewish versions of the dish harkens back to old Iberian flavors.¹⁰² The variations are themselves inheritance. The argument between

⁹⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 317.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 318.

¹⁰² Roden 1996, 619-20.

Aciman's mother and grandmother is not at all about preference, but instead about the rights to a ritualized annual retelling of a narrative of identification. In a real sense, these *haroset* recipes describe who these women are. As with Morin's family's *pastellico*, a recipe provides a nexus for the meeting of food, matrilineal inheritance, and religion.

An instinct that food is a constitutive element of narratives of identification equally informs in-group bonding. Despite the occasional tension between Aciman's mother's and father's families, they are firmly linked to one another not just by the marriage between Aciman's parents, but by the deep friendship between his grandmothers, who first meet one another at an Alexandrian market long before their children become romantically involved. At the market, each is contemplating "a suspiciously old catch of red mullet."¹⁰³ They had lived across the street from one another for years, never speaking, until one felt obliged to explain to the other that it was best to choose another fish. "It's in the gills. Not the eyes. Gills must be bright red. Otherwise, don't buy." The women begin conversing in Ladino, "a language each found out the other spoke because, at the fish vendor's stand, as one tried to explain why the mullet were not good that day, it suddenly occurred to both that of the six to seven languages each spoke fluently, neither knew the name for mullet except in Ladino." Each realizing she has encountered a fellow Sephardi Jew, they excitedly compare histories.

"But why didn't you ever speak to me?" insisted the one who knew everything about fish.

"I used to think you were French," replied her meeker neighbor, implying high-society French.

¹⁰³ Aciman 1994, 43. The same *rouget*, red mullet, consumed by the Nahums in France.

“French? And whatever made you think *I* was French? *Je suis italienne, madame,*” she added, as if that were a far greater distinction.

“As am I!”

“Yes? Are you? But we are from Leghorn [Livorno].”

“But so are we! What a marvelous coincidence.”

Neither woman is Italian, of course, nor is either “from” Livorno; both were born in Constantinople and are native speakers of Ladino, “which each insisted on calling Spanish.”¹⁰⁴ It is later revealed that Aciman’s paternal grandmother does, in fact, hold Italian papers. She acquired them by dint of her family’s passage through Livorno on their way to Constantinople untold decades before, when Italy was the Mediterranean’s premier mediator, the peninsula “crushed,” as Raffaele Nigro has it, between East and West, and therefore the land through which all migratory populations passed.¹⁰⁵ His maternal grandmother, though, is a French national – though the mechanism by which she finagled that citizenship is not revealed – and called her neighbor French as a form of flattery.¹⁰⁶

Alexandrian Sephardim were Europhilic generally, and Francophilic in particular, prizing French language and culture over Italian, which was seen as a household language itself superior to Ladino, while still proudly referring to their Ladino as pure Spanish, claiming it as a medieval

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁵ Nigro, 112.

¹⁰⁶ A great deal has been written about the vagaries of citizenship, consular protection, and protégé status in the Levant during the first half of the twentieth century. I cited from Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s *Extraterritorial Dreams* earlier in this chapter. Stein is careful to note that what was true of Sephardim also applied to “other mercantile diasporas, including the Armenian, Greek, Syrian, and Maltese” (9). On the history of patronage in Alexandria, see Fahmy 2013 and Gellner and Waterbury 1977.

Castilian preserved unchanged since the expulsion.¹⁰⁷ Ladino was, perhaps, the language of the heart, but French was esteemed above all, as the language of culture and of the mind, having been established as the elite's lingua franca during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

All had studied and knew French exceedingly well...gliding through the imperfect subjunctive with the unruffled ease of those who never err when it comes to grammar because, despite all of their efforts, they will never be native speakers. But French was a foreign, stuffy idiom and, as [my grandmother] would tell me many years later, after speaking French for more than two hours, she would begin to salivate. "Spanish [Ladino], on the other hand, *réveille l'âme*, lifts up the soul."¹⁰⁸

Just as in her proclamation, "*Je suis italienne*," Aciman's grandmother cannot resist French, even when describing another idiom. The family's relationship to the French language is indicative of both their class and their aspirations, revelatory of a reluctant sense of inferiority. One night as the family listens to Radio Monte Carlo, Aciman observes again how different the French of a native speaker is to the language his family spoke. "It was the French of movie stars, the French my uncles mimicked but never mastered, the French one made fun of but secretly envied, the French one claimed one didn't care to speak, the way some might say they didn't care for certain cheeses because no Brie or Saint André could ever compare with a good, hearty slice of fresh Greek feta."¹⁰⁹ The culinary analogy illustrates an anxious reverse-elitism, acknowledgement of what is perceived to be better coupled with an insistent preference for one's own habits.

¹⁰⁷ Sephardim across the Levant were frequently Francophilic due to the perceived superiority of French culture to British during a period when those two powers contested for domination of the Mediterranean. The history of Sephardi Francophilia remains to be written.

¹⁰⁸ Aciman 1994, 56.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

For Aciman, however, the contest between Brie and feta occurs at some remove. Feta and similar brined white cheeses may have totemic status for his grandparents' generation, but for André this place is occupied by the Egyptian street foods of his own childhood. Brie and French food in general retain their elite appeal, fresh feta becomes part of the background ensemble of Sephardi familial food, and the culinary foreground is filled by Egyptian dishes like the *ful* that holds such a prominent place in Roden's memories. Like Roden, Aciman acknowledges that *ful* is "a poor man's meal," signaling the complicated relationship of wealthy Sephardim to native Egyptians.¹¹⁰ Perhaps its air of impoverished authenticity – or, more kindly, universal accessibility – is what makes it so available for symbolic consumption. Early one morning during a seaside vacation, Aciman hungrily suggests to his Italian tutor, Signor Dall'Abaco, and his Persian governess, Roxane – the three of them being the only members of the household yet awake – that they walk down to the beach and buy *ful* from a reliable vendor.

When we finally reached [the *ful* vendor's] van, Roxane handed him the pot. He filled it and wished us a holy Sunday. We stared at him with a puzzled look: Why would a Moslem ever want to wish us a holy Sunday? He must have read our surprise, for, after looking around furtively, he pulled up his sleeve, displaying the inside of his wrist on which a large cross was tattooed. "I'm a Copt." The current regime was not sympathetic to Copts.

Though Signor Dall'Abaco was an atheist, Roxane a Zoroastrian, and I a Jew, all three of us wished him a holy Sunday in return.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 262.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 288.

This moment of inter-minority solidarity in the period following the nationalist upheavals of the 1950s becomes one of Aciman's core memories of his Egyptian childhood, standing in opposition to the careful distinctions between groups he normally emphasizes. A shared fondness for *ful* links these individuals together, and expresses Aciman's own chosen affiliation as "Alexandrian," above and beyond Sephardi, or Turkish, or Italian.

We know well that diasporic communities take many of their foods with them as they migrate, but for Aciman not every dish is portable. When it is finally time for his family to leave Egypt, he laments the loss of "guavas, the loud tap of backgammon chips slapped vindictively upon the bar, fried eggplants on late-summer mornings," as if these foods – or are they experiences? – cannot be accessed elsewhere.¹¹² Writing as an adult, Aciman pins his nostalgia on his younger self's expectation of culinary loss. On Aciman's last night in Egypt he wanders away from his family's Passover Seder to eat Egyptian food on the Alexandrian *corniche*, symbolically marking that, at least in this moment, he is more focused on the pain of his imminent departure than on his Jewishness, the very reason for which that departure has become necessary.¹¹³ It is, coincidentally, Ramadan as well as Passover, and numerous vendors are hawking *kadaif* to hungry Muslims after sundown.

At the corner of the street, from a sidewalk stall, came the smell of fresh
dough and of angel-hair being fried on top of a large copper stand – a common

¹¹² Ibid., 309.

¹¹³ In an essay in *False Papers*, Aciman drily notes, "It never occurred to us that a Seder in Egypt was a contradiction in terms" (109). Still, as he thinks of his family's history of exile, he cannot help but observe, "Jewish history is repetition, the history of repetition" (110). Taking my cue from Aciman, I do not much dwell on the apparent irony of celebrating Passover in Egypt, or of mourning the necessity of leaving Egypt on the holiday celebrating the advent of the Hebrews' first departure from Pharaonic Egypt. I am not certain that the stories have much in common other than their settings, though in titling his memoir *Out of Egypt* Aciman must have found the similarity, or the irony, irresistible.

sight throughout the city every Ramadan. People would fold the pancakes and stuff them with almonds, syrup, and raisins. The vendor caught me eyeing the cakes that were neatly spread on a black tray. He smiled and said, “*Etfaddal*, help yourself.”

I thought of Aunt Elsa’s chiding eyes. “But it’s Pesah,” I imagined her saying. My grandmother would disapprove too – eating food fried by Arabs on the street, unconscionable. The Egyptian didn’t want any money. “It’s for you,” he said, handing me the delicacy on a torn sheet of newspaper. . . .

I wanted to come back tomorrow night, and the night after, and the one after that as well, sensing that what made leaving so fiercely painful was the knowledge that there would never be another night like this, that I would never eat soggy cakes along the coast road in the evening, not this year or any other year, nor feel the baffling, sudden beauty of that moment when, if only for an instant, I had caught myself longing for a city I never knew I loved.¹¹⁴

In choosing to eat the *kadaif* in spite of his Aunt Elsa’s imagined Jewish objections and his grandmother’s elitist disdain, Aciman proclaims his overriding affiliation with Alexandria, and figures his memoir as an elegy for his own childhood, irreparably ruptured by his family’s emigration from Egypt. His knowledge that his family’s history is one of multiple migrations fails to dampen the sting of departure from the land of his own youth. Aciman seems to believe, in spite of the evidence in his family’s dining habits that food has traveled with them from place to place through their many migrations, that *this* food, and *this* move, are somehow different. His mourning is not precisely for the loss of Alexandrian cuisine, but for the impossibility of reliving

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 338-9.

the experience of eating Alexandrian food in Alexandria. This is a kind of anti-Proustianism, that is opposed as well to the type of memory I examined in this dissertation's second chapter: food alone is not enough to recreate the world of Aciman's memory; landscape, community, and language are all necessary, too. When Aciman does, eventually revisit Alexandria – an experience he pointedly excludes from *Out of Egypt*, and instead documents in his essay collection, *False Papers* – he walks into a familiar old pastry shop, but declines to purchase anything. Nodding to Proust, he writes, “The idea of eating cake to summon my past seems too uncanny and ridiculous.”¹¹⁵ Aciman describes the “predictable letdowns” of a city that has not become “unfamiliar enough.”¹¹⁶ He wants his experience of returning to Alexandria to align with his belief that the city and his life there can never be recovered. He would rather the city be totally alien than have to confront his own absence from its partially unchanged geography.¹¹⁷

The final section of his memoir, which continues in the voice of Aciman's younger self, is called “The Last Seder.” Aciman means by this his family's last Seder in Egypt, which culminates with him eating his solitary *kadaif* overlooking the sea. From a Jewish perspective, though, there is no such thing as a “last” Seder. The whole organization of religious observance is predicated on the idea of repetition and return – the annual celebration of Passover is itself a ritualized orbit through the past, peculiarly and poignantly doubled for a Jewish family that has settled in modern Egypt. But understanding this requires an adult perspective, which can only be arrived at through long experience of the strange ways the world repeats itself. In *Out of Egypt*

¹¹⁵ Aciman 2000, 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7. In describing this sensation, Aciman refers to Freud's essay, “A Disturbance of Memory upon the Acropolis.” Aciman writes of feeling “very much like Freud when, in his early forties, he had finally achieved his lifelong dream of visiting Athens and, standing on the Acropolis, felt strangely disappointed, calling his numbness derealization.” Return to something dreamed-of and longed-for must inevitably be disappointing.

this experience is embodied in Aciman's Aunt Flora, an Ashkenazi cousin-by-marriage whom the family adopts when she joins them in Egypt after fleeing Nazi Germany. We first meet Flora in a section describing the family's life in the decade before Aciman's birth. She is at this point a young woman, whose perspectives on migration and loss are much like young Aciman's will be on the eve of his own flight. As Rommel's forces advance through the desert, the family discusses the possibility of escaping from Egypt before he arrives in Alexandria. Exhausted, the newly arrived Flora interrupts the debate. "There's nowhere to go. I'm tired of running. I'm even more tired of worrying where to run. The world isn't big enough. And there's not enough time. I'm sorry."¹¹⁸ Aciman himself, in a section of the memoir evocatively titled "The Lotus Eaters," will bemoan the futility of his efforts to stop the progress of history with similar melancholy words: "There was nowhere to turn to forget."¹¹⁹ Memory, as in my earlier discussion of Claudia Roden, never settles within these exiles. It is in a state of constant access.

During a flash-forward Aciman, now an adult, visits Flora in Venice and finds that her perspective has deepened. She recalls playing Schubert for the family during Rommel's advance, and returning to the same music when they began to grapple with the final necessity of departing Egypt years later. "At times it felt like the only thing standing between us and Rommel was a sheet of music, nothing more. Ten years later [the Egyptians] took that sheet of music away. Eventually they took away everything else as well. And we let it happen, as Jews always let these things happen, because, deep inside, we know we'll lose everything we own at least twice in our lives."¹²⁰ Flora finds meaning in her acceptance of the patterns of the Jewish twentieth century: loss defines her. She elaborates, "Even today, I continue to live my life that way. I

¹¹⁸ Aciman 1994, 27.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

cross the street on the slant, I always sit in the side rows at concert halls, I am a citizen of two countries but I live in neither, and I never look people in the eye. . . . I don't even think I know who I am, I know myself the way I might know my neighbor: from across the street."¹²¹ These words contain instructive echoes of Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, in which he describes learning Arabic as a child in Algeria as if it were, "an alien language, a strange kind of alien language as the language of the other, but then of course, and this is the strange and troubling part, the other as the nearest neighbor. *Unheimlich*."¹²² Flora describes herself as her own nearest neighbor: she is uncanny to herself. This, I believe, is how Aciman sees himself, and the root of the temporal split in the narration of his memoir. His childhood, in the perceived irreparability of its loss, is alien to him.

But Flora is not as completely cut off from herself as she professes to be. After delivering her speech she produces, to Aciman's surprise, "a large Ottoman dessert made with goat cream called 'bread of the palace.'"¹²³ Where did Flora, an Ashkenazi Jew from Germany, learn to cook an Ottoman specialty? Flora answers this question in conversation with Aciman mere pages earlier, "It was your grandmother who taught me how to cook. . . . She taught me Sephardi dishes which nowadays even Sephardim have forgotten how to cook. Fish, artichokes, lamb, rice, eggplant, leeks. And red mullet, of course."¹²⁴ For the main course of the dinner she prepares during Aciman's visit, though, Flora chooses to make gnocchi rather than any of the Sephardi specialties she learned from his grandmother. Where Flora and Aciman see themselves as cut off from their pasts, I see instead layers of identification. To serve Italian gnocchi followed by an

¹²¹ Ibid., 86.

¹²² Derrida, 37.

¹²³ Aciman, 86. The dessert in question is probably *aish el-saraya*, today most familiar as a kind of Lebanese bread pudding.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 84.

Ottoman dessert while reminiscing about artichokes and red mullet is precisely the meaning of Sephardi accretion.

At Aciman's last Passover Seder in Egypt, he erupts with anger about his family's impending departure and expresses his resentment of their Jewishness. "What I want is to have no part of it...As far as I'm concerned, all of this is just worship of repetition, nothing more."¹²⁵ But Sephardi repetition is never "just" repetition. I argue, instead, that the Sephardi experience is analogous to the action of a 3D printer – it may indeed entail repeatedly tracing the same paths, but each iteration is additive. This layering up of influences is what is encoded in Aciman's mother's and grandmother's dueling *haroset* recipes, and in the odor of parmesan, artichokes, and *borekas* which wafts through his childhood home.

*

I might easily have included Claudia Roden in this chapter. Roden is, after all, a Sephardi Jew whose cookbooks focus on the stations of Sephardi migration in the Mediterranean. Perhaps because she is a cookbook writer, not a memoirist, questions of identification and the theme of hunger are less visible in her texts than in Morin's and Aciman's offerings. That is, Morin and Aciman explicitly ask the question to which Roden's work assumes the answer: what is the relationship between Sephardi Jews and their pasts? For Roden, it is obvious that the past is never past. As I argue earlier, she makes it continue to live in the present, and allows nothing to recede from memory. For Vidal and Aciman, this issue is more fraught. The past is the subject of constant negotiation and reevaluation in light of the present.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 333.

The term “Sephardi Jews” – literally, Spanish Jews – marks an ancient origin which has been transmuted into a living affiliation. Judaism is, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi conclusively demonstrated in *Zakhor*, in some ways fundamentally constituted by the command to remember – to remember the temple, to remember the exile from Israel, to remember Jewishness in diaspora – but among Sephardim this memory of expulsion is doubled, the departures from Iberia echoing the scattering of Jews out of Israel long before. The constitutional repetition of the Sephardi backward gaze is a valuable heuristic for understanding the stories at hand, in which forward movement occurs with the head continually turning over the shoulder, eyes darting between the future and the past by which it is shaped.

Stories of Sephardi migration express this Janus-faced attitude towards time via the accretion of languages, citizenships, and, not least, culinary influences. Rather than fusing together, distinct borders are maintained between these layered identifications, allowing the reader to examine the orbits of Sephardi migration as if they were exposed geological strata. These layers convey the narrative of Levantine Sephardi history, which is differentiated from the histories of other Mediterranean peoples by the apparent impossibility of return to a Sephardi homeland. Neither contemporary Spain nor contemporary Israel exerts a nationalist pull on the stories I have examined here, in which nationalism itself is treated as a mystifying force. Instead, these Sephardim make of each station along their route a new *Sepharad*, both a new site of longing and a new source of food, language, and culture to be added to the Sephardi repertoire.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

I first formulated this project in response to a phenomenon I observed in Ann Arbor during my early years of graduate school. At that time there were a number of restaurants on and near the University of Michigan's campus that described themselves as "Mediterranean restaurants" or "Mediterranean grilles." I would not likely have noticed their profusion except that the summer before I began studying at Michigan I had been living in Haifa, and when I moved to Ann Arbor I spent a good deal of time seeking out the best falafel in town. Falafel, though not prominently featured in any of the primary sources examined in this dissertation, might be called a "Mediterranean" food. One could equally describe it as an Arab dish, or a Levantine one. As it happens, most of the Ann Arbor restaurants where I tried the falafel were owned by Palestinians.

The large Arab population of Southeast Michigan is well known, and it seemed odd to me that these restaurants would choose the broad label of "Mediterranean" to sell what many of their customers could surely recognize as Levantine Arabic food, and seek out as such. My initial assumption was that this marketing choice had something to do with post-9/11 American prejudice, but after talking to several of the restaurateurs I was made to understand something different: they repeatedly evoked the healthy qualities of Mediterranean food, and a desire to capitalize on that association. All this coincided with one of the periodic surges of interest in the longevity apparently guaranteed by the so-called "Mediterranean Diet," and my reading, and my

conversations, and my eating, coalesced around the question of what we talk about when we talk about Mediterranean food, particularly when that food has travelled.

This project attempts to answer that question over the course of three chapters which, taken together, argue that when we talk about Mediterranean food we are largely talking about memory, identification, and hunger. In the chapter on memory I read cookbooks by Claudia Roden and contemporary Egyptian and Italian novels to propose that migrants use the foods of memory to keep their pasts alive within the present. The following chapter suggests that the opposite may be true as well: looking at an Italian novel and film I show that migrants may use attachment to the foods of their host country to negate their pasts and even themselves, replacing old identifications with new, elective ones. The chapter on hunger uses an Italian travel diary, a Lebanese novel, and a Moroccan autobiographical text to correct the assumption of idyllic Mediterranean plenty, for which it substitutes a consideration of the impacts of violence, poverty, and globalization on solitary Mediterranean figures.

On a broader level, this dissertation addresses two theoretical promptings, the first being the idea that Mediterranean studies fails to offer a coherent framework for analysis in the contemporary period; and the second being what an oft-missed opportunity for marrying interdisciplinary food studies with literary analysis. With regard to the first, this project demonstrates that the routes of human migration continue to bind the Mediterranean as much as its overlapping foodways do. For the second, I join a growing body of work bridging social scientific and literary methodologies to address the culinary in the literary. This all comes together in the dissertation's final chapter, which offers a case study of food in two Levantine Sephardi migration memoirs, and finds a pattern of accretion, not fusion, on the Sephardi table.

Thinking the Mediterranean entails grappling with both the foci of the Mediterranean imaginary and its lacunae. We must ask what it means to travel, for example, from Algeria to Italy. If we make that journey, are we still in the same region we began in? We must ask why falafel, a Levantine Arabic dish, speaks more loudly of the Mediterranean than Marseilles' bouillabaisse. Who traverses the Mediterranean Sea, and what foods and ideas do they bring with them? As Predrag Matvejevic puts it, "The Mediterranean is inseparable from its discourse."¹ I argue, further, that the discourse of the Mediterranean is largely inseparable from the two pillars which support this dissertation: food and migration. It is impossible to think the Mediterranean without considering human movement in and around the sea; it is, if anything, even more difficult to imagine the Mediterranean without reference to the olive, the vine, and the other totems of the Mediterranean culinary universe. The challenge of this project has been to bring these two vital dimensions of Mediterranean discourse together in the contemporary period, an age when many have argued that the Mediterranean zone no longer provides a coherent locus for scholarship. Over chapters two, three, and four of this dissertation I develop a theoretical framework which responds to this relegation of the Mediterranean to the past by using food and migration to triangulate the theoretical possibilities of the Mediterranean in the present. By organizing texts from a wide range of languages, nations, and genera under the rubrics of memory and nostalgia, identification, and hunger, the very structure of this project helps show that the elements which, admittedly, divide the contemporary Mediterranean are transcended by a set of relationships with food that have spread and persisted via ongoing human migration through the bordered realities of the modern world.

¹ Matvejevic, 12.

Chapters two, three, and four are linked as well by my primary sources' insistence on an active relationship with food: not static memory, but deliberate remembering; not the inflexible referents of identity, but ongoing processes of identification; not simple hunger, but hunger as a means of inquiry and wayfinding. Food is an especially rich kind of text. It is produced and crafted, it is multi-sensory, it is taken into the self. It bears a linguistic weight of meaning. It is both eminently practical, even utilitarian, and complexly symbolic. To misquote Lévi-Strauss, food is "good to think," and this is precisely what the various protagonists and narrators whose stories I examine find as they negotiate their migrations.² It is, naturally, my position as well. Though food has been largely overlooked in literary studies, I believe I have thoroughly demonstrated in this project the enormous critical potential of literature's alimentary dimensions for serious consideration of how migrants relate to their past and present homelands.

In chapter five, I rework the three theoretical perspectives previously elaborated into a portable framework for considering a given body of literature – in this case, memoirs by Levantine Sephardim. It is not my intention to suggest the top-down imposition of theory onto these literary texts, or any others. My aim, instead, is to have developed a set of theoretical concepts to the point that they can be productively used when and as other texts call for them. That is, I hope this work enriches, not delimits, continuing discussions of memory, identification, and hunger. In my examination of food in Levantine Sephardi migration memoirs, my tripartite model helps the particular quality of "accretion" which imbues these texts to become visible. I view the three prongs of my approach to food as a critical vocabulary, a set of terms which can help me – and, hopefully, other scholars – grapple with the unique stakes of the culinary in any

² Lévi-Strauss (1963), 89. In the French, "*bonnes a penser*." Lévi-Strauss is discussing the animals of totemism, not food in general, but the observation holds.

number of contexts. Not, then, a model to be applied, but a constellation of ideas with which we might think further, and more deeply, about food and literature, food and migration, and food and the Mediterranean.

When we talk about Mediterranean food, we often talk about a stereotyped set of ingredients: olive oil, garlic, fresh herbs, lemon juice, wheat. Enlarging the pantry we could add grapes, dates, tomatoes, feta cheese, pulses, and spices. In this dissertation I build from such lists a discourse. For migrants, the culinary is not only about the assemblage of ingredients, it is about expressing a relationship with the self and with the other. In the Mediterranean, this relationship is made uniquely complicated by the thin line separating the two: when the other is the neighbor, her foods may be barely differentiable from your own. Instead of focusing on ingredients, then, I focus on stories that explore the many ways in which the culinary is used to navigate these encounters. Eating elsewhere always suggests the thought, or the question, of home. I do not believe the semiotics of ingredients should be entirely discarded. Instead, it seems to me that such symbolism can only be understood following a careful consideration of narrative. *Ful*, one of the most commonly encountered dishes in this project, surely remains an avatar of Egypt, but this fact is only interesting insofar as we understand how the meanings of *ful* are played with, remembered, and reworked in stories like those I analyze here.

In the early stages of researching this project, I travelled to as many Mediterranean locales as I could in order to taste the Sea's foods and gain some understanding of how its flavors are combined and recombined in its many polities. Some things were constant: olive oil, garlic, and thyme were everywhere; the beers, where beer is consumed, were pale, refreshing lagers; flat breads were served in infinite variations; fresh cheese was never hard to find. Other culinary encounters were evanescent or highly specific. The best tomatoes I have ever tasted were on a

breakfast buffet in Israel; a melon so transcendently delicious that it changed my understanding of what a melon can be was served to me in a Circassian restaurant in Istanbul.

In Valencia, not long after I saw the advertisement for “Mythical Mediterranean ‘Bocadillos’” on a street carpeted with rotting oranges, I went to a restaurant for dinner and ordered, to start, a “duo of olives.” Olives! What is more classically Mediterranean than the olive? What arrived were two elegant white bowls, one filled with partially dried black olives, the other with wetly plump greens. On tasting them I found, to my great surprise, that the black olives had been flavored with anise, and the green ones with ginger. I have never before or since encountered these flavor combinations. I have no idea whence they derived, how olive and ginger and anise came to be combined. There is a story there I would like to know. It is wonderful to taste something entirely new.

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