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The Aesthetic Uncanny

The Politics of the Arabic Civil War Novel

in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Comparative Literature

by

Molly Meredith Courtney

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Nouri Gana, Chair

This dissertation takes a comparative approach in examining works of literary fiction that represent the 1975-1990 war in Lebanon, the 2011-present war in Syria, and the 2003-present war in Iraq. Drawing on a corpus of writings by Mahā Ḥassan, Dīma Wannūs, Imān Ḥumaydān, Azhar Jirjīs, and others, some of which have received little or no scholarly attention, the dissertation examines works of Arabic war fiction that draw on an aesthetic of the uncanny in order to disrupt wartime temporal discourses. In Lebanon, these works disrupt the postwar reconstruction process, which relied upon the production of the illusion of a prosperous future at the expense of erasing the memory of the war and the unresolved losses that accompanied it. Uncanny works of Iraqi fiction, meanwhile, stage the return of histories left out of dominant discourses through frightening and often grotesque figures like the ghost and the animated corpse who act as powerful metaphors for the ways in which unresolved histories continue to haunt the

present. Contemporary Syrian novels, finally, explore the psychological impact of protracted dictatorship through family sagas that explore long-lasting legacies of trauma. Ultimately, these works explore the temporal discourses that underlie protracted states of violence and, by drawing on an aesthetic of the uncanny, excavate memories that demonstrate that this violence emerged historically and that endeavor to keep alternative visions of the future alive even as violence continues.

The dissertation of Molly Meredith Courtney is approved.

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INTRODUCTION

> I'd catch him staring at me with that same strange look in his eyes: as if he wanted to peer into my depths…it was as if he wanted to see something that he couldn't see—as if I were hiding another body within my own, a body beyond my body.
>
> --Rabīʿ Jābir, *al-Iʿtirāfāt* (2008; *Confessions*, 2016)
>
> He visited me once on the balcony of my apartment, decapitated, his voice emerging from a black hole in his neck. When I approached him, he vanished with the wind. Later, he appeared before me in the metro station split into two halves, each unlike the other. I saw him one evening sleeping near me in the form of a skinless pile of flesh.
>
> --Azhar Jirjīs, *Al-Nawm fī ḥaql al-karaz* (2019; Sleeping in the Cherry Field)

This dissertation examines a trend in contemporary Arabic war fiction towards adopting an uncanny aesthetic, an aesthetic that, at its core, is the familiar made unfamiliar, the return of content that has undergone repression in an alien guise rather than remaining in the unconscious.[1] In works of contemporary fiction from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria authors have drawn on this aesthetic to express the profoundly defamiliarizing effects of civil wars, conflicts that transform familiar neighborhoods into ruins, fellow citizens into enemies, and shared national pasts into the historical roots of violent conflict. These novels portray homes transformed into rubble, urban landscapes transformed into the hunting grounds of terrifying monsters or shadowy underworlds, and loved ones transformed into grotesque corpses, fragmented remains, or heaps of rotting flesh. As these wars transform homes into rubble and the living into rotting corpses, they also transform violence into an everyday and even routine aspect of daily life. Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have witnessed wars that were or have been remarkably lengthy in duration and that remain unresolved; the wars in Iraq and Syria remain more or less ongoing while the war in

[1]Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'"in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 240.

Lebanon ended without a reconciliation process that could address the root causes of the war or bring perpetrators to justice. The result has been long-standing insecurity, where the outbreak of violence remains a consistent threat, producing "disposable" lives that can be exposed to violence and "subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead.*"[2]

In Lebanon, the aesthetic explores the ways in which violence is often experienced as cyclical and liable to break out again at any moment, producing a temporality marked by presentness and the uncanny anticipation of future war. In Syria, the aesthetic explores the psychological effects of long-standing dictatorship, in which terror becomes a routine feature of everyday life, a state briefly disrupted by the 2011 uprisings. In Iraq, authors have drawn on an aesthetic of the uncanny to explore the abject and buried pasts that haunt the margins of dominant historical narratives, like Iraq's national narrative and the US's narrative of the 2003 invasion.

Historical Overview

Lebanon

The beginning of the Lebanese Civil War is widely traced to the Ain al-Rammaneh massacre on April 13, 1975, in which the Kata'ib militia (under the auspices of the Maronite Christian Phalangist Party) stopped a bus containing twenty-seven Palestinian refugees and massacred them.[3] The massacre prompted swift retaliation from Palestinian militias and their leftist allies.

[2]Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 80; 92.
[3]Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

At stake in the subsequent fifteen years of fighting were a number of underlying societal and political issues. The first of these was the expulsion of large numbers of Palestinians from their homeland after the 1948 Nakba and the 1967 war. The resulting Palestinian struggle for liberation from occupation and for the right to return to their homes entangled Lebanon, especially after the 1971 Black September Conflict, which resulted in the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other Palestinian militias from Jordan; they subsequently moved their bases to Lebanon. Once in Lebanon, the PLO began to plan and carry out operations against Israel from Lebanese soil, increasing tensions between Israel and Lebanon. The arrival of Palestinian militias in Lebanon also resulted in the increased politicization and militarization of Palestinian refugee camps, which began to pose a challenge to Lebanese sovereignty, leading some "to accuse the Palestinian revolution of constituting a state within a state in Lebanon."[4]

The continued presence of the PLO and the increasing Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon also produced societal tensions that contributed to the outbreak of war because of the ways in which this population threatened to destabilize Lebanon's fragile demographic balance, especially in light of the sectarian quota system established as part of the October 1943 National Pact. The Pact laid the groundwork for a sectarian political system in post-independence Lebanon (Lebanon gained independence from France shortly afterwards, in November 1943). The system ensured that the president of Lebanon would be a Maronite Christian and that Maronite Christians would control the armed forces and the parliament. Lebanon came into being as a distinct territorial entity during the French mandate period, when French colonial authorities carved it out of the Syrian mandate in order to create a state in the region with a Christian majority. The Muslim population of Lebanon, however, grew at a faster rate than its

[4]Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 380.

Christian population, meaning that Muslims began to outnumber Christians in Lebanon by the 1950s.[5] This demographic transformation intensified with the influx of largely Muslim Palestinian refugees into Lebanon, further tipping the sectarian balance in favor of Muslims and threatening the dominance of Lebanon's Maronite Christian population.

Economic tensions also played a significant role in the outbreak of war. Although the beginning of the war is conventionally traced to the April 13, 1975 Ain al-Rammaneh massacre, the war's origins could also be located in February 1975, when the Lebanese army fired on striking fishermen in Saida who were "protesting the establishment of a modern, high technology company," sparking weeks of fighting between Maronite-rightist and Muslim-leftist units of the Lebanese army.[6] The fishermen's strike was part of a larger "social upheaval" ongoing in Lebanon at the time toward increased foreign investment, the concentration of wealth in the hands of an elite class, and uneven economic development, producing grievances that played a significant role in the outbreak of civil war.[7]

The war, as described in greater detail below, has been narrativized in a variety of different ways; to some, it was a Lebanese-Palestinian (or a Lebanese-Palestinian-Israeli-Syrian) war. To others, the war was primarily a sectarian conflict fought between Muslim and Christian elements of Lebanese society. Such generic narratives, however, fail to capture the complexity of the war, which involved a wide variety of actors, both foreign and domestic, with multi-faceted aims and protean alliances. The narrative that the war was primarily a war between Lebanese and foreign actors, for example, obscures the fact that many of the parties to the conflict, including those fighting on opposite sides, were Lebanese. One major party to the war, the Phalangist Party (a nationalist, Maronite Christian party), for example, fought against the PLO and other

[5]Ibid, 379-380.
[6]Michael Hudson, "The Palestinian Factor in the Lebanese Civil War," *Middle East Journal*, 32, no. 3 (1978): 270.
[7]Salim Nasr, "Backdrop to Civil War: the Crisis of Lebanese Capitalism," *MERIP Reports*, no. 73 (1978): 3.

Palestinian resistance organizations. The Phalangists, however, were not fighting only Palestinian militias but also their Lebanese allies, including the Lebanese National Movement (LNM; a leftist, Pan-Arabist party) led by Kamal Jumblatt, which not only supported the presence of Palestinians in Lebanon but was also opposed to maintaining the sectarian quota system in its current form.[8] The narrative that the war was primarily a sectarian conflict, furthermore, obscures the political and economic dimensions of the war as well as the fact that co-sectarians fought at times on opposite sides of the war. The Amal Movement, for example, was a Syrian-affiliated Shi'i militia that fought against Hezbollah, a Shi'i militia affiliated with Iran towards the end of the civil war.

Although the war is often referred to as a single, fifteen-year event, it was generally understood while ongoing as a series of smaller wars between various armed groups which flared up and died down periodically including, for example, the 1982 War of the Mountain fought largely between the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and the Maronite Christian Lebanese Fronts in Mount Lebanon[9] and the War of the Camps (varying start and end dates are given; 1985-1987, 1984-1988, etc.), a series of battles in south Beirut between the Shi'i Amal militia and various Palestinian armed organizations, between Amal and the Socialist Progressive Party and the parties of the LNM, as well as between Amal and Hezbollah.[10] Lebanon also witnessed several foreign occupations during the war which extended significantly beyond the war's official end date. In 1976, Syria intervened, initially on the side of the Maronite Christian Lebanese Front against the PLO in order to maintain a balance of power in the country;[11] in

[8]Elias, 5.
[9]Lyna Comaty, *Post-Conflict Transition in Lebanon: The Disappeared of the Civil War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 42; Makram Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: The Druze, the Maronites and Collective Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.
[10]Comaty, 45; Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 233-234.
[11]Hilde Henriksen Waage and Geir Bergersen Huse, "A Careful Minuet: The United States, Israel, Syria and the Lebanese Civil War,1975–1976," *The International History Review*, 42, no. 5 (2020): 1081.

1990, Syria agreed to remain in Lebanon for two years in order to assist the country in reestablishing stability after the war. It remained, instead, for 14 years, or until 2005, when it withdrew after a significant backlash against continued Syrian presence in Lebanon in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.[12] Israel invaded Lebanon twice during the war (in 1978 and 1982), where it fought in opposition to the PLO (leading to the destruction of the PLO's military infrastructure in Lebanon and its expulsion from the country in August 1982) and to weaken the broader Palestinian liberation movement; it did not fully withdraw until 2000.[13]

By the end of the 1975-1990 period, large swathes of the capital city, Beirut, were in ruins, as was much of Lebanon's infrastructure (the World Bank estimates that the financial losses incurred due to war equaled roughly $25 billion); the Lebanese government had also lost control over much of the country. Roughly 200,000 people had been killed, 300,000 injured, and 800,000 permanently displaced (out of a population of approximately 3.5 million). These numbers are in addition to the roughly 17,000 people who disappeared during the war whose fates remain unknown.[14]

The Ṭāʾif Accord of 1989 initiated a gradual end to hostilities. As a result of the agreement, militias participating in the fighting (with the exception of Hezbollah) agreed to surrender their weapons to the Lebanese Army and Syria agreed to assist the Lebanese government in regaining control over the country for the next two years. Although the Ṭāʾif Accord brought an end to the fighting, it failed to address the issues that had brought about the war, like "the unequal sectarian division of power, the fate of the Palestinian camps, the ongoing

Syria later resumed its support of a weakened PLO that it could control (Waage and Huse, 1097).
[12]Comaty, 20.
[13]Ibid, 23-24; Dan Naor and Eyal Lewin, "The 1982 Lebanon War 40 years on," *Israel Affairs*, 28, no. 3 (2022): 413-415.
[14]Maha Yahya, "Urban Traumas: The City and Disasters," *Center of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona* (2004): 1.

Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, and the Syrian tutelage of the Lebanese state."[15] This was compounded by a 1991 amnesty law which rendered former militia members immune from future prosecution; this law protected many members of the Lebanese political elite who were involved in the fighting. The amnesty law was also a response to the widespread belief that to investigate the events of the war and to punish the guilty would lead to a resumption of hostilities. As a result, no serious government initiatives to launch a national dialogue on the war, to seek justice for its victims, or even to uncover the fates of the thousands of Lebanese citizens who disappeared during the war, took place.[16] Although the war came to an end formally, no effort was made to resolve the societal divisions that brought it about or to achieve any kind of closure for its victims.

These attempts to erase the war at the political level were soon extended to the war's physical traces, particularly in the conflict's epicenter, Beirut. The postwar Lebanese government, led by Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, charged the Société Libanaise de Développement et Reconstruction du Centre-ville de Beyrouth (Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut or Solidere) with rebuilding downtown Beirut.[17] Solidere did not limit itself to restoring Beirut to its pre-war appearance; its plans entailed building an entirely new Beirut, with new street layouts, financial districts built "to the Manhattan model," and the eradication of lower and middle-class residential areas to make way for residences catering to the upper class.[18] The result was the erasure of nearly all traces of the war from Beirut's landscape.

[15]Elias, 6.
[16]Ibid, 7-8.
[17]Ibid, 9.
[18]Yahya, 3.

Solidere's efforts to erase the memory of the war were not uncontroversial. One vocal opponent to the reconstruction of downtown Beirut was Lebanese novelist Ilyās Khūrī, who rejected Solidere's portrayal of those who opposed the reconstruction as mired in nostalgia for the past or as the enemies of progress.[19] He describes the reconstruction efforts as follows:

> The new postwar political class—warlords and war criminals in alliance with oil-enriched capital and military and security apparatuses—was able to impose an amnesia, a complete forgetting, in order to whitewash their innocence. Their victims were silenced. The struggle for recovering memory was not in its essence a nostalgic draw for the past. Rather, it was a drive to claim the present, because the present can only be grounded in a break from its past. In other words, collective memory has to remain living for the present to be free from the hold of the past…[Solidere's] destruction of the past, which was predicated on the negation of memory, in effect reproduced it.[20]

The erasure of the memory of the war from Beirut's landscape and the impact of this erasure on collective memory of the war have been major concerns of the post-war period.

Iraq

The war in Iraq began with the US invasion in March 2003. Less than two years after the 2001 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration's claims that the Iraqi government possessed "weapons of mass destruction" (WMDs) and had ties to al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization that claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, stoked American fears that another terrorist attack was possible, or even imminent. Regime change, the administration insisted, was necessary to protect the United States from future attacks, garnering widespread support for an invasion. Just a few months before the invasion, in September of 2002, former President George Bush gave a

[19]Elias Khoury, "The Novel, the Novelist, and the Lebanese Civil War," *The Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies* (2006): 4.
[20]Ibid.

speech before the UN General Assembly in which he laid out his justification for invasion as follows:

> Saddam Hussein's regime is a grave and gathering danger. To suggest otherwise is to hope against the evidence. To assume this regime's good faith is to bet the lives of millions and the peace of the world in a reckless gamble. And this is a risk we must not take.[21]

After the invasion, no weapons of mass destruction or evidence demonstrating that the Saddam Hussein regime was working with al-Qaeda was found, leaving Bush struggling to justify the invasion to an increasingly dissatisfied US public. President Bush then increasingly focused on the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime in order to justify the invasion, which he portrayed as a humanitarian intervention and an effort to democratize Iraq.[22] In a recent uncanny slip, the former president appeared to acknowledge the unjustifiable nature of the US invasion in a 2022 event at his presidential library in Dallas, Texas, where he condemned "the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq — I mean of Ukraine."[23]

Many observers have attributed the invasion of Iraq to strategic aims; at the time of the invasion, Iraq possessed roughly 11% of total global oil reserves while the United States was the world's largest oil consumer and importer.[24] The United States, therefore, had a strong strategic interest in ensuring a "plentiful and cheap" global supply of oil "without an enemy such as Saddam Hussein controlling a significant part of the flow."[25] Although not a primary motive, both the United States and the United Kingdom also shared an interest in securing contracts for American and British oil companies once the invasion paved the way for the de-nationalization

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[21]Marc Sandalow, "NEWS ANALYSIS / Record Shows Bush Shifting on Iraq War / President's Rationale for the Invasion Continues to Evolve," *SFGate*, Sept. 29, 2004.
[22]Ibid.
[23]Bill Chappell, "Trying to condemn the war in Ukraine, Bush inadvertently calls Iraq war unjustified," *NPR*, May 19, 2022.
[24]Greg Muttitt, "No blood for oil, revisited: The strategic role of oil in the 2003 Iraq War," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 12, no. 3 (2018): 320.
[25]Ibid, 322.

of Iraq's oil companies.[26] One popular explanation for the US invasion is the "notion that the United States and the United Kingdom wanted the oil itself, like a conquistador loading up his ship with stolen New World gold."[27] Proponents of this explanation often point to President Bush's strong ties to the oil industry (ties which were shared by Vice President Dick Cheney and several members of Bush's cabinet),[28] as well as the fact that, after the invasion, American and British forces first moved to protect major oil fields in the south.[29] This explanation, however, fails to hold water in a postcolonial context where "oil no longer flows through closed supply chains from a BP well to a BP forecourt, or from a British colony to the British military."[30] In a contemporary context, where oil is traded on open markets, ensuring a secure global supply of oil, rather than the direct acquisition of Iraq's oil reserves, was the primary strategic aim of the invasion.[31]

Although US forces succeeded in overwhelming the Iraqi military and overthrowing the Saddam Hussein regime within only a few weeks, the Bush administration failed to adequately plan a strategy for how Iraq could be effectively governed afterwards. The US had brought enough troops to invade the country, but not enough to maintain law and order, producing a power vacuum that resulted in widespread looting, including of Baghdad's National Museum, and the destruction of key infrastructure. The US had initially planned to leave the Iraqi military and bureaucracy largely intact, allowing it to transfer power swiftly to a provisional government. This plan, however, had to be scrapped after Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, who was placed in charge of governing the country, launched a "de-Baathification" policy which led to the mass firings of former high-level government officials. Bremer also dissolved the Iraqi army and

[26]Ibid.
[27]Ibid, 322.
[28] Katty Kay,"Analysis: Oil and the Bush Cabinet," *BBC*, 29 Jan. 29, 2001.
[29]Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2021), 261.
[30]Muttitt, 322.
[31]Ibid.

police, forcing the US to rebuild not only Iraq's bureaucracy from scratch, but its police force and military as well. The resulting bureaucracy, military, and police force were poorly trained and lacked experience, further hindering US efforts to reestablish law and order and swiftly transfer power to an Iraqi government.[32]

The "seismic shift" in sectarian relations in Iraq was a contingent phenomenon sparked by the US invasion, although the influence of the post-Gulf War uprising and subsequent repression by Saddam Hussein should not be discounted.[33] After the invasion, US policy in Iraq was often based upon a simplistic understanding of Iraqi society supported by opposition members living in exile, namely that Iraqi society could be divided into three major camps: the Sunnis, vilified as oppressors and supporters of the regime, the Shi'a, and the Kurds. This meant that, after the invasion, Sunnis suddenly found themselves being defined not only in sectarian terms but as oppressors and as a minority group; meanwhile, Iraq's Shi'i population began to advocate for increased access to political power and to express their grievances with the regime in sectarian terms, a move which posed a threat to Sunnis.[34] In addition, US policies in Iraq post-invasion often relied upon a colonial "divide-and-rule" logic. Iraq's post-invasion transitional government established a sectarian quota system to divide power between Iraqi Sunnis, Shi'a, Kurds, Turkmans, and Assyrians; Iraq's post-invasion constitution further codified sectarian divisions in the Iraqi political sphere; government-issued ID cards began to identify the holder's sectarian affiliation by listing place names and sometimes religion; security barriers

[32]Marr, 263-268.
[33]For more information on the role played by the Iran-Iraq war and the repression of the 1991 uprising, see Dina Rizk Khoury, "The Security State and the Practice and Rhetoric of Sectarianism in Iraq," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 4, no. 3 (2010): 325-338.
[34]Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations Before 'Sectarianization' in Pre-2003 Iraq," *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 115-118.

established by US forces in Baghdad divided neighborhoods by sect.[35] These new political and social dynamics meant that the various militias and "shadow governments" that popped up to fill the post-invasion power vacuum were split along sectarian lines.[36] These tensions came to a head on February 22, 2006 when the al-ʿAskarī mosque in Sāmarrāʾ, a Shi'i shrine, was bombed, leading Shi'i militias in Baghdad to turn on Sunnis and sparking almost two years of war, with the involved parties largely split along sectarian lines.[37]

After sectarian violence began to wane in 2008, Iraq enjoyed a period of relative stability until 2013, when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (also commonly referred to as IS, ISIS or ISIL) emerged onto the scene, rapidly captured about a third of Iraqi and Syrian territory, and established a "caliphate" under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The rapid rise of ISIS is widely understood to be a consequence of the US invasion of Iraq, which deepened sectarian divisions and led to a decline in identification with a shared national identity and to the breakdown of state institutions, all creating fertile ground for an organization like ISIS to rise to power.[38] Bremer's post-invasion de-Baathification policy and dissolution of the Iraqi Army also played a role in that it produced a massive population of armed and unemployed men, which ISIS leaders targeted for recruitment. Successfully recruited formerly high-ranking Baathist officials offered ISIS strategic expertise that contributed to the success of the organization.[39] The civil war in Syria, which produced chaos in the regime that often spilled over its borders, also created fertile ground for the rise of ISIS, as did the failure of Arab regimes, not only in Iraq and Syria but in the region more broadly, to "represent the interests of their citizens and to construct

[35]Kali J. Rubaii, "Tripartheid: How Sectarianism Became Internal to Being in Anbar," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 42, no. 1 (2019): 126-127.
[36]Marr, 263-264.
[37]Ibid, 299.
[38]Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3-8.
[39]Megan K. McBride, "Unforced Errors: ISIS,The Baath Party, And The Reconciliation Of The Religious and The Secular," *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 20, no. 2 (2019): 173.

an inclusive national identity," leading to the "breakdown of the state-society relationship."[40] The emergence of ISIS led to a four-year war (2013-2017) between ISIS and Iraqi and Kurdish forces, with the United States and various European powers offering military aid to forces fighting against ISIS. In 2017, ISIS lost almost all of its territory, bringing the war to a conclusion.[41]

Today, Iraq remains unstable. Although ISIS has lost its territory, a 2020 UN report estimated that more than 10,000 ISIS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria and continue to wage war against Iraqi security forces and perpetrate bombings.[42] Rivalry between the United States and Iran, meanwhile, had led to conflict between the two countries via proxy battles, often played out on Iraqi soil.[43] Many Shi'i militias remain active in Iraq; some act as Iranian proxies, while others are rooted in local interests. Active militias have also launched attacks against US military facilities and personnel or worked to quash anti-regime protests.[44] Iraq's dismal economic situation, which often fuels massive protests, is another source of instability.[45]

Syria

Massive protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, part of a wave of uprisings around the Arab world calling for the fall of dictatorial regimes; this revolutionary wave, often referred to as the "Arab Spring" or "Arab Uprisings," resulted in the overthrow of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt before spreading to various other Arab countries. Protests began in Syria after a group of schoolchildren in the city of Daraa were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured for writing

[40]Gerges, 6.
[41]Martin Chulov, "The Rise and Fall of the Isis 'Caliphate,'" *The Guardian*, March 24, 2019.
[42]"Iraq Attack: Twin Suicide Bombings in Central Baghdad Kill 32," *BBC News*, Jan. 21, 2021.
[43]John Davison and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iraq Attacks Deepen Security Woes as Global, Local Rivals Clash," *Reuters*, April 16, 2021.
[44]Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, "Iraq's Anti-American Militias Aren't Just Iranian Proxies. That Helps Explain Their Troubles," *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2021.
[45]Alice Fordham, "In Iraq's 'Dire' Economy, Poverty Is Rising — And So Are Fears Of Instability," *NPR*, Feb. 3, 2021.

"Down with the regime," a slogan used by protestors in Egypt just a few months earlier, on a wall. When several of their family members were killed by state security forces after taking to the streets in protest, their funeral procession was accompanied by a crowd of twenty thousand protestors; protests soon spread around the country.[46]

Protests were met immediately with harsh suppression; the regime utilized the military and security services to attempt to suppress the rebellion, firing on protestors, using tanks, machine guns, barrel bombs, and, in 2013, sarin gas. In addition to deploying military force, the regime worked to undermine the opposition by exacerbating sectarian tensions. At the time that protests began, the population of Syria was roughly 75% Sunni Muslim. The remaining 25% of the population was Alawite (13%), Christian (10-12%), and other minorities. Bashar al-Asad belongs to the Alawite sect; under his regime, the Sunni majority faced discrimination and Sunnis were often excluded from holding high-level government positions.[47] When protests began, the regime was quick to portray protestors as Sunni Islamists or terrorists who would oppress minorities should they succeed in gaining power.[48] This kind of rhetoric allowed al-Asad to gain the support of Syria's religious minorities, effectively sectarianizing the conflict.[49]

As the regime's efforts to crackdown on its opponents intensified, the Syrian opposition shifted away from peaceful protest and towards armed resistance.[50] A myriad of militias and other armed organizations arose as the opposition fragmented into a variety of "shape shifting" and "ideologically heterogeneous" actors,[51] including the Free Syrian Army (originally formed

[46]James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 127.
[47]Ibid, 119.
[48]Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto, "The Shattered Nation: the Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 123; Gelvin, 119.
[49]Ibid, 129.
[50]Gelvin, 131-132.
[51]Ibid, 132.

by deserters from the regular Syrian army who were committed to protecting protesters from the regime), the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (which gained control over an area in northern Syria and designated it a Kurdish homeland), and a variety of Islamist militias, including the Islamic Front, Jabhat al-Nusra (an affiliate of al-Qaeda), and ISIS (which was able to gain control over parts of Syria and Iraq for several years, beginning in 2014, as described above).[52]

As the war continued, significant intervention from foreign powers took place, transforming the war into an "overlapping proxy war" between various foreign countries for global or regional dominance.[53] Turkey, for example, sees the rise in Kurdish separatism in Syria as having the potential to enliven a Kurdish separatist movement within its own borders; it has therefore intervened in the conflict in opposition to Kurdish militias in Syria. The US, meanwhile, supported Kurdish militias as allies in the fight against ISIS, putting the US and Turkey into conflict. Russia has intervened in support of the Asad regime while the US has intervened in support of various elements of the opposition; Iran and Israel have also supported opposing parties in the war, as have Qatar and Saudi Arabia, rendering the conflict in Syria one battlefield on which a wider struggle for regional dominance is being played out.[54]

Fighting in Syria is ongoing, as is intervention by various foreign powers. From the conflict's beginning in 2011 until December 2020, more than 500,000 Syrians have been killed or have disappeared. Approximately 6.7 million Syrians are internally displaced, while 5.6 million have left the country as refugees, totalling more than half of Syria's population. The conflict has led to the destruction of much of Syria's infrastructure, including medical facilities,

[52]Ibid, 134-140.
[53]Ian Bremmer, "These 5 Proxy Battles Are Making Syria's Civil War Increasingly Complicated," *Time*, Feb. 16, 2018.
[54]Bremmer; As`ad AbuKhalil, "How the Saudi-Qatari Rivalry Has Fueled the War in Syria," *The Intercept*, June 29, 2018.

and to the destruction or damage of many of the country's heritage sites, including the six UNESCO World Heritage sites located in Syria.[55]

Why Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria?

As the above historical overview illustrates, the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have a number of distinct features. To highlight just a few, the wars in Iraq and Syria took place in the context of decades-long oppressive governance, a state of affairs that continued in Iraq with the seizure of power by US forces and that continued in Syria as the Asad regime clung to power. In Iraq, the war constituted a continuation of violence initiated by a foreign invasion, while the war in Syria began in the aftermath of an attempted uprising against a dictatorial regime. The war in Lebanon witnessed the involvement of a significant refugee population, the Palestinians; the Lebanese war is also distinct due to the period in which it took place (1975-1990), rather than over a decade later, as was the case in Iraq and Syria. The period in which the Lebanese civil war took place meant the significant involvement of left/right political movements, movements which also played a significant role in Iraqi and Syrian politics during this period.

In spite of these significant differences, the wars do share a number of broad similarities. The first is their remarkably lengthy duration. The war in Lebanon lasted for fifteen years (1975-1990). The absence of an official reconciliation process, furthermore, left many to experience the war as unfinished, a state intensified by periodic instability in the post-war period, leading to fears that the post-war consensus would crumble. Iraq, meanwhile, has been at war more or less continuously since 1980, when the Iran-Iraq War broke out; the eight-year conflict was followed by the Gulf War in 1990, more than a decade of sanctions, and the US invasion of 2003, which has left Iraq continually rocked by war and violence ever since. In Syria, decades of

[55]"Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?" *BBC,* Mar. 12, 2021.

brutal dictatorship, punctuated by periodic violent suppression of dissent, most notably in the 1982 Hama massacre, preceded a war that has dragged on for over a decade.

Civil War? Revolution? "Events"? Sectarian Violence?

Lebanon

While ongoing, the 1975-1990 war was commonly referred to in Lebanon as "the events" (*al-aḥdāth*); the term "civil war" (*ḥarb ahliyya*) is now widely used in both Western and Arabic journalistic and scholarly sources to describe the 1975-1990 period in Lebanon. A number of scholars have explored the question of why "the events," rather than war, was for so long a dominant way of referring to the 1975-1990 period in Lebanon. To some, the term "events" is euphemistic; Nadine Hindi compares its use to referring to the 1967 defeat as "the setback" (*al-naksa*): an effort on the part of the Lebanese to "coldly detach themselves from the atrocities of the civil conflict."[56] Aseel Swalha argues, similarly, that referring to the 1975-1990 war as "the events" is an act of "unintended amnesia" that "deflect[s] responsibility for the horrors of the war."[57]

To others, however, the term points to an important dimension of the war, namely the "intermittent nature of the violence."[58] Although commonly referred to in the singular, the war was often divided, while ongoing, into a number of smaller conflicts: "the two-year war (1975–76); the Israeli invasions and occupation (1978, 1982–2000); the Syrian invasion and

[56]Nadine Hindi, "Recurrent Warscape in Beirut Public Spaces: Forty Years Later (1975-2015)," *History, Urbanism, Resilience: Planning and Heritage*, 17, no. 4 (2016): 158.
[57]Aseel Sawalha, "After Amnesia: Memory and War in Two Lebanese Films," *Visual Anthropology*, 27, no. 1-2 (2014): 107.
[58]Lamia Moghnieh, "Infrastructures of Suffering: Trauma, *Sumud* and the Politics of Violence and Aid in Lebanon," *Medicine Anthropology Theory,* 8, no. 1 (2021): 9.

occupation (1976–2005); the "War of the Camps" (1985–87), and so on."[59] As Max Weiss has argued:

> Indeed, 'the Lebanese civil war' as such is a myth, one might even say a political fiction; it was never one thing, and cannot be boiled down to a single conflict. The Lebanese civil wars, therefore, which must be apprehended in the plural, have started, stopped, and re-started at different moments, proceeding along multiple timelines, occasionally running parallel, occasionally intersecting, and not always in ways that are coherent or comprehensible.[60]

As Lamia Moghnieh adds, the term "events" is deployed by Lebanese remembering the war "to talk about a conglomeration of wars as a series of events; that is, to signal a condition of recurring and protracted war."[61]

The term "civil war" has also been rejected by some Lebanese intellectuals in favor of the phrase "the war of others" (*ḥarb al-ākhirūn*) or "the war of strangers/foreigners" (*ḥarb al-ghurabāʾ*), a reference to the involvement of outside actors in the war, including Iran, Israel, and Syria. Lebanese journalist Ghassān Tawīnī, for example, has referred to the 1975-1990 war as a "war of others on Lebanese soil" (*ḥarb al-ākhirūn ʿalā arḍ lubnān*),[62] a term later taken up by a number of other journalists and intellectuals. To give one representative example, a 2014 opinion piece in *Al-Nahār* reads:

> ونحن اليوم نقول أن حرب 1975 هي حرب خارجية على لبنان مع مشاركة لبنانية محدودة... ويا للأسف الشديد، ففي 13 نيسان من كل عام منذ 1975، نسمع المنظومة نفسها من قبل سياسيين وقياديين واعلاميين مضللين يصفون حرب الغرباء على لبنان بالحرب الأهلية. فكفى تشويهاً وتضليلاً للحقيقة والتاريخ. فهي ما كانت يوماً حرباً أهلية...لبّ النزاع والحرب كان لبنانياً فلسطينياً. فما هي النسبة المئوية لهؤلاء اللبنانيين الذين انضموا الى الغرباء؟ هي بالتأكيد نسبة ضئيلة جداً ربما لم تتجاوز العشرة في المئة من مجموع جحافل الغرباء والغزاة.[63]

[59]Max Weiss, "Wonders of Destruction in Arabic Fiction," *Public Books*, Dec. 15, 2013.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Moghnieh, 10.
[62]Ilyās Khūrī, "Al-ḥarb al-ahliyya lam taḥṣul,"*Al-Quds al-ʿArabī*, April 12, 2021, https://www.alquds.co.uk/الحرب-الأهلية-لم-تحصل.
[63]Biyār Adīb Sarkīs, ʿAfwan! Lam takun yawman ḥarban ahliyya!," *Al-Nahār*, Dec. 8, 2014, https://www.annahar.com/arabic/article/195988-عفوا-لم-تكن-يوما-حربا-أهلية.

> Today, we say that the 1975 war was an external war against Lebanon with limited Lebanese participation…Unfortunately, on April 13th of every year since 1975, we hear the same misleading interpretation by politicians, leaders, and the media who describe the war of foreigners against Lebanon as a civil war. Stop these misleading distortions of truth and history. It was never a civil war…the core of the conflict and the war was Lebanese-Palestinian. What was the percentage of Lebanese who joined the foreigners? It was certainly a very small percentage that did not surpass 10% of the hordes of foreigners and invaders.

This phrase, however, has been sharply critiqued by a number of Lebanese intellectuals, including Ilyās Khūrī, who says in response to those who characterize the war as a "war of others" or a "Lebanese-Palestine war":

> كانت حرباً ضد 'صهاينة الداخل،' ولا بأس في أن يسقط بعض الضحايا في الدامور والعيشية وإلى آخره…
>
> مذابحها كانت للتحرير، من تل الزعتر إلى شاتيلا وصبرا إلى مذابح الجبل…
>
> كانت كما نشاء، شرط أن نستنتج أننا أبرياء، ونبحث عن كبش محرقة، قد يكون فلسطينياً لاجئاً أو عاملاً سورياً، ونلبّسه كل الجرائم.[64]

> It was a war against 'internal Zionists,' never mind the victims in Damour, Aaichiyeh, etc…
>
> Our massacres were for liberation, from Tal al-Zaatar to Shatila and Sabra to the Mountain massacres…
>
> [The war] is whatever we want it to be, so long as we conclude that we are innocent and look for a scapegoat, whether he be a Palestinian refugee or Syrian worker, and blame him for all the crimes.

In other words, portraying the war as a "war of others" ignores the fact that much of the fighting (and the killing and the massacres) was perpetrated by Lebanese citizens; the phrase, Khoury continues, allows Lebanese to assert their own innocence in the conflict while placing all the blame for the crimes that took place during the war on Palestinian or Syrian "scapegoats."[65] Lebanese sociologist Aḥmad Bayḍūn has also written against the term, arguing that those who claim that the wars (rather than "war") in Lebanon were "wars of foreigners" (*ḥurūb al-aghyār*)

[64]Ilyās Khūrī, "Al-ḥarb al-ahliyya lam taḥṣul."
[65]Sarkīs.

did so in order to ignore the social and political causes of the conflict within Lebanon and in order to "cast blame exclusively on the other while exonerating the self."[66]

Iraq

In Iraq, the term "civil war" is most often utilized with respect to the 2006-2008 period, in which sectarian tensions increasingly markedly following the February 22, 2006 bombing of al-ʿAskarī mosque in Sāmarrāʾ, a Shi'i shrine, sparking retaliatory violence against Sunnis, the perceived perpetrators of the bombing. Policymakers, historians, and political scientists consistently utilized the term at the time and in the years that followed. Political scientist Nicholas Sambanis, for example, published a 2006 op-ed in the *New York Times* titled "It's Official: There is Now a Civil War in Iraq"; James Fearon, in a 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article titled "Iraq's Civil War" is equally unequivocal in his deployment of the term.[67] Policymakers, including "former military officers, military advisors and influential think-tanks" also frequently referred to ongoing events in Iraq as a civil war.[68] Prominent historians including Fanar Haddad, Toby Dodge, and Dina Rizk Khoury also utilize the term; scholarly debate among them has tended to center less on the term "civil war" than on what caused or characterized the war. Toby Dodge, for example, uses the term but rejects a tendency that he identifies in journalistic and academic accounts of the war towards "primordialization," or attributing the war to "ancient hatreds."[69] Stathis Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, similarly, reject the characterization of the war as an "ethnic" civil war, arguing that the war's outbreak has more to do with US

[66]Aḥmad Bayḍūn, *Al-Jumhūriyya al-Mutaqaṭṭiʿ* (Algiers: Dār al-Nahār, 1999), 50-51.
[67]Khūrī, "Al-ḥarb al-ahliyya lam taḥṣul."
[68]Marc Scarcelli, "The Uneven Application of the 'Civil War' Label to Iraq," Civil Wars, 19, no, 1 (2017): 98.
[69]Toby Dodge, "Enemy Images, Coercive Socio-Engineering and Civil War in Iraq,"*International Peacekeeping*, 19, no.1 (2012): 462.

policies in Iraq after the invasion than with existing divides between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a communities.[70]

In contrast to this scholarly consensus, the US media has often been inconsistent in its usage of the term, even within a single media outlet. As Marc Scarcelli has noted, the terminology used by the media to describe the 2006-2008 period has been marked by: "ambiguity…with some journalists opting for innocuous terms such as 'sectarian violence' or 'sectarian bloodshed', some referring to a 'civil war' or 'sectarian war', and some using the latter terms but adding 'brink of' or 'near' just prior to the key phrase."[71] This inconsistency, Scarcelli argues, is due to the fact that the term was politicized in the US context; Bush administration officials avoided using the term, which pointed to its failures to achieve political stability in Iraq, while Democratic politicians embraced it.[72]

In Arabic-language media, a similar inconsistency prevailed. Many journalists and outlets avoided utilizing the term directly, preferring language like "the brink of civil war,"[73] "a wave of killing,"[74] and "street battles..approaching civil war."[75] This is likely due to the fact that the term was politicized, not only in the US political realm but in the Iraqi one; Iraq's leaders, including then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, insisted that Iraq was not in a civil war, likely in order to avoid criticism for mismanagement of the country.[76] That the term was politicized in Iraq is also suggested by the willingness of members of the opposition to embrace the term.[77]

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[70]Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam," *Politics & Society,* 35, no. 2, (2007): 183-223.
[71]Scarcelli, 90.
[72]Ibid.
[73]"ʿAām 2006..wuṣūl al-ʿIraq ilā ḥāfāt al-ḥarb al-ahliyya," *Al-Jazeera*, Dec. 29, 2006, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2006/12/29/وصول-العراق-إلى-حافات-الحرب-عام-2006.
[74]"Mawja min aʿmāl al-qatl wa al-ḥukūma takhshā ḥarban ahliyya," *Al-Arabiyya*, Feb. 23, 2006, https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006%2F02%2F23%2F21397.
[75]"Maʿārik al-Shawāriʿ fī al-Aʿẓimiyya taqtarib min ḥarb ahliyya maftūha," *Al-Bayān*, Apr. 19, 2006, https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/2006-04-19-1.910940.
[76]Ahmed S. Hashim, "Iraq's Civil War," *Current History*, 106, no. 696, The Middle East (2007): 3.
[77]Scarcelli, 90.

Some Iraqi journalists and scholars, however, have also resisted using the term civil war, arguing that the term neglects a major dimension of the war, namely the interference of outside actors and the role that these actors have played in stoking sectarian tensions. Iraqi author and intellectual Ḥusayn al-Mūzānī, for example, rejects the term "civil war" in favor of "sectarian war" (*ḥarb ṭāʾifiyya*), a term which he argues better reflects the roles played by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors in stoking sectarian strife for the purpose of projecting their own regional influence.[78] Najaḥ Muḥammad ʿAlī offers the term "war of others" (*ḥarb al-ākhairūn*), a term that, as described above, has also been deployed in the Lebanese context, in recognition of the role played by the United States in driving sectarian violence.[79]

Syria

Unlike the Lebanese war, which originated as an armed conflict, the war in Syria began with a wave of pro-democracy protests, part of the "Arab Spring" that swept the Arab world in late 2010 and 2011. These protests, which often called for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Asad, were soon met with harsh repression by the regime, which militarized the conflict by directing the army to attack protestors, including with live ammunition, tanks, and, as the conflict intensified, bombs and chemical weapons.

Some Syrian intellectuals were critical of this protest movement, notably the famed Syrian poet and literary critic Adūnīs (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd Isbir), who rejected the terms "revolution" (*thawra*) or "uprising" (*intifāḍa*) to refer to post-2011 Syria. Well-known for his support of secularism and critical views towards (especially political) Islam, Adūnīs criticized the "Syrian opposition" for its failure to adopt a secular discourse that calls for democracy and

[78]Ḥusayn al-Mūzānī, "ʿAn al-ḥarb al-ṭāʾifiyya fī al-ʿIrāq," *Qantara*, Aug. 15, 2006, https://ar.qantara.de/content/hsyn-lmwzny-n-lhrb-ltyfy-fy-lrq.
[79]Najaḥ Muḥammad ʿAlī, "ʿUnf al-ʿIrāq, ḥarb ṭāʾifiyya am ḥarb ahliyya?," *Al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin*, Aug. 5, 2006, https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=71864.

equality, or indeed any clear discourse, and for its lack of a unified leadership.[80] Noting that protests in Syria, as was the case in other countries that participated in the wave of "Arab Spring" protests, often used mosques as a platform from which to launch demonstrations, he argues that "a secular revolution cannot be achieved by people going out [to protest] from mosques."[81]

Adūnīs was also critical of the opposition's turn to violence, declaring:

> A writer can never be on the side of killing…How can a poet or a painter be on the [same] side as a person with an explosive belt who goes into a school and detonates himself? How?...It is an unimaginable monstrosity. My brother, if the regime is tyrannical then fight the regime. Do not fight children and schools. Do not destroy the country. Do not kill innocent people.[82]

He also criticized the opposition for its destruction of Syria's cultural heritage, including Aleppo's historic markets, and for looting museums.[83] When asked whether the opposition's violence could be understood as a response to the violence of the regime, Adūnīs replied that, even if this was the case, "a revolution cannot be built upon violence and cannot respond to violence with violence."[84]

Adūnīs' refusal to refer to the opposition movement as a revolution was harshly criticized by a number of other prominent intellectuals, including Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, who characterizes Adūnīs' position as a critique of protests that "spring from the mosque and not from the opera

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[80]"Adūnīs li-Frāns 24: 'Kunnā fī mushkilat al-Niẓām wa al-Yawm Aṣbaḥnā Amām Mushkilat al-Thawra!," *France 24*, Feb. 5, 2015, https://www.france24.com/ar/20130220-أدونيس-فرانس-٢٤-سوريا-الثورات-العربية-الحقيقية-المعاضرة-السورية-خطاب-علماني-أوضح-إسلاميين-النظام.

[81]"Adūnīs: Thawra ʿAlmāniyya lā Yumkin Taḥqīquhā ʿAbr Ashkhās yakhrajūn min al-Masājid," *France 24*, Sept. 26, 2016, https://www.france24.com/ar/20160926-أدونيس-سوريا-أوروبا-إسلام-علمانية-مساجد-الولايات-المتحدة-روسيا.

[82]Jonathan Guyer, "'Now the Writing Starts': An Interview with Adonis," *The New York Review*, 19 Apr. 19, 2016.

[83] Ibid.

[84]"Adūnīs li-Frāns 24."

house or the national theatre."[85] Journalist and novelist Mahā Ḥassan, meanwhile, published a 2011 article in *al-Hayat* titled "Adūnīs' Opportunity?" which addressed Adūnīs directly:

> عليك أن تقول كلمة أمام الدم السوري… قم اليوم، ولوّن ربيع سورية، بعمود أخضر من أزهار حقولك. أدونيس، هذه فرصتك الأخيرة![86]
>
> You must say something regarding the bloodshed in Syria…Stand up today and color Syria's spring with a green column of flowers from your fields. Adūnīs, this is your last chance!

Despite his lack of support for the Syrian opposition, and his unwillingness to refer to its actions as a revolution, Adūnīs also stops short of referring to events in Syria as a civil war, although he hints that one is possible in a 2012 interview in the Austrian *Profil* magazine, Adūnīs responded to the question of whether Syria was in a civil war as follows:

> Nein, ausgebrochen ist er noch nicht. Aber er kann kommen-und das wäre eine absolute Katastrophe. In Syrien selbst ist das Regime stärker als die Opposition.[87]
>
> No, it has not broken out yet. But [civil war] might come-and that would be an absolute disaster. In Syria, the regime is stronger than the opposition.

To other Syrian intellectuals, the protest movement and subsequent emergence of an armed opposition constituted an ongoing revolution aimed at overthrowing a dictatorial regime. These intellectuals tend to emphasize the peaceful nature of the original protest movement and the role played by the violence of the Asad regime in the militarization of the opposition. Syrian intellectual Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, for example, described the war in Syria in a 2013 interview as "an overwhelming popular Intifada [uprising], in the classical sense of the word Intifada as invented by the Palestinian people, which was then forced to militarize" as well as a "revolution" that "seeks restoration of the republic through the toppling of the old hereditary regime."[88] In a 2016 article in *al-Fikr* magazine, he argues that the war in Syria is often mistakenly defined as a

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[85]Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, " Interview with Dr. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm: The Syrian Revolution and the Role of the Intellectual," *Al-Jumhuriya*, 27 Apr. 2013.
[86]Mahā Ḥassan, "Furṣat Adūnīs," *Al-Hayat*, Apr. 14, 2011.
[87]Tessa Szyszkowitz, "Ich unterstütze die Opposition nicht," *Profil*, Nov. 2, 2012, https://www.profil.at/home/syrien-ich-opposition-318878
[88]Al-Azm, " Interview."

sectarian war, like those in Lebanon or Iraq. In Lebanon, he writes, "groups, including sects and organizations, fight one another with force while the state remains without interference"; in Iraq, the US removed the regime, the army, and the ruling party, "leaving the Shi'a, the Sunnis, and the Kurds to move against one another."[89] In Syria, however, "there are two warring parties: the regime, the state, the army, and the ruling party on one side, and the popular *intifāḍa* on the other side." The conflict in Syria, he continues, is not sectarian in nature and the conflict is not a civil war.[90]

Another prominent Syrian intellectual, Yāssīn al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, initially referred to events in Syria as a "revolution" (*thawra*) or an "uprising" (*intifāḍa*); these early writings reflect a great deal of optimism for the future and a strong belief that the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia would soon be accompanied by the fall of the Asad regime in Syria.[91]As violence intensified and the opposition began to take up arms, however, his analyses began to reflect a fear that the initial revolutionary promise of the uprisings would not bear fruit; as early as September 2011, he began to warn of the potential for the Syrian revolution to "regress into…a 'state of nature.'"[92] Al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ attributes this regression, characterized by an increasing turn to violence, the rise of a religious element in the opposition, the loss of clear unifying goals, and a rise in expressions of anger, to the efforts of the Asad regime to violently suppress the revolution.[93] Such a state of nature:

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[89]Ṣādiq Jalāl al-ʿAẓm, "Sūriyya fī Thawra," *Al-Fikr*, 24 (2016): 87.
[90]Ibid.
[91]See, for example, "Thawrat al-ʿĀmma: Qaḍāyā Ikhlāqiyya wa Thaqāfiyya wa Siyāsiyya fī Shaʾn al-Intifāḍa al-Suriyya," ("Revolution of the Common People: Ethical, Cultural, and Political Issues Relating to the Syrian Uprising") in *Al-Thawra al-Mustaḥīla: al-Thawra, al-Ḥarb al-Ahliyya, wa al-Ḥarb al-ʿĀmma fī Sūriyya* (Beirut: Al-Muʾassasa al-ʿArabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr, 2017).
[92]Yāssīn al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, *Al-Thawra al-Mustaḥīla*, 53; translation is from the English edition: Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 60. Citations from this book will be given with pagination from both the Arabic edition and the English edition.
[93]Ibid, 53-55; 66-68.

> is the equivalent of a civil war—a sectarian war, in which murder leads to murder, asabiyyah activates asabiyyah, and hatred animates hatred.[94]

This state, he argues, prevailed in both Iraq and Lebanon, and may afflict Syria if "the regime's killing machine continues to claim Syrian lives at the current rate."[95]

In May 2012, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ identified a new phase in Syria's ongoing violence: the rise of nihilism [*al-ʿadamiyya*] characterized by "extreme violence, strict religiosity, and the withdrawal of trust from the world."[96] Although the regime remains "the most nihilistic force in Syria," al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ also attributes nihilism to some elements of the opposition, especially jihadist Salafist militant groups; he argues, however, groups who have not fallen prey to the sway of nihilism, notably the Free Syrian Army, persist.[97] Despite worsening violence, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ continued to remain hopeful, if increasingly concerned:

> اليوم، لا تزال عدميتنا ضحلة، قابلة للانعكاس حين تنفرج الأجواء العامة ويقل نزيف الدم والأرواح اليوم. لكن نقدر أنه كلما استمرت العمليات الثلاثة التي رصدناها في مطلع المقال، عنف مجنون من طرف النظام، وأداء ركيك من قبل المعارضة، ولا مبالاة عالمية بالمأساة السورية، فضلا عن التجزؤ الجغرافي والفكري للثورة، ضعفت أكثر وأكثر أية مقاومات ممكنة لتنامي العدمية، ولم يعد يقف في وجهها شيء.

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[94]Ibid 60; 75.
The term "asabiyyah" is closely associated with the work of 14th-century philosopher, historian, and proto-sociologist Ibn Khaldūn, who used the term to refer to the bonds that hold different social groups, from tribes and clans to civilizations, together. The term is often negatively associated with tribalism or factionalism and, more recently, with the role that sectarianism plays in modern states in the region, especially Syria and Lebanon (see, for example, Fouad Ajami, Fuad Khuri, and Leon Goldsmith). Azmi Bishara argues that these analyses fail to properly understand the term. In Ibn Khaldoun's conception, Bishara argues, 'asabiyya leads to the rise of the state; the modern state, on the other hand, arises as a "manifestation of society as a whole," although an existing state may later produce an 'asabiyya that serves its interests ("Ibn Khaldun's 'Asabiyya and Sects," in *Sectarianism Without Sects* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2021), 201). In other words, "In modern times, the state produces the 'asabiyya; the 'asabiyya does not produce the state" (Bishara, 201).
Al-Haj Saleh's understanding of 'asabiyya seems similar to that of Bishara; it is a tool deployed by the regime in order to secure its authority. Al-Haj Saleh compares sectarian 'asabiyya to oil wealth in the Gulf; it is a tool that "provides the ruling elite with exclusivity and an independence from the governed" because it allows the regime to acquire loyalty without having to spend public funds or grant equal political and legal rights (224-225; not in Arabic edition). Once deployed, however, the regime's 'asabiyya activates other group solidarities, effectively sectarianizing the Syrian political and social spheres (ibid).
[95]Ibid.
[96]Ibid, 133; 121.
[97]Ibid, 146; 135.

> Today, our nihilism remains shallow and reversible, so long as a détente is conceivable and so long as daily scenes of bloodshed decline. Yet if the three processes observed at the beginning of this article continue (i.e. the unrestrained violence of the regime, the inadequate performance of the opposition, and international indifference to the Syrian ordeal) any constraints on the rise of nihilism will grow increasingly weak, especially given the geographical and intellectual fragmentation of the revolution. If these constraints disintegrate, nihilism will become unstoppable.[98]

By March 2013, it seemed, such a nihilistic state or "state of nature" had finally arrived. Al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ writes:

> سورية اليوم بلد لا شكل له، ليس دولة وطنية ولا هو دولة سلطانية تقليدية، وتقاوم النظام فيها مئات التشكيلات العسكرية، على نحو لم يسبق رؤيته في ثورة اجتماعية أو في حرب وطنية، وتظهر فيه كائنات دينية متشددة غريبة، ويمارس فيه عنف هائل، ويشكل عملية إعادة تشكل كبرى لأنه يبدو أن بلدنا منغمس في عملية تحول عنيفة للأشكال، قد يكون فقدان الشكل وظهور هذه الكائنات المشوهة الغريبة أحد أوجهها.
>
> Today, Syria is neither a national state nor a traditional Sultanic one, but a shapeless country in which hundreds of military formations are fighting the regime in a way that has never been seen before in any social revolution or national war. Syria today is a country witnessing the emergence of strange creatures of religious extremism. Tremendous violence now engulfs the country. It is practically a playground for ghouls and terrifying, faceless beings. We speak of a major 'reform' process, because it seems that our country is immersed in a furious process of transformation, completely losing its shape and passing through malformed, monstrous incarnations.[99]

In this article, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ still stops short of referring to ongoing violence in Syria as a civil war; the description above, however, appears indicative of an understanding of ongoing events in Syria as chaotic violence in pursuit of survival rather than any higher political aim.

By 2015, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ's understanding of events in Syria had solidified into a conception of a series of stages, beginning with revolution, moving into a sectarian conflict primarily between Sunnis and Shi'a, and ending with an international proxy war characterized by the involvement of the US, Russia, and other regional and global powers. In al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ's view, a

[98]Ibid, 144; 133.
[99]Ibid, 209; 210-211.

period between the rise of armed opposition to the regime in Fall 2011 until the end of 2012, when the "national framework" (*al-iṭār al-waṭanī*) of the struggle collapsed, constitutes a civil war.[100]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the terms by which the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria are referred to are highly contested. In Iraq, for example, referring to 2006-2008 as a civil war might be understood as an implied critique of the Bush Administration or of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's leadership. In Syria, the term to some implies a sectarian conflict that diminishes the revolutionary aspirations of the opposition. In Lebanon, finally, the term might suggest an effort to contend with collective Lebanese responsibility for the war(s) or, to others, might diminish the role played by outside actors.

Despite the term's contested nature, I have elected to use it in this dissertation because I find the term useful in identifying a particular type or stage of violence and because it makes the basis for comparison between the three contexts clearer. I do not intend my use of the term to diminish the ways in which actors in all three wars fought, at least initially, in pursuit of political aims including Palestinian liberation, the expulsion of the US occupation of Iraq, and democratic transition in Syria. The term, however, does reflect the ways in which, as violence wore on, political aims became increasingly unclear, often replaced with the simple fight for survival, and sectarian allegiances began to take on an increased importance. It also reflects the fragmentation of parties involved in the wars. One aspect of the three wars which the term does neglect, however, is the international dimension of each, especially the ways in which each war later evolved into battlegrounds on which various regional and global powers played out broader

[100]Ibid, 231-231. This chapter is not in the English translation of the book.

struggles for dominance; when I wish to refer to this stage of each war specifically, I will utilize the term "proxy war."

Literary Transformations

Lebanon

In Lebanon, many scholars and intellectuals have noted the impact of the war on Lebanese literary production. Ilyās Khūrī, notably, has stated that "the Lebanese novel was **only born** during the war," arguing that Lebanese novels did not form a single, coherent body with shared stylistic elements, themes, and preoccupations until after the war.[101] Critics have observed that the Lebanese war "played an important role in destabilizing the writers' worldview and self-perception";[102] in response, writers produced experimental novels characterized by what Ilyās Khūrī describes as a "freedom from concern for conventions of form."[103] This freedom, as Stefan Meyer notes, often took the form of narrative fragmentation, a technique which authors adopted in order to "express the sense of complete dislocation caused by the conflict."[104] Ilyās Khūrī's *Riḥlat Ghāndī Aṣ-Ṣaghīr* (2000; *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, 2009), for example, experiments with a non-linear, fragmented form, as well as with repetition. Other novels utilized other experimental techniques, for example the inclusion of supernatural or surreal elements, like Ghāda Sammān's *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (1976; *Beirut Nightmares,* 1997), or with metafictional narrative techniques that call the reader's attention to the act of narration itself, like Ilyās Khūrī's *al-Jabal Aṣ-Ṣaghīr* (1977; *Little Mountain,* 2007).[105]

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[101]Khoury, "The Novel," 7; emphasis in original.
[102]Fabio Caiani, *Contemporary Arab Fiction: Innovation from Rama to Yalu* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.
[103]Khoury, "The Novel," 8.
[104]Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 117-118.
[105]Ibid, 122-129.

As these novels explored the destabilization and disorientation of war at the level of form, other works explored the ways in which this destabilization opened opportunities for questioning or subverting social norms, especially relating to gender and sexuality. Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Ḥikāyat Zahrā'* (1980; *The Story of Zahra*, 1996), for example, depicts the war as a time when women experienced increased freedom from patriarchal domination; however, the female protagonist's murder at the hands of her lover, a sniper, suggests that such freedom could only have been temporary and limited. Hudā Barakāt's *Ḥajar aḍ-Ḍaḥik* (1990; *The Stone of Laughter,* 1998) addresses similar themes, delving into the war's production of a militarized hypermasculinity. The male protagonist's efforts to maintain a gentle, feminine gender presentation become increasingly unsustainable as the war continues, culminating in his transformation into a rapist and a murderer. Najwā Barakāt's *Yā Salām* (1999; *Oh, Salaam!,* 2015) also depicts men who participated in the war and adopted the kind of militarized, hypermasculinity that Hoda Barakat's novel critiques. This kind of masculinity, Najwa Barakat's novel suggests, did not disappear with the end of the war but has persisted and continues to have a damaging impact upon gender dynamics in society more broadly.

A number of critical works have addressed the centrality of gender to Lebanese war fiction. In *Sexuality and War:Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1992), for example, Evelyne Accad examines a set of novels written during the war that, according to her reading, demonstrate how war and violence are linked to sexuality and unequal treatment of women. miriam cooke's 1996 book *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* also deals with gender and the Lebanese War. Taking as her starting point the rapid increase in novels written by women during the war, cooke identifies a group of women whom she terms the "Beirut Decentrists" whose works are both stylistically and thematically distinct from the writing

that was produced by men at the time. Unlike male authors, whose works were concerned with "savagery, anger, and despair" as well as "strategy, ideology and violence," the Beirut Decentrists were concerned with the daily experience of war from within their homes, on the margins of the fighting itself.[106] Their "holistic" approach, according to cooke, allowed this group of writers to "undermine and restructure society around the image of a new center" that was removed from the battlefield.[107]

In the postwar period, the role that Lebanese cultural production can play in constructing a counter-memory in the face of state-sponsored erasure has received significant attention. Elias Chad's *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-War Lebanon* (2018), for example, examines contemporary Lebanese visual art that acts as a site for reconstituting a "communal memory" of the war.[108] Norman Saadi Nikro's *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon* (2012), similarly, examines various forms of cultural production, including fiction, film, photography, visual arts, and theater, identifying an experimental trend marked by an "episodic, stuttering style."[109] This experimental style, he argues, expresses a "resistance to closure" that stands in opposition to official, state-sponsored memory which erases the presence of the war entirely.[110]

A particularly noteworthy contribution is Ken Seigneurie's *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon.* Seigneurie examines a corpus of novels which represent two contrasting "aesthetic responses" to the war.[111] The first of these is "mythic

[106]miriam cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.
[107]Ibid.
[108]Elias, 10.
[109]Norman Saadi Nikro, *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 8.
[110]Ibid.
[111]Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 8.

utopianism," which Seigneurie identifies as a dominant response.[112] This aesthetic depicted the ruins and losses of the war as necessary sacrifices on the road to a utopian vision of the future, drawing on "secular and religious discourses of redemptive self-sacrifice" and tending to depict human beings as "things to be used in the service of various utopian projects."[113] Seigneurie also identifies a second, alternative aesthetic that he terms "elegiac humanism."[114] Writers and filmmakers who adopted this aesthetic drew on the trope of "standing-by-the-ruins" from classical Arabic poetry to produce an "open-ended evocation of loss and longing."[115] This aesthetic viewed ruins as places for an alternative memory of the war based on nostalgia, mourning, and the recognition of loss, rather than self-sacrifice in favor of a utopian dream.[116]

Iraq

In Iraq, many decades of war, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Gulf War (1991) have rendered the war novel a long-standing feature of the Iraqi literary scene. Before 2003, harsh censorship meant that war novels produced within Iraq were generally propagandistic[117] and tended to portray the bravery of Iraqi soldiers, their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the greater Arab nation, and the "martyrs" who fell in battle.[118] Authors who left Iraq, including Jinān Jāsim Hillāwī, Shākir al-Anbārī and Salām Ibrāhīm (all of whom participated in the Iran-Iraq war and later deserted), produced novels which were critical of the Iran-Iraq war and the regime and which often centered the suffering of conscripted soldiers and the figure of the deserter, rather than heroism and martyrdom.[119] Authors living abroad also

[112]Ibid, 177.
[113]Ibid, 27.
[114]Ibid, 177.
[115]Ibid, 26-31.
[116]Ibid, 31.
[117]Hawra Al-Hassan, "Women, Wars and Weapons: Mapping the Cultural Battlefield of Ba'thist Iraq," in *Women, Writing and the Iraqi Ba'thist State* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 3-4.
[118]Amir Moosavi, "How to Write Death: Resignifying Martyrdom in Two Novels of the Iran-Iraq War," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 35 (2015), 16-17.
[119]Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 11.

produced novels critical of the Gulf War and subsequent sanctions, including ʿAlī Badr's *Ṣakhab wa Nisā' wa Kātib Maghmūr* (2005, *Tumult, Women, and an Obscure Writer*) and Batūl Khuḍayrī's (b. 1965) *Ghā'ib* (2004, *Absent*).[120]

Because the war novel is a long-standing feature of the Iraqi literary scene, some critics have read the post-2003 Iraqi novel alongside earlier examples of war fiction. Ikram Masmoudi's 2015 book *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, for example, examines Iraqi war novels from the late 1990s-early 2000s, with particular attention to novels that represent the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the American occupation.[121] Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," Masmoudi argues that Iraqi novels that address these wars represent how power in Iraq has acted to "subjugat[e] life to the power of death and killing" and portray figures caught up in these wars, like soldiers, deserters, and prisoners of war as "forms of bare life caught in the sovereign sphere."[122]

Despite the continuities between the post-2003 novel and earlier literary production, the US invasion did have a clear impact upon Iraqi fiction in several ways. The elimination of censorship, as mentioned above, allowed for the publication of fiction on a much broader range of topics, including works critical of the regime and works on topics that had been seen as taboo, including "[s]ex, politics, and religion."[123] The removal of censorship therefore led to a huge increase in Iraqi literary production; Sadek Mohammed estimates that between 2003 and 2017, more than 850 novels were written, "more than the number published in the entire history of the Iraqi novel."[124]

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[120]Al-Hassan, 259.
[121]Masmoudi, 20-21.
[122]Ibid, 4-7.
[123]Sadek R. Mohammed, "The Return of Scheherazade, or the Rise of the Iraqi Novel after 2003," *World Literature Today*, 92, vol. 2 (2018): 35.
[124]Ibid.

Although experimentation with form is not new to Iraqi literature,[125] it increased markedly in the years following the US invasion. In particular, post-2003 Iraqi writers moved away from realism in favor of producing texts with gothic, supernatural, magic realist, darkly comedic, absurd and/or grotesque elements.[126] Post-2003 Iraqi gothic fiction, in particular, has attracted significant scholarly attention.[127] In addition to narrative experimentation, many post-2003 novels also explored new themes as they sought to respond to ongoing violence and occupation. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these themes is the increased attention to death, dying, and the politics of the corpse. A number of critics have observed that, since the US invasion, there has been an upsurge in the production of novels which center the figure of the corpse. "The Iraqi literary scene of the past years is a funeral wake with a corpse at its very center," writes Fatima Sai, for example.[128] "Literary and artistic representation of the body's violent dismemberment and mutilation, in particular, are a recurring feature of post-2003 Iraqi cultural production, from literature to the visual arts. These representations include portrayals of decapitations, dismembered limbs, tortured bodies, and charred remains of corpses," notes Haytham Bahoora.[129] "Looking at some of the titles of recent Iraqi fiction published in the past ten years, one is struck by the references to death, killing, madness and loss, all in connection with Iraq itself," adds Ikram Masmoudi.[130]

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[125]The novels of Ghā'ib Farmān (1927–1990) are often identified as some of the earliest experimental Iraqi novels due to their use of fragmentation, polyphony, and stream of consciousness (Haytham Bahoora, "Iraq," *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail S. Hassan (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 256-258).
[126]Sarah Kahly-Mills, "Living and Writing Iraq's Time of Tumult," *New Lines Magazine*, August 3, 2021; Bahoora, "Iraq," 13.
[127]See, for example Haytham Bahoora, "Writing the Dismembered Nation: the Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War," *The Arab Studies Journal,* 23, no. 1 (2015) and Ikram Masmoudi, "Gothic Poetics in Hassan Blasim's Fiction," *Al-Karmil,* 40-41 (2019-2020).
[128]Fatima Sai, "Flesh and Blood: Necropolitics of Literature," *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World: Proceedings of the 12th Conference of the European Association for Modern Arabic Literature (EURAMAL), May 2016, Oslo*, ed. Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 244.
[129]Bahoora, "Writing," 186.
[130]Masmoudi, *War*, 2.

Although I am unaware of any book-length works on this topic, several pertinent articles or chapters on the representation of the corpse in Iraqi fiction, particularly as that representation relates to political power, have been published in recent years. One of these is Fatima Sai's 2019 chapter titled "Flesh and Blood: The Necropolitics of Literature," which examines Iraqi fiction published from 2008-2014 that foregrounds depictions of the dead body. She reads the chaotic situation in Iraq after the US invasion through the lens of Achille Mbembe's conception of necropolitics; she reads several works of Iraqi fiction as efforts to re-establish the figure of the corpse as an object of mourning in a necropolitical situation where death is so ubiquitous that the boundaries between the living and the dead have blurred.[131] In a 2017 article titled "Iraq War Body Counts: Reportage, Photography, and Fiction," Roger Luckhurst also turns to representations of the corpse in recent Iraqi fiction. He opens with a discussion of the restrictions on photographing dead bodies during the US invasion and occupation, which often left wartime deaths, both American and Iraqi, undocumented and unrepresented, before turning to two works of fiction by Iraqi authors (Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād* (2013; *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, 2018) and Sinān Antūn's *Waḥdaha Shajarat al-Rummān* (2010, *The Corpse Washer*, 2013) that he reads as attempts to represent these erased corpses and reinstate them as "grievable subjects."[132]

Another major preoccupation of post-2003 Iraqi fiction, as Ronan Zeidel has observed, is an increased interest in representing Iraq's ethnic, religious, and sectarian diversity in fiction, a tendency that stands in contrast to pre-2003 novels, which tended to avoid addressing sectarian divisions. Authors emphasize pluralism in their works, Zeidel argues, in order to participate in the "rediscovery of the national memory, which had been concealed by consequent regimes and

[131]Sai, 244.
[132]Roger Luckhurst, "Iraq War Body Counts: Reportage, Photography, and Fiction," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 63, no. 2 (2017), 360; 367-368.

their versions of Iraqi history" in an attempt to "rewrite Iraqi history in order to make it more accommodating to the multiplicity of components that forms part of Iraq."[133] A number of post-2003 novels that participate in this trend turn to the past to depict periods when a pluralistic Iraqi society lived in harmony, for example Sinan Antoon's 2016 novel *Yā Maryam* (*The Baghdad Eucharist*, 2017) whose protagonist is a Christian man who spends much of the novel looking back on a more pluralistic national past and wondering how Iraq could have become so fragmented so quickly. Others use the figure of a dead person with multiple or ambiguous sectarian affiliations to symbolically stage the death of Iraqi pluralism, for example Ali Bader's 2008 novel *Ḥāris al-Tabgh* (*The Tobacco Keeper*, 2011), which depicts an investigation into the death of a man who has changed his name, identity, and sectarian affiliation three times.

Syria

As was the case in Iraq, the 2011 uprising in Syria prompted a massive increase in cultural production as the Asad regime weakened and its ability to exercise effective censorship over Syrian cultural production declined.. As miriam cooke notes, a wide variety of mediums participated in this "cultural outpouring," including "[s]martphone videos, feature films, art photography, oil paintings, watercolors, songs, and theatrical plays"; an estimated 300,000 short clips were posted on YouTube alone from 2011-2015.[134] Satire and caricature of Bashar al-Asad and the regime were particularly prevalent in the post-2011 period.[135] Another critical factor was a desire among Syrian cultural producers to play a role in supporting ongoing opposition to the

[133]Ronen Zeidel, *Pluralism in the Iraqi Novel after 2003: Literature and the Recovery of National Identity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 4-5.
[134]miriam cooke, "It's a revolution."
[135]cooke, "It's a revolution"; Christa Salamandra, "Syria's drama outpouring: Between complicity and critique in Syria," in *Syria: From Reform to Revolt*, 2, ed. Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 36.

regime, as well as an urgent need to document ongoing events, including the increasingly violent suppression of protests.

Consequently, many early literary responses to the outbreak of war in 2011 utilized a documentary or journalistic style and were written by writers who witnessed or participated in the protests and watched the country descend into violence soon afterwards. Samar Yazbik's 2012 memoir *Taqatu' Nīrān: min Yawmiyyāt al-Intifāḍa al-Suriyya* (*A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, 2012) is one of the best known examples of this trend. In the early days of the uprising and, later, the war, writers felt that there was an urgent need to document what they were witnessing; in a 2015 interview, Samar Yazbik, for example, said, "In my first book about the revolution, all I did was document facts," adding that due to the urgency of documenting the revolution, she has not written any works of fiction in five years.[136] In a 2016 interview, Khālid Khalīfa adds, "The screaming phase has to be over before we begin to see good works. In general, instantaneous writing, i.e., writing documentations and testimonies, is the most dominant so far…"[137]

Many early literary responses also turned to the past, perhaps feeling that it was too soon or too difficult to represent an ongoing war; the fact that the war weakened the hold of the Asad regime and the fact that many authors fled Syria at this time also made it possible for many authors to write novels critical of the regime and its past abuses for the first time. As a result, many novels published during this period were set during the presidency of Bashar al-Asad or his father, Hafez al-Asad, and depicted repressive governance, the prevalence of state informers, and the harsh conditions experienced by political prisoners. Some of these novels addressed the 1982 Hama massacre, in which the Syrian army killed thousands of residents of Hama and

[136]Rosa Gosch and Samar Yazbek, "An Interview with Syrian Author Samar Yazbek," *Qantara.de*, 2015.
[137]Rachael Daum and Khaled Khalifa, "Syrian Novelist Khaled Khalifa: 'I Have Always Wondered About the Ability of Some Writers To Remain Silent,'" *Arab Lit*, Apr. 11, 2016.

leveled much of the city in order to quell Islamist resistance to the regime, for the first time. Novels published after 2011 which depict the oppressive nature of the Asad regimes include Khālid Khalīfa's *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh hadhihi al-Madīna* (2013, *No Knives in the Kitchens of this City*, 2016) and Fawwāz Ḥaddād's *al-Suriyyūn al-A'dā'* (2014, *The Enemy Syrians*). Now that a decade has passed since the start of the war, many novels that address the war directly have been published. Some of these depict the protests and the early days of the war, including Rūzā Yāsīn Ḥasan's *Alladhīna massahum al-Siḥr* (2016, *Those Touched by Magic*), Khalīl Ṣuwayliḥ's *Ikhtibār an-Nadam* (2017; *Remorse Test*), and Fādī ʿAzzām's *Bayt Ḥuddud* (2017; *Huddud's House*). Others depict the Islamic State and its impact on Syria, like Nabīl Sulaymān's *Layl al-'Ālam* (2016, *The World's Night)*. More than half of Syria's population has been either internally displaced or fled the country since 2011; unsurprisingly, a number of Syrian novels which deal with exile or displacement have also been published. These include Shahlā al-ʿUjaylī's *Samā' Qarība min Baytna* (2015; *A Sky So Close To Us*, 2018) and Maḥmūd Ḥassan al-Jāsim's *Nuzūḥ Maryam* (2015; *Mariam's Journey*).

One major preoccupation of post-2011 Syrian fiction has been death and the corpse, especially the politics of the corpse and the ways in which mourning and burial rites have been disrupted by ongoing war. As Max Weiss observes:

> In recent Syrian War literature, corpses can be found—as individual subjects and collective actors—weighing like a nightmare on the living. Fictionalized war landscapes are apocalyptic, populated with ground flesh, severed limbs, disappearances, and bodies demanding identification, transportation, and even communal reconciliation. The dead are physically—that is to say, not just emotionally, psychologically or spiritually—a burden on the living.[138]

[138]Max Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic: A Cultural History of Ba'thist Syria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 272.

Weiss identifies a number of works of post-2011 which draw on these "necroaesthetics," including Khālid Khalīfa's novel *al-Mawt ʿAmal Shāqq* (2016; *Death is Hard Work*, 2019), Māzin ʿArafa's novel *al-Gharānīq* (*The Cranes*) and the film *Yawm Aḍʿatu Ẓillī* (2018; *The Day I Lost My Shadow*) by Suʾdad Kaʿdān.[139]

As Anne-Marie McManus and Max Weiss have argued, one of the major features of the post-2011 Syrian cultural scene has been an engagement with wartime temporalities. McManus argues that post-2011 literature and film engage with the image of the ruin in ways that center the wartime experience of time: "flattened into the repetition of war, drawn out in accumulated suffering, compressed in a sedimented present."[140] These works are a response to the ways in which the 2011 uprising constituted a moment of revolutionary possibility, "a future whose contours were known and lived, now submerged by signs of an apocalypse that will not stop rearriving."[141] McManus draws on Nouri Gana's notion of the "unbearable present" of unresolved mourning, "bereft of the very end it professes and hastens to announce again and again."[142] Max Weiss identifies a wartime temporality characterized by "The immediacy of images and the imaginary of the immediate…The acceleration of time and the intensification of destruction."[143] This temporality puts a demand on the witness to "keep pace by documenting every last detail of waking life," an impossible demand given the rapid speed at which events are developing.[144] In response to this demand and to the broader context of "unpredictable life circumstances and unimaginable violence," some works of Syrian cultural production feature a figure whom Weiss terms the "slow witness," a figure who "confounds the demands of speed and

[139]Weiss, *Revolutions*, 276.
[140]Anne-Marie McManus, "On the Ruins of What's to Come, I Stand: Time and Devastation in Syrian Cultural Production since 2011," *Critical Inquiry*, 48, no. 1 (2021): 46.
[141]Ibid, 47.
[142]Nouri Gana, "War, Poetry, Mourning: Darwish, Adonis, Iraq," *Public Culture*, 22, no. 1 (2010): 40.
[143]Weiss, *Revolutions*, 235.
[144]Ibid.

immediacy" by existing in a time "out of joint" and remaining "incapable of making sense of things or even using language as a means to describe, explain, or understand an experience."[145]

A second experimental trend in post-2011 Syrian fiction has been, as was the case in Iraq, the tendency of authors to adopt supernatural, magic realist, or even gothic elements, including the animated corpse. Although experimentation is not new to Syrian fiction (magic realism, in particular, is a significant trend in contemporary and pan-national Kurdish literature produced in both Iraq and Syria),[146] the post-2011 period has seen a significant uptick in the production of experimental works. Māzin ʿArafa's *al-Gharānīq*, for example, depicts an encounter with speaking corpses in a dream.[147] Salīm Barakāt's *Sabāyā Sinjār* (2016, *The Captives of Sinjar*) offers a deeper engagement with the figure of the ghost in its depiction of a Syrian artist living in exile who is approached by the ghosts of Yazidi girls murdered by ISIS, as well as some ISIS members themselves; these figures ask the artist to represent them in a painting. Mahā Ḥassan's *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* (2018; *Good Morning, War*), meanwhile, is narrated in part by the animated corpse of the author's mother, whose fragmented and rotting corpse tells her story from its grave in Aleppo.

Conclusion

The wars in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria have initiated transformational periods in each country's cultural scene. In each, the eruption of violence has prompted a significant increase in cultural production and in experimentation. Although the most prominent themes of wartime

[145]Ibid, 228; 264-265.
[146]A number of prominent Kurdish authors have produced magic realist novelist in recent decades; Salim Barakat's prolific novelistic output in Arabic is one noteworthy example, as is Iraqi-Kurdish author Bakhtiyar Ali's work in Kurdish. These authors have found magic realism to be a fruitful mode for exploring and critiquing ongoing political issues, including "the infringement of the Syrian Arab Republic on Kurdish ancestral land, the erasure and suppression of the Kurdish language and worldview and the fragmentation of the community by state borders" (Alexandra Chreiteh, "Fantastic Cohabitations: Magical Realism in Arabic and Hebrew," in *Magical Realism and Literature*, ed. Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)).
[147]Weiss, *Revolutions*, 298-299.

literature differ from context to context, engagement with major issues like exile and displacement, death, dying, and loss, memories of previous periods of violence, and sectarianism has been consistent in each. This dissertation explores the ways in which fiction from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria that seeks to represent war has drawn on a shared aesthetic of the uncanny.

My understanding of this aesthetic draws on many of the scholarly contributions referenced above. An image that commonly appears in works that draw on an aesthetic of the uncanny is the grotesque corpse, often presented as animated or as a ghost, a figure that acts as a powerful metaphor for the ways in which traumatic pasts live on in the present. My understanding of this figure has been shaped by existing scholarship on the gothic genre in Iraq and on necroaesthetics in Syria, which explore the rise in representations of the (often mutilated or decomposing) corpse in contemporary Iraqi and Syrian fiction. Scholarship on the ways in which Lebanese cultural production can act as a form of counter-memory in the face of state sponsored erasure is also relevant to this project, which explores the ways in which an aesthetic of the uncanny can bring buried memories to light while also making their ongoing suppression visible. This project draws, also, on scholarship that explores the ways in which the collapse of the Syrian revolution seemed to put time "out of joint," making it difficult for visions of an alternative future to remain visible. An aesthetic of the uncanny, I argue, can intervene into this temporality by raising questions about whether visions of a brighter future can coexist with ongoing war and dictatorship. Although I am indebted to these contributions, this project brings them together in new ways as part of its identification of an aesthetic of the uncanny in contemporary Lebanese, Iraqi, and Syrian fiction, an aesthetic that has a significant political resonance in the context of protracted violence.

Theoretical Framework

In a 1919 essay, Freud defines the uncanny as the feeling of unease that results upon the return of that which "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."[148] The uncanny, in other words, is understood by Freud as the return of once-familiar memories that have undergone repression yet insistently return in an unfamiliar and alien guise. Freud's understanding of the uncanny positions it in between memory and repression; it is that which refuses to remain concealed and therefore returns to haunt the present. The uncanny is a boundary blurring category that stands in between memory and forgetting, the conscious and the unconscious; it can also blur the boundaries between self and other (through figures like the uncanny double), between the living and the dead (the uncanny ghost or corpse), or between the internal and the external, the animate and the inanimate (abject, uncanny objects).

Because the uncanny is that which is both familiar and frightening, it is a fruitful aesthetic for exploring the defamiliarizing effects of war, which transform familiar spaces of memory into battlegrounds and graveyards and transform loved ones into grotesque corpses. At the same time, the blurring of the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar that characterizes the uncanny renders it a fruitful aesthetic for exploring the ways in which war creates uncanny temporalities in which terrifying violence becomes a routine and often repetitive feature of daily life and in which violence from the past continues to haunt the present, whether as an unresolved injustice or as the fear that it will return again in the future.

In Lebanon, postwar literary works have explored the ways in which long-standing political conditions, including the lack of official resolution for the war and intermittent outbreaks of further violence, ensure that violence is experienced as cyclical and keep fears that violence will resume ever present. This temporality renders war a familiar, mundane, and yet still horrifying feature of daily life, producing what Maria Root and Laura Brown term "insidious

[148]Freud, 241.

trauma,"[149] a form of trauma that, as Stef Craps and Gert Buelens have argued, can account for collective trauma affecting large groups of people, as well as the underlying conditions that enable their recurring traumatization.[150] At the same time, it produces an uncanny temporality in which violence is experienced as "both a historical event and an ongoing and returning possibility";[151] this produces a temporality marked by presentness in which time is "halted, arrested between past and future"[152] that Walid Sadek terms in relation to Lebanon "the protracted now."[153] This temporality is also traumatizing; Paul K. Saint-Amour refers to it as the "traumatic uncanny," a "pre-traumatic stress syndrome" produced by the anticipation of violence.[154]

Postwar Lebanese fiction has drawn on an aesthetic of the uncanny in order to represent the ways in which violence in Lebanon is experienced as ongoing and threatening to return. This aesthetic, however, also explores the conditions that allow this temporality to persist, suggesting that it is repressing violent histories rather than assimilating and coming to terms with them that allows violence to exist in the present as a constant threat. The uncanny allows these histories repressed by the postwar reconstruction process to return, bringing to light those histories that will need to be resolved in order for Lebanon to truly move into the postwar period.

In Iraq, post-2003 fiction has explored the ways in which historical narratives like Iraq's national narrative, the US narrative of the invasion, sectarian narratives, and archival/official histories have often relied upon suppressing or failing to confront long and often unresolved

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[149]Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," *American Imago*, 48, no. 1 (1991): 128.
[150]Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel*, 40, no. 1/2 Postcolonial Trauma Novels (2008): 4.
[151]Andreas Bandak, "Repetition and uncanny temporalities: Armenians and the recurrence of genocide in the Levant," *History and Anthropology*, 30, no. 2 (2019): 190-193.
[152]Ibid, 193.
[153]Walid Sadek, "In the Presence of the Corpse," *Third Text*, 26, no. 4 (2012): 481.
[154]Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7-13.

periods of violence. In works that draw on the aesthetic and stylistic conventions of the postcolonial gothic genre, authors stage the resurgence of those pasts "abjected" from official narratives, often through grotesque and frightening figures like the ghost or the animated corpse. The abject is closely related to the uncanny; as Julia Kristeva defines it, the abject is "The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" and which, therefore, we must expel in order to maintain a coherent sense of self.[155] Abject figures are both familiar and frightening; familiar because they once were part of us and unfamiliar in their expulsion. They take on a "monstrous" or "ghostly" appearance, carrying "overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements."[156] By staging the return of the abject, these works bring to light that which has been left out of dominant historical narratives, producing instead a temporality haunted by the ghosts of unresolved pasts, ghosts that these works portray as continuing to drive ongoing violence. These works explore the repressed traumas, losses, and injustices that need to be worked through in order for violence to truly come to an end.

In Syria, the Asad regime has long deployed a discourse that emphasizes its durability, as well as the dynastic transfer of power from father to son, ensuring the regime's continuation; this discourse is exemplified by the regime slogan "*Al-Asad ilā al-Abad* [al-Asad forever]."[157] The trauma of dictatorship, consequently, is not only collective and "insidious" but a legacy passed down from generation to generation as power transferred from Hafez al-Asad, the father, to Bashar al-Asad, the son. This intergenerational and unspoken trauma has been explored by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*; they uncover a new physic phenomenon which they term the "phantom," or a hidden, unspoken

[155]Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
[156]Ibid, 7.
[157]Eylaf Bader Eddin, "*Al-Abad*: On the Ongoing," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication,*15 (2022): 368.

family trauma which is passed down from an ancestor to a descendant without either being aware of this process.[158] The phantoms of folklore, they suggest, are a "metaphor" of the presence of an unspoken secret which has never entered the conscious mind-it has passed across generations from one unconscious mind to the next.[159] Only when this phantom has been revealed and exorcized can healthy psychic activity resume.

Efforts to exorcize this phantom, in post-2011 Syrian fiction, have often proceeded hand in hand with efforts to stay loyal to the spirit of the Syrian revolution despite widespread death, despair, and the increasing likelihood that the Asad regime will remain in power. The collapse of longed-for visions of the future, like the vision represented by the Syrian uprisings, can result in what Walter Benjamin terms "left-wing melancholy," a state which, as Wendy Brown has argued, is marked by temporal disorientation and a lack of access to the future.[160] In *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Jacques Derrida introduces the notion of a specter of the past and the future; the past because it represents the returned dead "be they victims of war or other violence," and the future because the specter is that which "could come back," someday, in the future, at any time.[161] Learning to "live with ghosts," Derrida suggests, entails remaining loyal to emancipatory "spirit" of Marxism, even if it may presently be out of reach, mourning the losses of the past while remaining open to new horizons of possibility in the future.[162]

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[158]Nicholas T. Rand, "Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed.Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.
[159]Nicolas Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 172-173.
[160]Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy." *Boundary*, 26, no. 3 (1999), 4-21; Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139.
[161]Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2006), xviii; 48.
[162]Ibid, xvi-xvii; 111.

Conclusion

In representations of the 1975-1990 war in Lebanon, the post-2003 war in Iraq, and the post-2011 war in Syria, the novels discussed in this dissertation confront the reader with figures who act as metaphors for the ways in which traumatic and unresolved pasts continue to haunt the present. From the grotesque, animated corpse of the mother in Mahā Ḥassan's *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* to the subterranean inhabitants of Rabīʿ Jābir's underground Beirut in *Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ* to the haunting presence of Mīryām's vanished lover in Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, these works explore the impossibility of moving forwards while continuing to carry the heavy burden of unmourned losses.

The uncanny return of these disturbing yet familiar (and often beloved) figures is part of a broader engagement in these novels with the uncanny. In Lebanese fiction, characters wander the streets of Beirut, seeing ghostly traces of the war flicker uncannily beneath a newly reconstructed city. Grotesque corpses haunt or even terrorize the living in contemporary Iraqi fiction. The protagonists of wartime Syrian novels, meanwhile, find themselves lingering with the frightening yet familiar dead and their memories in a wartime temporality that should have rendered mourning impossible.

These novels also engage with the uncanny at the level of form. A number of these works are non-linear, often circling back to memories of past losses or repeating themselves; the protagonists of these works try to organize their thoughts yet find themselves unable to offer a straightforward narrative. From the protagonist of Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, whose memories circle and spiral, the multivocal narrative in Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād*, which doubles back, often repeating events from different perspectives, and the unreliable narrator of Rabīʿ Jābir's *al-Iʻtirāfāt*, who cannot distinguish between memory and

delusion, these works stage uncanny repetitions, returns, and the uneasy blurring of the lines that separate past from present. Other works are deeply engaged with the process of narration itself, presenting metafictional, semi-autobiographical, and self-reflective elements that allow the reader access to the composition process, raising doubts about the authenticity of the work, granting the reader access to its unreliable and constructed elements, and allowing the novels to delve into the (im)possibility of narrating violence at all.

The main political resonance of the uncanny in these works, however, is the ways in which it offers a mode for disrupting dominant temporal discourses that ensure that past losses remain unmourned, traumas unresolved, and that violence persists as an ever-present threat. In Lebanon, works which draw on an aesthetic of the uncanny disrupt the postwar reconstruction process, which relied upon the production of the illusion of a prosperous future at the expense of erasing the memory of the war and the unresolved losses that accompanied it. This illusion, these works suggest, allowed violence to maintain a haunting and threatening presence in the postwar period; by disrupting this illusion, these works explore what work remains to be done in order for Lebanon to truly transition into a postwar temporality. Uncanny works of Iraqi fiction, meanwhile, stage the return of histories left out of dominant narratives and discourses through frightening and often grotesque figures like the ghost and the animated corpse who act as powerful metaphors for the ways in which unresolved histories continue to haunt the present. Ultimately, these works contribute to bringing these dominant narratives into question and considering what futures alternative memory practices might allow to come into being. Contemporary Syrian novels, finally, explore the psychological impact of protracted dictatorship through family sagas that explore long-lasting legacies of trauma. These novels introduce uncanny figures, often a deceased family member, who raise questions about what alternative

legacies might be excavated from Syrian history and whether visions of alternative futures can coexist with ongoing dictatorship and war.

Chapters Overview

Chapter 1 will examine three works of postwar Lebanese fiction: Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā* (2010; *Other Lives*, 2014), Rabīʿ Jābir's *Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ* and Rabīʿ Jābir's *al-Iʿtirāfāt* (2008; *Confessions*, 2016). I situate these three works in a genre that I term "failed memoir"; the three works feature protagonists attempting to narrate their life stories yet meeting with repeated difficulty as their memories shift and spiral and resist being organized in a linear fashion. This nonlinearity at the level of narrative is paralleled by the protagonists' lives, which stagnate; they seem mired in an endless present, trapped in repetitive and inescapable cycles or limbos and haunted by unresolved wartime memories even as the city that surrounds them launches itself into a bright postwar future.

These novels draw on an aesthetic of the uncanny in their presentation of a temporality marked by a stagnant presentness in which time does not seem to move forwards; the future is uncertain and frightening, imaginable only as an anxiety that violence from the past will once again resurface. This temporality allows these works to explore the ways in which the Lebanese civil war ended without resolution, leaving it to threaten the present with its seemingly inevitable return. These works also draw on an aesthetic of the uncanny in their depictions of various uncanny doublings (parallel cities, doubled figures, "double vision," etc.). These doublings explore the erasure of the war's memory from Beirut's urban landscape, leaving wartime Beirut a spectral presence in the reconstructed postwar city. The doublings also allow these authors to portray postwar prosperity in Lebanon as a facade, an illusion that rests upon the suppression of memories of violence.

In lingering with memories of the war, however, these authors contribute, also, to disrupting the postwar temporality they explore and ultimately critique. Although none of the works present a positive vision of Lebanon's future, they do offer an alternative to continuing to live in an illusory present contingent upon the suppression of unresolved memories. These memories, the works suggest, will continue to remain unresolved; too much has been lost and too many memories have been erased for true resolution to remain possible. Nevertheless, these works offer a model for living alongside these unresolved memories rather than continuing to suppress them, a model that might, the works suggest, enable an escape from the continued anticipation of violence.

Chapter 2 will examine three works of post-2006 Iraq fiction (Azhar Jirjīs' *Al-Nawm fī ḥaql al-karaz* (2019; Sleeping in the Cherry Field), Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (2013; *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, 2018), and Ḥassan Blāsim's *Maʿriḍ al-Juthath* (2015; *The Corpse Exhibition*, 2014)) that draw on the aesthetic and stylistic conventions of the postcolonial gothic genre. They do so primarily through an aesthetic of the grotesque, especially lingering descriptions of corpses in states of mutilation and decay, who often blur the boundaries between life and death by appearing as ghosts or coming to life in order to terrorize the living. This gothic aesthetic is also an aesthetic of the uncanny in its attention to the return of buried histories and to figures who uneasily blur the lines that divide the living from the dead.

I read these figures as an exploration of the abject, especially traumatic historical moments that have been abjected from dominant and/or official narratives. The abject is a concept that is closely related to the uncanny; although Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is careful to distinguish the two, her account of the abject as that which was once internal and is now cast off and unfamiliar, provoking unease and fear upon its return, has a number of clear

parallels to Freud's concept of the uncanny. In the works studied here, the abject is the historical abject; what it explores is that feelings of unease and even disgust that result when seemingly stable narratives reveal themselves to be resting upon suppressing violent and contested histories.

As these works center figures like the animated corpse and the ghost that act as powerful metaphors for the return of pasts excluded from dominant narratives, they also play with the boundaries between truth and fiction in order to explore the mythical dimension of all seemingly coherent narratives. These works include fantastical, irrational, and magical elements while also playing on veracity genres like official documents and journalism, establishing a tension between the authentic and the fictional. Rather than offering an alternative coherent narrative based on similar abjection, these works present narratives that leave room for the abject, the irrational, the haunting, and for events so far outside of normative experience that they cannot be presented in a coherent and linear narrative.

Chapter 3 will examine three works of post-2011 Syrian fiction: Dīma Wannūs' *Al-Khā'ifūn* (2017; The Frightened Ones, 2020), Mahā Ḥassan's *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* (2018; *Good Morning, War*), and Khālid Khalīfa's *Al-Mawt ʿAmal Shāqq* (2016; *Death is Hard Work*, 2019). The three works all narrate the Syrian civil war through a multi-generational family saga; the protagonists of each work are heirs to a complex familial legacy that symbolizes, in my reading, the heavy legacy of long-lasting dictatorship. This legacy in Syria has a distinct temporal dimension because of the extent to which the Asad regime has relied on a discourse of durability, as exemplified by the regime slogan "*Al-Assad ilā al-Abad* [al-Asad forever]." The slogan emphasizes that the Asad regime is a dynastic one, passed down from father to son and set to rule over Syria permanently.

The works explore dictatorship as an inherited and intergenerational trauma briefly disrupted by the 2011 revolution, which ultimately failed to live up to its early promise of bringing down the Asad regime. Similar to the works of postwar Lebanese fiction described above, time in these works of contemporary Syrian fiction is stagnant and interminable, an endless present. Violence is banal and routine and there is limited access to visions of the future marked by anything other than the continuation of war. The family sagas in these novels explore dictatorship as an inheritance passed down from parents to children, producing stagnation and fear and ultimately breaking apart families and communities. In the face of a failed revolution and the increased likelihood that the Asad regime would remain in power, these novels raise the question of whether despair and the heavy legacy of dictatorship can coexist with alternative legacies. In these texts, the uncanny is a mode that resurrects the specter of alternative futures, especially the Syrian revolution, by lingering with figures, often the grotesque corpses of deceased parents, who embody alternatives to ongoing violence.

CHAPTER 1: THE "TRAUMATIC UNCANNY" IN POSTWAR LEBANESE FICTION

Introduction

As Mīryām, the protagonist of Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā* narrates:

> تاريخ يعيد نفسه. هل ذلك بسبب طبيعة المكان؟ هو هو بسبب الجلول التي تتميّز بها الأرض هنا، أتى التاريخ على شاكلة الأرض مقطعاً متكسراً لا يكتمل بل يعيد نفسه كخطوط مكرّرة. هل بسبب مُدننا التي تموت ولا تجد من يدفنها. لماذا هنا، في هذه البقعة بالذات من العالم يلد العنف نفسه مئات المرّات؟
>
> History repeats itself. Is this because of the nature of the place? Is it because of the terraces that are peculiar to the land here? Our history comes like our land… cut off, broken, incomplete, re-making itself in repetitive rows. Is this because our cities die and can't find anyone to bury them? Why here, in this particular spot in the world, is violence reborn hundreds of times?[163]

Mīryām's musings about Lebanese history reflect an understanding of violence in Lebanon as cyclical and repetitive; to her, the reasons for this uncanny repetition remain unclear, yet she raises the question of whether it is because "our cities die and can't find anyone to bury them," suggesting that failed mourning or a lack of resolution for past losses and traumas is responsible.

This uncanny sense of a violent past threatening the present with its inevitable return is a familiar one in postwar Lebanese cultural production that explores the ways in which the war ended without any official resolution or reconciliation process, as well as the erasure of the war's memory from Beirut's urban landscape. In addition to this lack of resolution, postwar Lebanon has been afflicted by a number of subsequent outbreaks of violence, including the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, largely fought on Lebanese soil, intensifying the anxiety of residents that violence will return. This threat, as Sami Hermez has argued, has also been kept at the forefront of Lebanese citizens'

[163]Imān Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā (*Ar-Rāwī*,* 2010), 116; Iman Humaydan, *Other Lives* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2014), 87. All translations are from Michelle Hartman's published translation unless otherwise noted.

minds by politicians who frequently deploy the threat that war will resume so that people continue to "feel that their leaders are necessary for their sense of communal security within a constantly unstable state headed for violence."[164] Walid Sadek, similarly, has argued that the threat that civil war will resume is deliberately manufactured and maintained by "political-sectarian factions" who deploy this threat to avoid doing the work that a true national reconciliation would entail and to maintain "their prolonged dominance."[165] Strategies like these keep the fear of violence at the surface of Lebanon's collective consciousness, where it "seep[s] into everyday contexts and into ways of being."[166]

As a result, new clashes, protests, or disasters always seem to evoke memories of the war and anxiety that it will return. To give a recent example, 2021 clashes in Beirut prompted the publication of a flurry of articles in the Lebanese and Arab press that evoked the specter of the civil war, featuring titles like "Beirut Clashes Awaken the Specter of War"[167] and "The Worst Acts of Violence in Beirut in Years Revive the Specter of the Civil War."[168] Such anticipation has a profound effect on those forced to live under the constant threat of violence. Lebanese journalist Rubā Abū ʿAmmū has written on the topic poignantly in a 2014 article titled "Fī Intiẓār al-Ḥarb" ("Waiting for the War"):

الحرب ثابتة. امتدادها مستمرّ عبر التاريخ. ويلاتها ثابتة أيضاً. لكنها باتت تأخذ أشكالاً مختلفة. لا نكتسب الخوف. بل يولد معنا. القلق أيضاً.

> The war is constant. It extends throughout history. Its horrors are also constant, but have started to take on different forms. We do not acquire fear; it is born with us. As is anxiety.[169]

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[164]Sami Hermez, "'The War is Going to Ignite': On the Anticipation of Violence in Lebanon," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 35, no. 2 (2012): 330.
[165]Sadek, 481.
[166]Hermez, 330.
[167]"Ishtibākāt Bayrūt Tūqiẓ Ashbāḥ al-Ḥarb," *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, Oct. 15, 2021, https://aawsat.com/home/article/3246456/اشتباكات-بيروت-توقظ-أشباح-الحرب.
[168]Aswaʾ Aʿmāl ʿUnf fī Bayrūt mundhu Sanawāt Tuḥyī Shabaḥ al-Ḥarb al-Ahliyya," *Al-Nahār al-ʿArabī*, Oct. 15, 2021, https://www.annaharar.com/arabic/news/arab-world/lebanon/14102021090208144.
[169]Rubā Abū ʿAmmu, "Fī Intiẓār al-Ḥarb," *Al-ʿArabī al-Jadīd*, Oct. 4, 2014, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/في-انتظار-الحرب.

This anticipation is so traumatizing, she continues, that it is "exhausting," leading her to wonder if "living during war might be easier than living in anticipation of war," and if a death that one can plan for might be easier than a random one.[170]

In Lebanon, writers have made recourse to an aesthetic of the uncanny in order to represent trauma experienced as a long-standing condition rather than a finished event; these works speak to contemporary developments in trauma theory away from the event-based model of trauma popularized by Cathy Caruth, who understood trauma as the product of an event so removed from everyday, normative experience that it produces "a break in the mind's experience of time."[171] Because trauma cannot be experienced in real time, Caruth continues, the event returns repetitively in the form of flashbacks or nightmares that are the subjects' attempts to assimilate the "missed" experience. [172] Since Caruth, others have brought this model of trauma into question, arguing that it cannot account for systems of domination that are traumatizing yet also an ongoing feature of everyday experience.[173] Laura Brown's essay "Outside the Range," for example, studied the experiences of American women suffering from domestic abuse, arguing that these experiences were both part of everyday life for these women and traumatic. In order to account for long-lasting and daily forms of trauma, Maria Root and Laura Brown developed the concept of "insidious trauma," or "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit."[174] Following Brown, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens consider other forms of "insidious trauma" outside the North American context, including colonialism and racism, which are undoubtedly traumatic but which the event-based model of trauma cannot

[170]Ibid.
[171]Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 61.
[172]Ibid, 61-62.
[173]Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 16.
[174]L. Brown, 128.

account for. A new conceptualization of trauma that can account for systems of domination and oppression rather than a single event, Craps and Buelens argue, must also be able to account for collective trauma affecting entire communities and even nations; a narrow focus on the individual experience, Craps and Buelens argue, is a depoliticizing approach that "ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse."[175] Unlike individual trauma, which can be treated and perhaps cured therapeutically, the trauma that stems from ongoing political conditions can only be "cured" when the structures that produce it are removed.[176]

In the context of postwar Lebanon, however, this "insidious" trauma takes on an uncanny form in that it is the result of long-lasting fear that violence that ought to have remained in the past will instead return in the future. The uncanny is an aesthetic that can account for the traumatizing effects of violence both past and anticipated; as Andreas Bandak has argued, violence experienced as "both a historical event and an ongoing and returning possibility" is an uncanny experience, one characterized by the threat that "what one hoped to have left behind in the past" will instead inevitably return.[177] Past losses seem to be haunting the present and the future, so that "mourning merges with warning";[178] time is either "halted, arrested between past and future"[179] and/or seems to be repeating itself, so that it becomes cyclical rather than linear; moments of safety appear fragile and precarious, the calm before the storm. Such anticipation is also traumatizing; in *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*, Paul K.

[175]Craps and Buelens, 4.
[176]Ibid.
[177]Bandak, 190-193.
[178]Alexander Etkind, "Fear of the Past: Post-Soviet Culture and the Soviet Terror," in *Facing Fear: The History of an Emotion in Global Perspective*, ed. Michael Laffan and Max Weiss (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 184.
[179]Bandak, 193.

Saint-Amour, argues that the anticipation of violence is itself a form of violence that can produce "a pre-traumatic stress syndrome" that he terms the "traumatic uncanny."[180]

Saint-Amour notes that the anticipation of violence can produce a temporality marked by presentness; in postwar Lebanon, a number of observers have noted such a temporality. Walid Sadek, for example, refers to it as the "protracted now," a condition that he links to a "wishful discourse on the necessary future release from the binds of sectarianism, labelled a false ensnarement with the past rather than a foundational structural component of the making of Modern Lebanon."[181] Sadek continues:

> In accompanying the recurring violence of politico-sectarian civil war with this wishful discourse, the fatalism of the protracted now is clothed in tragic form as Lebanese appear to agonise, seeking release from a morbid past that inhabits them. Together, the cyclical recurrence of violence and truce and this longed-for future release, indefinitely deferred, generate an ethic of despair that appeals to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of the past in the name of a regeneration which recognises that all have suffered equally. Constructed rather than fatalistic or formally tragic, this protracted now holds the Lebanese amid structure violence palliatively substantiated as the necessary furnace for a yet-to-be-born nonsectarian future.[182]

The protracted now, in Sadek's terms, is contingent upon a rejection of the past (rather than mourning it or coming to terms with it) and an understanding of ongoing violence as a necessary stage for a passage into an infinitely deferred "nonsectarian" future.

This temporality, Judith Naeff adds, has entered into Lebanese cultural production, which expresses "a particular sense of time, a sense of being stuck in the present, not being able to move forward, nor look back";[183] turning the present into a "stretched-out moment of waiting which is often…experienced in a numbed, distracted and disoriented way."[184] The cultural

[180]Saint-Amour, 7-13.
[181]Sadek, 481.
[182] Ibid, 482.
[183]Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City's Suspended Now* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 35.
[184]Ibid, 44.

objects Naeff examines delve into the experience of not only "being cut off from the past" but also of being cut off from a future which also "seems to be out of reach, as continuous tensions and repeated episodes of violence prevent a confident and active attitude towards the future of the city."[185] These cultural objects feature figures and images that point to an unresolved past, including "ruins, martyrs posters, the tabula rasa and subterranean spaces."[186] Judith Naeff attributes this temporality to a lack of resolution for the war itself, particularly the 17,000 disappeared, the general amnesty law that left crimes unpunished and left perpetrators to occupy a "continued presence in public life," the "indeterminate status of Palestinian refugees, the continued activity of Hezbollah, and the "way in which old rifts between political parties continue to be rearticulated along lines of sectarian identity and geopolitical divisions."[187] "Dominant discursive frameworks," she continued, have failed to "provide narrative closure to violent events of the past," meaning that the "horizon of expectations is imbued with imminent danger."[188]

In such a temporality, critically, mourning becomes impossible; Alexander Etkind writes that in the aftermath of an unresolved catastrophe "memory of the past becomes indistinguishable from the obsessive fear of its repetition in the future, and mourning merges with warning."[189] In these circumstances, "mourning over real losses merges with an anticipation of new and imagined ones, creating a ghostly amalgam."[190] Walid Sadek, too, argues that the anticipation of violence is disruptive to mourning; in this temporality, he argues, "corpses are peremptorily occulted behind formulaic meanings of death authored by warring factions" or

[185]Ibid, 35.
[186]Ibid, 44.
[187]Ibid, 42.
[188]Ibid, 44.
[189]Etkind, 184.
[190]Ibid.

"abandoned as carrion."[191] In such a temporality, as Walid Sadek argues, ignoring the wartime injunction to either valorize corpses as martyrs or render them disposable and electing to linger with and mourn the uncategorizable corpse (or, perhaps, the unresolvable loss more broadly), he argues, is a disruptive gesture, one that has the potential to"prompt an uneasy conversation about…why a better future is either indefinitely deferred or made to collapse into this present which extends unchallenged" and perhaps, to imagine an alternative to it.[192]

In the works examined in this chapter, the traumatic anticipation of violence and resulting presentness is explored through characters caught in limbos, unable to move forwards with their lives; they are trapped in repetitive cycles or loops from which they cannot escape. They find themselves unable to organize their memories in a linear narrative; their attempts "spiral," "keep getting accosted, distracted," or "jump forwards" against their will. The texts play with the conventions of veracity genres like memoirs, testimonials, and confessionals, but ultimately fail to produce coherent narratives. These failed memoirs explore the impossibility of producing a linear narrative of a war that "ended" without resolution and that remains, in a sense, ongoing.

Because the uncanny stages the return of traumatic pasts in unfamiliar and unsettling forms, it is also a fruitful aesthetic for representing those haunting memories of war that prevent the protagonists of these works from moving forwards. In these works, these memories are always imperfectly concealed behind the illusory narrative of Lebanon's phoenix-like "postwar" revival. Through various uncanny doublings, these texts linger with the buried histories, repressed traumas, and unacknowledged legacies of war and violence that underlie the facade of postwar prosperity. In resurrecting these painful pasts, these works do not only explore the political and historical conditions that have kept the threat of violence a long-standing feature of

[191]Sadek, 482.
[192]Ibid.

daily life in Lebanon; they also conjure memories that offer the possibility of an exit from the cyclical temporalities they portray.

Imān Ḥumaydān's Ḥayawāt Ukhrā *(2010;* Other Lives*, 2014)*

Imān Ḥumaydān (b. 1956) is a Lebanese writer and academic. She has published four novels: *Bā' Mithl Bayrūt* (1997; *B as in Beirut*, 2007), *Tūt Barrī* (2001; *Wild Mulberries*, 2008), *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā* (2010; *Other Lives*, 2014), and *Khamsūn Gharāman min al-Janna* (2015; *The Weight of Paradise*, 2016), which won the Katara Prize. She has also collaborated in writing two screenplays and was the editor of the short story collection *Beirut Noir* (2015), which explores "the memory of people wounded by Beirut during the war, who have not yet healed" through depictions of the city of Beirut that view it "from a position of critique, doubt, disappointment, and despair."[193] The stories are often melancholic or nostalgic in tone; "the characters' lives can be unstable, and they often have no confidence whatsoever in the future."[194] As an academic, she has taught creative writing at the University of Iowa and the University of Paris 8.[195] Her research has often centered on the disappeared of the 1975-1990 war, including her 2006 MA dissertation titled "Neither Here Nor There: Families of the Disappeared in Lebanon."[196] Her fiction has also often explored the unresolved legacies of the war. *Khamsūn Gharāman min al-Janna*, notably, depicts a Lebanese journalist who uncovers a suitcase filled with documents and seeks to piece together the stories of their owners. Her efforts are met with silences, ambiguity, and a mystery: a child has been stolen during the war and adopted abroad, but she is unable to uncover his fate.

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[193]Iman Humaydan, "Introduction: Violence of Loneliness, Violence of Mayhem," in *Beirut Noir*, ed. Iman Humaydan (New York: Akashic Books, 2015), 14.
[194]Ibid, 15.
[195]"Iman Humaydan," https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/node/1455.
[196]Iman Humaydan,"Neither Here Nor There: Families of the Disappeared in Lebanon," *AUB ScholarWorks*, 2006, https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/handle/10938/7136.

Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā* is narrated by its female protagonist, Mīryām, who has returned to Lebanon to claim property that she has inherited from her deceased father. Mīryām left Lebanon during the war for Australia; she later immigrated to Kenya where she entered into an unhappy marriage with her British husband, Chris. Despite the years that she spent in Australia and Kenya, she has never felt at home in either place. To her, home is suitcases:

جمعت ما لا يقلّ عن ١٣ حقيبة خلال هجراتي الموزعة بين لبنان وأوستراليا وكينيا. وضعت في الحقائب ما أحتاج إليه. ما عدت أفهم حاجة الإنسان إلى إفراغ حقائبه. صارت حقيبتي بيتي. صرت خبيرة حقائب، حقائب مخصّصة لآلام الظّهر، وأخرى تسع الكثير إلّا أنّها خفيفة الوزن. صار عليّ إيجاد أماكن إضافية في البيت لوضع الحقائب، أماكن أمينة أصل إليها بسهولة إذا احتجت إليها.

I've collected no fewer than thirteen suitcases during my scattered migrations between Lebanon, Australia and Kenya. I put what I need in these suitcases. I still don't understand why a person would need to empty her suitcases. My suitcase has become my home. I've become a suitcase expert—special suitcases for backache, others that hold a lot though they weigh very little. I've had to find extra space in my house to put the suitcases, safe places I can get to easily when I need to.[197]

By refusing to unpack her suitcases, Mīryām lives as if she might need to flee at any moment, a habit that she explains as follows:

كنت أعلم أنّ عادة الاستعداد والاستقرار حملتها معي من بيروت الحرب، من ذاكرة الملاجىء والتنقّل من مكان إلى آخر أكثر أماناً. بقيت في داخلي ولم تبارحني طيلة سنوات التّنقل والتّرحال بين أديلايد ومومباسا.

I'm well aware that my habit of always being on alert and nervously ready for anything is something I brought with me from wartime Beirut, from the memory of bomb shelters and needing to move from one place to another, safer one. This remains inside of me, never leaving me, throughout years of nomadic moving and wandering between Adelaide and Mombasa.[198]

Despite the geographic and temporal distance that separates her from the Lebanese war, Mīryām remains suspended in time, unable to distance herself psychologically from wartime

[197]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*,11; 21.
[198]Ibid, 50; 35.

Lebanon. She lives in a constant state of uncanny anticipation of violence, treating her life in Kenya as if it were precarious and impermanent, "as if there were no tomorrow, or as if the future right in front me is still waiting on something from the past."[199] She is unable to plan for a future she never entirely believes will come, infuriating her husband with her unwillingness to plan summer vacations in advance, telling him that her brother "was getting ready for a relaxing trip to Istanbul, his ticket in his pocket, when he was killed."[200]

Mīryām's inability to plan for the future is linked to a particular attitude toward the past. To Mīryām, time is not linear, but circular; the novel is filled with repetitive flashbacks to wartime losses, including the loss of her brother, Bahāʾ, who was killed in 1978 in an explosion that fragmented his remains, leaving pieces of his body hanging from neighborhood trees, and the loss of her father, who remains alive but suffers from permanent brain damage as a result of shrapnel injuries from the same explosion that killed his son. She is also haunted by the memory of her lover, Jūrj, and by the memory of their unborn child, whom she aborted during the war, a decision that she feels is linked to her current inability to conceive a child with her husband.

This attitude is reflected in the novel's structure; one of the novel's more noteworthy features is its non-linearity. It is narrated in a repetitive and often circular structure, making frequent jumps in time as Mīryām moves back and forth between past and present, juxtaposing events taking place in present-day Beirut with memories of the war, her childhood, her life in Kenya with her husband, and her life in Australia. The reader often comes to learn about major events in her life in bits and pieces; the exact circumstances regarding her abortion, for example, are revealed gradually, in snippets revealed pages apart. Mīryām comments on this structure herself:

[199]Ibid, 59; 42-43.
[200]Ibid, 79; 59.

تبدو حياتي كزمن متقطّع أو كمشاهد فيلم تتكرّر ثمّ تعود لتبدأ من حيث انتهت. لا أتذكّر كل ما جرى معي بطريقة متسلسلة بل بطريقة دائرية حيث أعود دائماً من حيث ابتدأت...تلتبس عليّ العلاقة بين الأحداث والأماكن. أفكّر في يوم سفرنا من بيروت ثم أجد نفسي أقفز فجأة إلى السّنوات التي قضيتها مع كريس في كينيا. ربما لهذا الأمر تأخذ قصتي الآن شكلاً دائريّاً وأحياناً شكلاً لولبيّاً.

My life feels like interrupted sequences of time, like scenes in a film that begin just as another scene ends. My memory of everything that has happened is not continuous, but circular. I always come back to where I began…I mix up the relationship between events and places. I'll be thinking about the day we left Beirut and then find myself suddenly jumping to the years that I've spent with Chris in Kenya. Perhaps this is why my story now takes on a circular and sometimes spiral form.[201]

Imān Ḥumaydān has addressed this stylistic choice in an essay on her writing process titled "The First Sentence." She wrote her first novel during the war, in which she frequently traveled between East and West Beirut and between Beirut and the mountains, movement that she links to "the fragmented and unsettled nature of the writing in that story which mirrored my life at the time."[202] Ḥumaydān describes her fragmented writing process as follows:

ما أكتبه نتف من مشاهد. أعيد كتابتها ضمن سياق روائي...يأخذ الجمع أحياناً وقتاً أطول مما أتوقع. أوراق هنا وهناك، لا أدخلها مباشرة في صلب الرواية بل أطبعها في مكان مستقل ثم عمل عليها. نواة تتحول إلى فصول كاملة في الرواية، أو تصبح مقاطع طويلة تضاف إلى فصول كتبتها سابقاً.

الرواية بناء مستمر بالنسبة إلي، لا يأخذ البناء أبداً خطّاً مستقيماً بل له أشكال عدة تتناوب ضمن عملية البناء وتختلف...لا أكتب بطريقة كرونولوجية، بل أحياناً بطريقة دائرية أعود فيها إلى حيث بدأت، أو لا أعود أبداً.[203]

I proceed by writing scene fragments, which I rework into a narrative structure. This fragment-gathering sometimes takes longer than I anticipate: there are papers everywhere as I type up the various fragments separately, and only incorporate them into the main body of the story after I have rewritten them. The fragments thus become kernels from which an entire chapter will emerge, or I attach them to a chapter I have already written. For me, a novel is a continuous act of construction: it takes shape incrementally, not in a linear fashion, but in a sequence of alternating and differing forms as the writing progresses…I don't

[201]Ibid, 23; 12-13.
[202]Imān Ḥumaydān, "Al-Jumla al-Ulā," *International Writing Program*, 2, https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/Iman%20Humaydan%20Arabic.pdf; The English translation was also published by the International Writing Program under the title "The First Sentence," https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/Iman%20Humaydan%20English.pdf.
[203]Ibid, 2.

write in a chronological fashion but rather in a circular one. Sometimes I go back to where I had started, and sometimes not.

In *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, the structure speaks to a past that refuses to remain there, preventing Mīryām from moving forward with her life. Trapped in circular time, Mīryām's life has little forward motion; she stagnates in Kenya with her husband, unable to plan for a future with him or to conceive a child. The novel's major event is Mīryām's decision to return to Beirut in order to claim property that she has inherited from her father and to care for her friend who is ill with cancer; once she reaches Beirut, however, she finds herself mired in endless bureaucratic complications. By the end of the novel, she has come no closer to claiming the property than she had been at the beginning.

Like Dīma Wannūs' *Al-Khā'ifūn* (2017; *The Frightened Ones*, 2020) (Chapter 3), the novel portrays Mīryām's efforts to seek mental health treatment for her unresolved traumas as an exercise in futility. She sees a psychoanalyst in Mombasa in the hope that he can help her to leave the past behind:

كنت أريده أن يفهم جيّداً ويُفهمني أيضاً ما بي وما يحدث لي. أريد أن يساعدني على التخلّص من ذنوب لم أقترفها، ذنب موت أخي وذنب صمت أمي وذنب جنون أبي. ذنب إجباري على التّخلص من جنيني الذي لم أعد أستطيع بعده الإنجاب من كريس، كأنني معاقبة.

I want him to understand and to help me understand myself, what's happening to me. I want him to help me be delivered from sins I have not committed: the sin of my brother's death, the sin of my mother's silence, the sin of my father's madness… the sin of being forced to abort my baby, the baby that I'm not yet able to conceive with Chris, as though I am being punished.[204]

In therapy, however, she makes little progress; she must communicate with her therapist in English, rather than her native Arabic, and often feels that he does not understand her. These scenes speak to the inability of therapeutic treatment to provide relief to patients experiencing ongoing and collective trauma, rather than individual finished events.

[204]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 45; 31.

Mīryām's friends, too, are unable to understand her inability to leave the past behind. They resent her constant reminders of the war's lingering presence, especially since she left Lebanon during the war, escaping the years of trauma and violence that those who remained endured. Mīryām's friend Ulghā snaps:

خلص اسكتي! إنتِ ما كنتِ هون، أنا كنت، أنا عشت الحرب وأنا من حقي أنسى. تلات ارباع الناس اللي بضلّوا يحكوا عن الذاكرة ما كانوا هون وما شافوا شي...خلصينا بقى! بدنا ننسى...

> Enough, shut up! You weren't here, I was. I lived the war and I have the right to forget. Three-quarters of the people who keep talking about memory weren't here and didn't see anything... Enough already! We want to forget.[205]

To her friends, Mīryām's inability to leave the war in the past is not only a choice but a luxury available only to privileged members of the diaspora and one that they can ill afford.

These scenes allow Ḥumaydān, who herself has often written from abroad (she currently lives between Paris and Beirut) to raise ethical questions about representing the war experience from the relatively privileged position of safety in diaspora. At the same time, Ḥumaydān suggests that the nostalgic perspective of the exile has a certain political potential. Unlike her friends who are eager to cast off the past, Mīryām insists on lingering with it, allowing her to see the ways in which violence in Lebanon remains ongoing and demonstrating that her nostalgia is not the result of individual psychology but rather long-standing political conditions that can never be "cured" therapeutically.

The novel establishes clear links between Mīryām's symptoms and ongoing political conditions in Lebanon. The circularity of her memories, for example, is paralleled in the novel by the cyclical nature of violence in Lebanon. Mīryām reflects:

[205]Ibid, 104; 78.

تاريخ يعيد نفسه. هل ذلك بسبب طبيعة المكان؟ هل هو بسبب الجلول التي تتميّز بها الأرض هنا, أتى التاريخ على شاكلة الأرض مقطعاً متكسراً لا بكتمل بل يعيد نفسه كخطوط مكرّرة. هل بسبب مُدننا التي تموت ولا تجد من يدفنها؟ لماذا هنا, في هذه البقعة بالذات من العالم يلد العنف نفسه مئات المرّات؟

> History repeats itself. Is this because of the nature of the place? Is it because of the terraces that are peculiar to the land here? Our history comes like our land… cut off, broken, incomplete, re-making itself in repetitive rows. Is this because our cities die and can't find anyone to bury them? Why here, in this particular spot in the world, is violence reborn hundreds of times?[206]

Mīryām's inability to move forwards-or out of an interminable present-meanwhile, is linked to the unresolved nature of the 1975-1990 war, especially the 17,000 individuals who disappeared during the war and whose fates remain unknown. One of these disappeared is Mīryām's lover, Jūrj (rendered "Georges" in the English translation). Although he had planned to join Mīryām in Australia, he never made it onto his ship leaving the country:

ربما اختُطف. ربما لم يغادر أبداً وبقي في لبنان سجيناً أو مفقوداً أو قتيلاً، دفنت جثّته ولا يعلم أيّ من أفراد عائلته مكانها. لم يصل إلى المكان الذي أراد الوصول إليه، تماماً ككثير من الناس الذين غادروا أماكنهم إلى أماكن أخرى ولم يصلوا.

> Perhaps he was kidnapped. Perhaps he never left and remained in Lebanon-imprisoned, lost or murdered, his corpse buried somewhere that no one in his family can find. He never reached his destination, just like so many people who left their own places for others and never arrived.[207]

To Mīryām, Jūrj's unknown fate leaves him, rather like Mīryām herself, "neither alive nor dead…between two places, suspended between war and peace, the past and the present."[208] Like many of the families and loved ones of the 17,000 disappeared, Mīryām is left a "hostage of the past and of waiting,"[209] unable to move forward with her life or to grieve because of a lack of closure, keeping her loss in the present.

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[206]Ibid, 116; 87.
[207]Ibid, 19; 9.
[208]Ibid, 110; 83.
[209]Anwarʿ Amr, "Mafqūdū Lubnān…Sanawāt min al-Intiẓār lā Tantahī," *Al-ʿArabī al-Jadīd*, Aug. 31, 2020, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/مفقودو-لبنان-سنوات-من-الانتظار-لا-تنتهي.

While Mīryām's life stagnates and her memories spiral, the postwar Beirut to which she returns seems poised to launch itself into a brighter future. Although the novel was published in 2010, it is set earlier, in the more immediate postwar period (likely the mid to late 1990s) after Solidere began the reconstruction of downtown Beirut in 1994; the Beirut Mīryām encounters has been newly transformed. The atmosphere is jubilant and celebratory; television channels "rejoice all day long that the war's ended," and her friend Ulghā excitedly declares:

"خلصت الحرب…خلصت!" قالت أولغا بصوت غنائي مادّة ذراعها بطريقة استعراضية من نافذة السيارة التي يقودها نور ومشيرة بيدها إلى الخارج. "شوفي الشوارع ليكي عجقة السير…ما في غرف فارغة بالفنادق"

"The war is over… It's over!" Olga sings, theatrically stretching her arms out of the window of Nour's car, waving her hands outside. "Look at the streets, look at the traffic… All the hotel rooms are booked up!"[210]

While her friends rejoice, to Mīryām, the jubilant atmosphere of post-war Beirut appears as a facade concealing unresolved traumas and memories of the war that continue to haunt the present. Her friends' optimistic visions of Beirut's future are often interrupted in the narrative by Mīryām's flashbacks to the war, or by her raising of uncomfortable questions about the war's lack of resolution. When her friend, Ulghā, cheerfully declares that the war is over, Mīryām thinks about the men who remain missing;[211] when she drives by a museum with friends, she suddenly recalls being stopped at a checkpoint there and mistakes a man holding a cellphone for a man with a gun;[212] when her friend takes her to a yoga class to help ease her anxiety over her inability to understand how the war could be over, she finds herself wandering to the clinic where she aborted her baby during the war.[213]

The major political resonance of Mīryām's attitude toward the past lies in its ability to disrupt-and, ultimately, critique-a celebratory postwar temporality contingent upon the erasure of

[210]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 101-102; 76.
[211]Ibid.
[212]Ibid, 103 ;77.
[213]Ibid, 125-126; 95.

the war's memory and entry into a bright future symbolized by the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. As Naomi Klein has noted, the reconstructed areas, which appeared to be "the shining symbol of Lebanon's postwar rebirth," was, to many Lebanese, "a kind of holograph. "[214] "Outside the ultramodern downtown core," she continues, "much of Beirut lacked basic infrastructure, from electricity to public transit, and the bullet holes inflicted during the civil war were never repaired on the facades of many buildings."[215] The inequalities of the postwar reconstruction were compounded by the fact that the funds for the reconstruction came from foreign loans, which the Lebanese taxpayer was expected to repay, burdening a population already struggling to recover from the war with the cost of a project that primarily benefited a select elite. In the novel, Mīryām is the only one who is able to see through the illusion of postwar prosperity; only she realizes that "Old Beirut is transforming into rubble with skyscrapers on top of it…"[216]

Mīryām's uncanny "double vision,"[217] her ability to see traces of the war underneath, or incompletely concealed by, a facade of prosperity, and her constant disruption of a jubilant postwar atmosphere with her wartime memories, are not only evidence of a nostalgic attachment to the past but a political position, one that refuses to accept the erasure of the past and the notion that the neoliberal transformation of Beirut will lead to a brighter future. The novel takes this a step further and argues that this transformation has contributed to keeping the threat of violence alive in postwar Lebanon. Mīryām reflects:

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[214]Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 461.
[215] Ibid.
[216]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 116-117; 87.
[217]Robyn Creswell, "Chasing Beirut's Ghosts," *The New York Review*, July 20, 2013. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/07/20/rabee-jaber-chasing-beiruts-ghosts/.

الاقتتال هنا هو نمط حياة. هو طريقة الاستهلاك مثله مثل الكحول والدخان والإعلام وقنوات التلفزيون والموسيقى. هناك الحرب الأهلية وهناك الجمّيزة والداون تاون والمونو والحمرا وجونيه والمعاملتين ورأس بيروت...هناك كلّ شيء. أشياء لا تتقابل، تتداخل! هذا صحيح، إلا أنها لا تتقابل، بل يتغذّى بعضها من بعض، فكرت.

> Bloody fighting is a way of life here. It's a kind of consumption, like alcohol, smoking, pop music and advertising on TV. There's civil war and then there's Gemmayzeh... and Downtown, Monot Street, Hamra, Jounieh, Maameltein and Ras Beirut... There's everything. Things that never meet and that have nothing to do with each other. But although they never meet, they feed off of each other, I think.[218]

The areas in Beirut that Mīryām references (Gemmayzeh, Downtown, Monot Street, Hamra, Jounieh, Maameltein, and Ras Beirut) are upscale or trendy areas associated with shopping, bars, nightclubs, hotels and resorts. Some of these areas also underwent substantial reconstruction in the postwar period. Mīryām suggests that the postwar transformation of Beirut makes the outbreak of further violence appear inevitable by linking violence in Lebanon to capitalist consumption in the passage cited above, an apparent reference to disaster capitalism, a term coined by Naomi Klein which refers to "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities."[219] There, Mīryām directly references the seemingly repetitive nature of violence in Lebanon, which she links to both disaster capitalism and failed mourning, the result of postwar reconstruction that left the memory of the civil war unresolved and that allowed it to uncannily haunt Mīryām's present as the threat that violence will resume.

Even as the novel rejects the postwar vision of the future promulgated by the architects of Beirut's reconstruction, it also conjures the possibility of an escape from the traumatic loop which entraps Mīryām, a loop that corresponds to cyclical violence in Lebanon. The memories that Mīryām circles back to are linked to traumatic pasts; one set of memories, however, also

[218]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 121; 91.
[219]Klein, 6.

summons alternative visions of the future, once possible and now foreclosed. Mīryām's disruptive wartime memories often center on her disappeared lover, Jūrj, whom she met while the two were involved in political activism as members of the Fatah party, a left-wing Palestinian nationalist party and a faction of the PLO. The two worked at the Shatila refugee camp as volunteers, a reference that immediately brings to mind the infamous 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinian refugees perpetrated by the Lebanese Forces, a right-wing Maronite militia, as occupying Israeli troops looked on. The massacre left over a thousand Palestinians (and roughly one hundred Lebanese) dead;[220] it took place in the context of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which resulted in the withdrawal of the PLO from besieged Beirut, leaving Palestinian refugee camps without their protection.[221] The PLO had already been expelled from Jordan in "Black September" 1970; now, in 1982, its expulsion from Lebanon represented a second major blow to its operations. To give a sense of the psychological impact of this expulsion upon those who supported the Palestinian cause, Lebanese author and literary critic Ilyās Khūrī has described it as follows:

> ٢١ آب ١٩٨٢، سنة مضت على تلك الأيام العشرة الطويلة، حيث رأينا، ورأى العالم، الشجرة وهي تقتلع من الأرض وترمى في البحر، رأينا ما يشبه المستحيل، شبح الهزيمة يلفنا وليل الاحتلال يغطي عيوننا، والفاشية تحوم فوق ركام المدن، والفدائيون يغادرون.[222]
>
> August 21, 1982. A year passed over the course of those long ten days when we saw, and the world saw, a tree being uprooted from the ground and thrown into the sea. We saw seemed impossible: the specter of defeat surrounding us, the night of occupation covering our eyes, fascism hovering above the rubble of cities, and the fidāʾiyyīn leaving.

The memory of the expulsion of the PLO and the massacres brings to mind not only a deeply traumatic moment in the ongoing Palestinian refugee crisis but also the memory of another

[220]Traboulsi, 218.
[221]Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 1-3.
[222]Ilyās Khūrī, "Al-Dhikrā wa al-Dhākira," in *Zaman al-Iḥtilāl* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Abḥāth al-ʿArabiyya, 1985), 98.

historic blow to the future prospects of the broader Palestinian liberation movement, the fate of which was a key issue over which the war was fought. The memory of the disappeared Jūrj, in other words, is also the memory of a failed political project, one that was accompanied by particular visions of and hopes for the future that went unrealized.

Jūrj, crucially, is not only Mīryām's former lover but the father of her unborn child. This loss has left Mīryām to mourn something that never was, "my baby, who never became a fact," and her boyfriend, "the father of a baby who was never born."[223] It is not difficult to read Mīryām's abortion as a metaphor for her (and her lover's) aborted vision of the future that also "never became a fact." In Mīryām's case, this abortion has also prevented her from conceiving in the present, a move that can be read as a metaphor for her inability to develop alternative visions of the future, leaving her trapped in a suspended present.

Although Mīryām's case seems hopeless and incurable, her commitment to lingering with the memories of the past and with memories of foreclosed future does allow her to bring the dominant postwar temporality marked by the erasure of the past in the name of moving into a bright and yet ultimately illusory future into question. Mīryām's circular memories mark a refusal to unquestioningly accept the narrative that the postwar reconstruction of Beirut will lead the country into a brighter and more economically prosperous future. Instead, the novel refuses to accept the erasure of an unresolved past, allowing Mīryām to perceive instead a postwar temporality marked, in Walid Sadek's words, "by the persistent absence of the forcibly disappeared, and by living with uninhumed corpses, with ruins, mazedly places and labyrinthine temporalities."[224] In lingering with memories of the past, Mīryām not only disrupts the illusion of postwar prosperity but also summons the ghosts of failed political projects and visions of futures

[223]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 126-128; 96-97.
[224]Walid Sadek, "A Surfeit of Victims: a Time after Time," *Contemporary Levant*, 4, no. 2 (2019): 156.

past, including the Palestinian liberation movement, which one character in the novel refers to as the "last liberation movement in the world" and as a "revolution."[225] By summoning these memories, of futures once possible and now foreclosed, Mīryām disrupts a postwar temporality in which futures marked by anything other than the repetitive return of violence with a reminder that alternative futures were once possible and may become so again.

The novel's title also hints at the political potential of Mīryām's circular memories. The title, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, as Michelle Hartman notes in her translator's note on the text, uses a "relatively esoteric plural" of the Arabic word for life which can "imply a Druze understanding of 'lives.'"[226] Mīryām is a member of the Druze community; the novel draws on this aspect of Mīryām's identity primarily through a number of references to the transmigration of souls (*al-taqammuṣ*) or the belief that, after death, the soul of a Druze person will migrate from the body of the deceased and into the body of a newborn baby. Generally, Druze souls are thought to migrate only into the bodies of Druze babies. Mīryām, however, tells the story of her friend Ulghā, a Christian who was born at the same time that Mīryām's aunt died; as she lay dying, she saw herself being born to a woman wearing a cross, leading everyone in the family the believe that Ulghā was the aunt reincarnated.[227] The circular structure of the novel appears to mimic the structure of the Druze life-cycle, which is marked by cyclical periods of life, death, and re-birth. The link between the novel's structure and the Druze belief in the transmigration of souls raises the possibility that a circular understanding of time, one which keeps the past in the present, can be linked to renewal and change, offering, perhaps, the possibility of a temporal alternative to the cyclical recurrence of violence.

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[225]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 120; 90-91 (Here, I modified Michelle Hartman's translation).
[226]Michelle Hartman, "Translator's Note," in *Other Lives* by Iman Humaydan (Northampton, Massachusets: Interlink Books, 2014), 150.
[227]Ḥumaydān, *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, 173-174; 129-130.

Rabīʿ Jābir's Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ *(2006;* Berytus: An Underground City*)*

The other two novels that this chapter will examine were both written by Lebanese author Rabīʿ Jābir, who was born in Beirut in 1972, shortly before the outbreak of war in 1975; the war experience has been central to Jābir's oeuvre, which includes 18 novels produced between 1992 and 2011.[228] His first novel, *Sayyid al-ʿAtma* (1992; Lord of Darkness) was published when he was twenty and still a student at the American University of Beirut.[229] His novels *Amrīka* (2009; America) and *Ṭuyūr al-Hūlīdāy Inn* (2011; The Birds of the Holiday Inn) were long or short-listed for the IPAF; his novel *Durūz Bilghrād* (2011; The Druze of Belgrade) won the IPAF in 2012.

The complex interactions between national, historical, and personal memory have long been a central preoccupation of Jābir's oeuvre, particularly the ways in which both are marked by unresolvable gaps and silences. Jābir's works of historical fiction at times feature Jābir as a researcher, attempting to fill the gaps in his personal, family history with the help of the archive, which he finds inadequate due to missing or incomplete information. His works often play with the boundaries between authenticity and artifice, featuring both "real" figures, historical events, documents, and spaces and "gestures of literary artifice," including "repetition, flashback, flash-forward" and various metafictional techniques.[230] They might blur the boundaries between fiction and veracity genres, including memoir, confessionals, and testimonials, staging intersections between the historical and "imaginative, dream-like experience."[231] As Lebanese critic Kamāl Ṣalībī, has argued, Jābir's historical fiction combines the techniques of the historian

[228]Zeina G. Halabi, *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile and the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 73.
[229]Ibid.
[230]David Joseph Wrisley, "Metafiction Meets Migrations: Art from the Archives in Rabee Jaber's *Amerika," Mashriq & Mahjar*, 1, no. 2 (2013): 120.
[231]Ibid, 121.

with those of the novelist, producing what Ṣalībī terms the "past-present" (al-mādī al-ḥādir), or the inclusion of both historically accurate details and an imaginative, fictional dimension.[232]

The effect is a complex blurring of the imaginary and the historical, a blurring that allows the texts to explore the unreliability of personal memory and the inadequacy of national memory to shed light on pasts marked by violent ruptures. In Jābir's works, the two often intersect in cramped, labyrinthine spaces that are both home to the marginalized populations left out of official history and that externalize the complex and convoluted pathways of human memory, including the walled Ottoman city in *Bayrūt: Madīnat al-ʾĀlam* (2003; Beirut: City of the World), the below-deck cabins and corridors of the ship carrying his protagonist to New York in *Amrīka* (2009; America), the crowded streets of lower Manhattan, also in *Amrīka,*[233] and a shadowy, parallel Beirut, an underworld home to the dead in *Taqrīr Mīlīs* (2005; *The Mehlis Report*, 2013).

Jābir's *Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ* depicts a journey to an underground city, Beirut's uncanny double; the journey underground is a journey into the the city's collective unconscious, home to the protagonist's own repressed memories as well as suppressed national histories. This journey begins when Jābir's protagonist, Buṭrus, enters the underground city through a hole in the ruins of the City Palace Cinema, where he works as a security guard. The location is a deeply symbolic one; the cinema is a rare surviving war ruin, located on the demarcation line that once divided East and West Beirut.[234] As he guards the cinema, Buṭrus guards a threshold between a violent past and a postwar present, as well as the threshold between the two parallel cities, one aboveground and one below. One night, after nodding off, he is awoken by the sound of an

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[232]Kamāl Ṣalībī, *Bayrūt wa al-Zaman: Qirāʾa fī Thulāthiyyat Rabīʿ Jābir Bayrūt Madīnat al-ʿĀlam* (Beirut: Dār Nilsin, 2009), 79.
[233]Wrisley, 120.
[234]Summaya ʾAzzām, "Matāhāt al-ʾUnf fī 'Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ' (Qirāʿa Hirmīnūṭīqiyya)," *Fikr Magazine*, June 15, 2018. https://www.fikrmag.com/article_details.php?article_id=736.

intruder. He pursues the intruder, a boy in a white dress (whom he later discovers is actually a woman, Yāsmīna). The boy jumps into a hole and Buṭrus follows, unable to remember later if he jumped or fell. After a long fall, Buṭrus lands, badly injured, in an underground city where he spends weeks in a coma before recovering slowly from his injuries.

The underground city in which Buṭrus awakens is a disturbing yet fantastical setting. The city is completely dark and labyrinthine, navigable only by candlelight; it is home to frightening locales, including a river which occasionally expels corpses from its depths with the force of a cannon and a forest filled with petrified human remains. These settings are home to a variety of grotesque figures: the mud people, or humanoid figures made entirely of mud, invisible creatures who resemble human beings but have only one eye, one leg, and one arm, and ferocious bats. The city is a dangerous place; one might be killed off by a monstrous creature, become lost in the labyrinth and suffocate to death, or die of one of the mysterious epidemics that ravage the city, killing off entire neighborhoods. Buṭrus' journey into the city, which he compares to Alice's fall into Wonderland after chasing the white rabbit in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*,[235] is a journey into a dark and sinister fantasy world.

The journey into the timeless underground city is a journey into the fantastical, the primeval, and the irrational, a gothic gesture that can be read as a journey into Buṭrus' own unconscious mind where he comes into confrontation with buried anxieties and desires embodied in figures both attractive and repellent.[236] Aboveground, Buṭrus is able to suppress his memories of the war, where a jubilant, postwar atmosphere of excess seems to render them out of reach:

حين أعبر مونو ليلاً، وأنت تعرف كيف يكون هذا الشارع صاخباً بالموسيقى الأجنبية، مكتظاً بالفتيان والفتيات يترنحون سكارى إلى ساعة الفجر...كل تلك الروائح أعبرها حتى أبلغ أعلى مونو. وحين ألمح تلك الباحة المهملة غارقة في الظلمة, أو في نور سيارة عابرة, لا اذكر

[235]Rabīʿ Jābir, *Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ* (Casablanca and Beirut: Al-Markaz Al-Thaqāfī Al- 'Arabī and Dār al-Ādāb lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 2006), 35-36. All translations are mine.
[236]Jerrold E. Hogle, "Introduction: the Gothic in western culture," *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4-6.

عمّي سمعان...ولا أذكر جسماً مقطوعاً إلى نصفين من وسطه، كأنهم نشروه بمنشار الحطب...لا اذكر المصران الأخضر على الدرجة تحت الشرفة، ولا أذكر مواء القطط، ولا أذكر شقف اللحم على الغسيل الملون المنشور والغسيل الابيض الذي سقط مع حبلٍ قطعته شظايا أو ضغط الانفجار.[237]

> When I cross Monnot Street at night, and you know how this street is, roaring with the sound of foreign music, packed with young men and women staggering around drunk until dawn…I pass through all these scents until I reach the top of Monnot. And when I glimpse that derelict plaza drowning in darkness, or in the light of a passing car, I don't remember my uncle Simaʾān…and I don't remember a body cut into two halves at the waist, as if they had split it with a chainsaw…I don't remember the green intestines on the step beneath the balcony and I don't remember the cats meowing, and I don't remember the shreds of flesh on the colored and white laundry that fell when the clothesline was cut by shrapnel or from the force of the explosion.

Upon awakening underground, Buṭrus soon finds that memories he had successfully repressed aboveground come floating to the surface involuntarily in the city below. The underground city brings back memories of hiding in a bomb shelter as a child;[238] after encountering the river filled with corpses, Buṭrus recalls his brother, Nizār, who found thirteen naked corpses underneath a bridge in their village in 1983;[239] learning that the residents of the underground city are sometimes forced to move to new neighborhoods due to a lack of air in their homes reminds him of fleeing the mountains with his family during the war.[240] His time underground is plagued with nightmares about the war that feature dismembered, rotting human remains. He longs to leave the underground "where there are corpses, trash, smells" for the world above.[241] Underground, he comments, "I remember things that I do not want to remember. I see faces that I do not want to see…"[242]

[237]Jābir, 42-43.
[238]Ibid, 39.
[239]Ibid, 134.
[240]Ibid, 109.
[241]Ibid, 211.
[242]Ibid.

Jābir's account of memories suppressed aboveground by a glittering postwar atmosphere speaks to the postwar reconstruction process, which entailed a re-narrativization of the city as a safe home for global investment and, consequently, an erasure of the war's memory. Soon after the war ended, Rafiq al-Hariri became prime minister of Lebanon and ushered in significant neoliberal economic transformation. Hariri's economic vision for Lebanon involved enacting policies that would increase foreign investment and Lebanon's integration into the world economy; in the postwar reconstruction project undertaken by Solidere, "the discourse of Harirism…reached its pinnacle and climax, its ultimate expression."[243] In line with this discourse, the postwar reconstruction project was narrativized as a move to "re-capture Lebanon's 'national vocation' as the 'international' financial capital of the East, and thus re-insert Beirut into a global narrative."[244]

Narrativizing Beirut as the "Singapore of the Middle East,"[245] entailed the erasure of contested or fraught histories, especially the 1975-1990 war, that might put this narrative into question. Solidere adopted the motto "Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future," and undertook a number of archaeological excavations that uncovered ruins from various historical periods, including Roman, Mamluk, Greek, Ottoman, and Phonecian structures and artifacts.[246] Although Solidere was quick to make use of these excavations as evidence of its interest in preserving the city's cultural heritage,[247] miriam cooke has argued that they allowed Solidere to promulgate a specific historical narrative aimed at "tam[ing]" sites of memory in the downtown area by erasing their association with the war period and turning them into representations, instead, of

[243]Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere," *Critical Inquiry*, 23, no. 3 (1997): 700.
[244]Yahya, 2.
[245]Klein, 460.
[246]Makdisi, 662-681.
[247]Ibid, 681-682.

"classical history."[248] Ilyās Khūrī, similarly, has argued that these excavations connected the newly reconstructed, "modern" Beirut to an ancient past while ensuring that the recent past, especially the memory of the war, remained buried:

> Ancient edifices, witnesses to a distant past, were cloistered by fences, contiguous to the new strange, modern structures, witnesses of the future-to-be. Between the two, all traces of recent past and present time have been eradicated. The present-the civil war and its remembrance-plays no role in the regenerated myth. The buildings of Beirut which used to weave an urban fabric inscribed in history and to embody its continuation, are gone.[249]

Jābir's work suggests that the postwar reconstruction of Beirut is a facade overlying buried and painful histories. Underneath this facade lies Jābir's underground city, Bīrytūs, the buried ruins of the formerly Roman city that is central to Solidere's "mythical" version of Lebanese history. Jābir's Roman city, however, foregrounds rather than erases the national histories left out of a postwar narrative of Lebanese history.

These histories are embodied in the residents of the underground city, who are either the victims of violence or their descendants, whether from the war or from earlier periods, who sought shelter in the underground city. They represent the contested or unresolved histories of violence that put Solidere's postwar narrative of Lebanese history into question. The first of these histories concerns the roughly 17,000 individuals who disappeared during the war, a history that also maintained a haunting presence in Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā*, discussed above. As the reconstruction of Beirut erased physical traces of the war, the absence of any official effort to uncover the fates of the disappeared was experienced by many as yet another example of state-sponsored amnesia. In the underground city, this amnesia is unsustainable; Buṭrus is repeatedly forced into unwelcome confrontations with the disappeared, now residents

[248]miriam cooke, "Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, no. 2 (2002): 405.
[249]Elias Khoury, "The Memory of the City," *Grand Street*, no. 54, Space (1995), 141-142.

of the underground city, who insist upon recounting their painful stories. Buṭrus refuses to repeat many of these to Jābir, telling him that it would be better if they were forgotten.[250] He does, however, recount one particularly disturbing encounter with his cousin, Ibrāhīm, who disappeared when he was only fifteen. Given his decades-long absence, his family has long since accepted that Ibrāhīm is dead; Buṭrus' encounter with him is as terrifying to him as an encounter with an animated corpse:

> هل تستطيع أن تتخيل رجلاً ميتاً ينهض من القبر ويقعد معك؟ تشربان الشاي ويحكي لك عن حياته. هذا ما حدث معي.[251]
>
> Can you imagine a dead man rising from the grave and sitting with you? The two of you, drinking tea as he tells you about his life. This is what happened to me...

Buṭrus finds his cousin in a neighborhood for the blind residents of the city, currently suffering from an epidemic of diarrhea. Although the residents seem able-bodied, they lie listlessly on the ground, rousing themselves only to ask Buṭrus for water; he complies, and is startled to recognize his cousin, now decades older. Rather than reunite with his missing cousin, Buṭrus flees from an encounter with him, giving him water silently before leaving hastily and resolving to escape the underground city as soon as possible.[252]

The inhabitants of the underground city also embody earlier historical memories. The city's historian tells Buṭrus about a "second wave" of migrants that arrived wounded with torn clothes, fleeing their burning cities, hunger, and illness; Buṭrus believes that these migrants were fleeing the 1860 war,[253] a conflict fought mainly between the Druze and Christians of Mount Lebanon. A "third wave" of migrants arrived some years later, fleeing what the historian terms the "outside famine."[254] During and in the aftermath of World War I, the Levant was gripped by a

[250]Jābir, 224; 229.
[251]Ibid, 206.
[252]Ibid, 231.
[253]Ibid, 106-107.
[254]Ibid, 99.

severe famine; the war and the famine together killed roughly half a million people in the region. Beirut alone is estimated to have lost approximately half of its population in the fighting, from hunger, and from disease.[255] The famine, as Melanie Tanielian has demonstrated, is a contested memory, given that suffering was unevenly distributed along sectarian lines; this has rendered the famine an unsuitable "*lieu de memoire* for a collective national memory."[256]

Both the 1860 war and the famine are memories that speak to unresolved histories of violence and conflict that serve as a reminder of sectarianism and of Lebanon's historical instability and, consequently, unsuitability as a site for global investment. Unlike aboveground Beirut, which has launched into a glittering period of postwar prosperity, the underground city, home to these memories of violence, is also home to a limbo-like wartime temporality characterized by presentness, haunting pasts, and a lack of access to the future. Time in the underground city stands still; little about its inhabitants' lives has changed for generations. They live in Roman tombs, without much electricity or many modern conveniences. Their library is nearly empty and the pursuit of knowledge is seen as pointless, particularly when there is no hope of progress or escape. Anyone who attempts to flee the city risks suffocation in the city's narrow passageways, becoming hopelessly lost, or death at the hands of the mud people; reaching the aboveground city, furthermore, means being permanently blinded by the bright sun. Nights in the underground city, characterized by "waiting and anticipation" remind Buṭrus of the war years; in college, he wrote an essay about how his life from 1983 to 1990 was "a single day that I repeated in precise detail day after day."[257] From 1983 to 1990, he continues:

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[255]Melanie Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2.
[256]Melanie Tanielian, *The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918)*, Phd. Diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 7-8.
[257]Jābir, 116-117.

كانت هذه حياتي: الزمن زمن حروب تشتعل ثم تهمد، والمدارس في معظم الأوقات معطلة...القصف يسقط على بيوتنا بين حين وآخر. لكننا، مع ذلك، نخرج إلى الشوارع. الأولاد في الشوارع، وأنا لست معهم. من 1983 إلى 1990 عشت القسم الأطول من نهاراتي تحت الأرض، في صالات السينما.[258]

> This was my life: time was the time of wars that flare up and die down, and schools were closed most of the time…Bombs fell on our houses now and again but we, nevertheless, went out to the streets. Children were in the streets, and I was not with them. From 1983 to 1990, I lived most of my days underground, in the cinema.

Buṭrus compares life in the underground city to war years spent in an underground cinema. Both underground spaces are characterized by a temporality in which there is little to anticipate other than the next outbreak of violence or disease. The positioning of the memories repressed by the postwar reconstruction process in a limbo-like temporality suggests a link between these buried histories and a temporality marked by the cyclical outbreak of violence. Concealing rather than coming to terms with violent histories, these passages suggest, has kept the threat of violence present in the city's collective unconscious.

In addition to the memories excluded from postwar historical narratives, the underground city is also home to those individuals who were excluded from the benefits of postwar prosperity. The city below is devoid of luxuries familiar in aboveground Beirut, which is "lit up with electricity," filled with tourists, music, and the "scents of food, perfume, bodies, and the salt of the sea."[259] In contrast, the above ground city is dark and quiet, "as if you were in a cemetery."[260] It is impoverished; its inhabitants have little access to any form of modern technology. Buṭrus exclaims:

كل تلك الأحياء المملوءة بالفقراء! كل تلك البيوت التي تبدو على وشك السقوط! وكل تلك النظرات الحزينة![261]

[258]Ibid, 117-118.
[259]Ibid, 9-10.
[260]Ibid, 68.
[261]Ibid, 191.

> All of these neighborhoods filled with impoverished people! All of these homes that seem to be on the verge of collapse! All of these sad gazes!

Despite the many epidemics running rampant in the city, furthermore, its inhabitants lack access to modern medicine; one of the city's inhabitants, who has lived in aboveground Beirut, comments that an ongoing diarrhea epidemic could easily be cured with pills available above.[262]

Entering this impoverished and marginalized space awakens Buṭrus' desire for consumption and sensual pleasure. His life above ground is simple; his work as a security guard is sufficient for him to earn a living, however modest, and although he is unmarried, he expresses no discontentment with his lot. Below ground, however, even fleeting glimpses of the sun or snatches of music awaken in him feelings of longing:

> تلك الليلة سمعت أصوات بيروت، مدينتنا…سمعت غناء وموسيقى (لن تكن موسيقى أجنبية. كانت موسيقى عربية. لم أتأكد ماذا كانت الأغنية. لكنها كانت أغنية حديثة. ليست طرباً قديماً، ليست أم كلثوم التي أحبها…وفي العادة أمقتها، ولكنني عندئذ-وأنا تحت الأرض الثقيلة الصامتة المظلمة-فكرت أنها أحلى صوت أسمعه في حياتي).[263]
>
> That night I heard the sounds of Beirut, our city…I heard music (it wasn't foreign music, it was Arabic music. I'm not sure what song it was, but it was a modern song, not old *ṭarab*,[264] not Umm Kalthoum, whom I love…Usually, I despise those songs, but then-when I was under the heavy, dark, silent ground-I thought that it was the most beautiful sound that I had heard in my life).

Although the music Buṭrus hears is not to his taste, and would in fact have annoyed him aboveground, once it is not longer in his grasp it becomes an object of his desire. He considers screaming for help to the people above ground but decides that they would not hear him considering the meters of dirt that lies between them and the volume of the music and cars:

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[262]Ibid, 230.
[263]Ibid, 68-69.
[264]*Ṭarab* refers to both a form of music and the state or affect that music produces, namely feelings of ecstasy, rapture, or heightened emotion. Umm Kalthoum, who is referenced in this passage, was a singer, songwriter, and Egyptian cultural icon active from the 1920s-1970s who is often associated with the term. By referring to old songs as an example of *ṭarab*, Buṭrus expresses his admiration for them while also offering a rejection of modern music which, in his view, lacks this ability to evoke emotion.

أنا الآن خارج حياتهم، خارج عالمهم. أنا الآن تحت. أعيش كما يعيش الموتى، في هذه القبور الحجر التي يسموّها هنا بيوتاً.أنا الآن <<برّاني>>...لعلني تحت شارع الجامع العمري، والناس يخرجون من المطاعم ويدخلون: المطعم الطلياني البارلمانتو حيث طالما رأيت المحررين في <<الحياة>> قاعدين يأكلون المعكرونة بالبندورة ويشربون النبيذ الأحمر.-يا ربّ! متى آكل طعاماً يؤكل مرة أخرى! متى آكل أكلاً ليس سمكاً![265]

> I am now outside their lives, outside their world. Now, I'm underground, living like the dead in these stone tombs that they call houses here. Now, I'm an "outsider"...Perhaps I'm under al-ʿUmarī Mosque Street, where people are going in and out of restaurants, like the il Parlamento Italian restaurant where I always used to see the editors of *Al-Hayat* sitting and eating pasta with tomatoes and drinking red wine-oh God! When will I eat palatable food again! When will I eat food that isn't fish!

Now an outsider, Buṭrus is filled with longing for the luxuries of the above ground world, even though these luxuries were not actually available to him above ground; he recalls seeing the editors of *Al-Hayat* eating Italian food, not consuming it himself. Below ground, furthermore, he begins a love affair with Yāsmīna, the woman whom he chased into the underground city. In Ken Seigneurie's reading of the novel, Buṭrus' love affair with Yāsmīna, whom he first encountered aboveground, is linked to his desire to return to the world above; as he waits for her to come to him for the first time, he imagines hearing restaurant noises. Later, when he stares at a blank wall waiting for her, he remembers visiting a porn movie theater in his youth; "Yasmina and home shimmer before him as interchangeable signifiers of desire."[266]

The image of Buṭrus lurking in the margins of the luxurious postwar city, gazing longingly at luxuries out of his reach, is an image that evokes what urban sociologist Nabil Beyhum refers to as the "dual city," or the separation between the newly reconstructed downtown Beirut, a gentrified area home to a wealthy elite, and the rest of the city and the country, home to the "destitute" and "undesirable."[267] This "dual city," Saree Makdisi argues,

[265]Ibid, 71.
[266]Seigneurie, 89-90.
[267]Makdisi, 700.

must be understood "in a simultaneously local and global context."[268] The boundaries dividing downtown Beirut from the rest of the city, he continues, are analogous to the boundary that divides "a regional node in the global economy…and a peripheral backwater…characterized by the labor processes of the informal economy."[269] In other words, the dynamic between Beirut's reconstructed downtown area and the rest of the country resembles the dynamic between countries which belong to the metropolitan core of the capitalist world economic system and countries which belong to the less developed periphery. The two cities of Beirut portrayed in Jābir's novel can be read as symbolic of the divide that Makdisi and Beyhum describe between the reconstructed city center and the rest of the city of Beirut, home to undesirables unwelcome in the newly "modernized" center, as shown by Buṭrus's profession; as a guard, his task is to expel vagrants from the City Palace Cinema, one of whom is Yāsmīna, the woman whom he mistakes for a homeless youth and chases into the underground city.

The underground city is home to memories and populations marginalized in the postwar period; entering this space "awakens Butros to the forgotten suffering that subtends aboveground prosperity."[270] Despite this awakening, Buṭrus' journey fails to lead him to "the commonsense conclusion that 'something should be done about it.'"[271] Far from being spurred to action by the poverty and hardship he witnesses underground, Buṭrus refuses to help Yāsmīna flee the underground city (she eventually does so on her own) and even turns away in silence from his dying cousin in a scene that Seigneurie reads as an intertextual reference to Peter's denial of Jesus.[272]

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[268]Ibid, 703.
[269]Ibid.
[270]Seigneurie, 93.
[271]Ibid.
[272]Ibid. Buṭrus is the Arabic equivalent of the name Peter.

After fleeing the city, however, Buṭrus is tormented by feelings of responsibility and guilt:

لا أستطيع أن أحمل وحدي كل هذا الثقل، كل هذه المسؤولية، كل هذه المعرفة: المدينة تحت تموت. إنهم يموتون. كلّهم.[273]

I can't bear all of this weight alone. All of this responsibility. All of this knowledge.

In order to ease the weight of this burden, he decides to tell his story, a task that proves difficult; his attempts to organize his account into a linear fashion fail as he repeatedly finds himself jumping forwards or backwards in time.[274] A further challenge lies in the fantastical, unbelievable nature of his story; to address this challenge, he turns to the novelist Rabīʿ Jābir and asks him to write his story, telling him:

أعرف أنك تحبّ القصص الحقيقية، وأنك مرات تخترع قصصاً تبدو حقيقية. ومرات تكتب قصصاً حقيقية ولكنك تجعلها تبدو خيالية.[275]

I know that you like true stories and that sometimes you invent stories that seem true. Other times, you write true stories but make them seem fictional.

Because of Jābir's ability to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, Buṭrus believes that he can help him to forget his experience in the underground city:

أقول لنفسي أحياناً أنني إذا أخبرتك القصة وكتبتها أنت في رواية صارت تبدو لي خيالية، غير حقيقية، ولم تعد تُفسد عليّ نومي. لا تزعل مني. أنا لا أسخر من رواياتك. أنا أقول فقط أن ما يُكتب يصير يُسبب ألماً أقل.[276]

I tell myself sometimes that if I told you the story and you wrote it in a novel, then it would start to seem imaginary, untrue, and it wouldn't disturb my sleep anymore. Don't get annoyed with me-I'm not mocking your novels. I'm only saying that what is written down starts to cause less pain.

In other words, turning to Jābir is another attempt by Buṭrus to flee from his feelings of responsibility toward the underground city; he believes that writing his story in a novel will make it seem untrue and, therefore, less painful.

[273]Jābir, 226.
[274]Ibid, 17.
[275]Ibid, 15.
[276]Ibid, 229.

Buṭrus' conversations with Jābir offer a challenge to a postwar model of politically committed literature that "draws on the power of the writer, the written word and the literary text."[277] This model, which Zeina Halabi associates with Ilyās Khūrī, conceives of the writer as a "prophetic figure, one who has to assume the role of an omniscient and omnipotent critic"; the authorial figure who emerges in Jābir's work, on the other hand, is a figure who "demystifies the elevated status associated with authorship."[278] Rather than a "prophetic" or "omnipotent" figure, the authorial figure in Jābir's novel is impotent, unable to produce a text that will act as a call to action; his text offers Buṭrus only catharsis, not resolution.

The authorial figure in Jābir's work, furthermore, is not an omniscient figure who narrates events largely from an external, detached perspective; Jābir, instead, deliberately implicates himself in the processes he critiques. As the text explores the postwar division of Beirut into a prosperous, reconstructed zone and an impoverished margin, Jābir situates himself firmly in the prosperous zone, enjoying the benefits of Beirut's neoliberal transformation. The novel opens on the rooftop of the Virgin Megastore in downtown Beirut, where Jābir and his friends are having dinner, listening to their fellow diners conversing in various languages, and enjoying the sea views; tourists are everywhere, as is the sound of loud music and the scents of perfume and human bodies.[279] When Buṭrus arrives and begins to narrate his journey into the underground city, the transition is a jarring one that emphasizes the distance between the impoverished underground and Jābir's elevated position on a rooftop in the reconstructed city. Later, when Buṭrus fantasizes about returning aboveground to eat in luxurious restaurants, he recalls seeing the editors of *Al-Hayat* newspaper eating Italian food and drinking red wine.[280]

[277]Halabi, 81.
[278]Ibid, 70-89.
[279]Jābir, 9-10.
[280]Ibid, 71.

Jābir himself was an editor of *Al-Hayat's* cultural supplement; the scene again positions him as a beneficiary of postwar reconstruction, to be gazed upon enviously from the margins. Rather than a lofty and distant authorial figure, Jābir conceives of the author as a figure who is shaped by and implicated in the political and economic forces he critiques.

It is Buṭrus' inability to bear the weight of responsibility alone-his need to share this burden, in other words-that ultimately makes Jābir's implication in the suffering of the underground city visible. As Buṭrus turns to Jābir to share his story, he also shares his guilt and responsibility by implicating Jābir as he has already been implicated. Although he does succeed in sharing the weight of responsibility with Jābir, the novel suggests that Buṭrus will not easily be able to cast if off entirely. Now aware of the porousness of the boundaries that divide the above and below ground cities, Buṭrus finds himself haunted by glimpses of those who have made the journey aboveground:

> الآن، لا أسير في طرقات بيروت، إلّا أجدني أتأمل الوجوه الشاحبة. أفتش عن عيون حزينة ترمش متعبة في نور الشمس الحلو-القوي...[281]
>
> Now, whenever I walk through the streets of Beirut, I find myself contemplating pale faces. I look for sad eyes blinking wearily in the beautiful, strong light of the sun…

Buṭrus, too, has been changed by his journey; he is thin, speaks with a hoarse whisper, and appears to Jābir like someone "uncertain of his own existence" who had "just arrived from another world."[282] Although he has returned to the aboveground city, he is unable to truly believe that he has left the underground city behind; the novel ends with this realization.[283]

Despite Jābir's reflections on the limited ability of literature to intervene into reality, the novel's ending does suggest that literature can lead to new awareness of our own implication in ongoing suffering; such an awareness, furthermore, carries with it an obligation, even a

[281]Ibid, 220.
[282]Ibid, 11.
[283]Ibid, 238.

compulsion, to speak and to share this awareness with others. Buṭrus turns to Jābir, after all, not only so that Jābir can help him forget but because "I can't stop myself. I must speak."[284] This ending gestures toward the possibility of a collective and uncomfortable awareness of the suffering on which the illusion of postwar prosperity rests. The novel leaves a redemptive ending in which the inhabitants of the underground city are reintegrated into the city above out of reach; it does, however, make the repressed histories of violence that sustain the limbo-like temporality of the underground city visible even if the possibility of action remains, for the moment, deferred.

Rabīʿ Jābir's al-Iʿtirāfāt *(2008;* Confessions*, 2016)*

Like Rabīʿ Jābir's *Bīrytūs: Madīna Taḥt al-Arḍ*, *al-Iʿtirāfāt* is a novel deeply concerned with narrative itself, particularly narratives blocked by uncertain memories, confused narrators, and unreliable authorial figures. Like *Bīrytūs*, *al-Iʿtirāfāt* is presented to the reader as an oral narrative being relayed to the author, Rabīʿ Jābir, by the novel's narrator/protagonist, Mārūn, who is ostensibly relating "true" events that constitute his own life story. This lends the text an air of authenticity and reliability soon disrupted by Mārūn's inability to organize the events of his life into a coherent narrative:

> حاولت كثيرًا-ستعرف أنَّ هذا مهمّ في حياتي-حاولت كثيرًا أن أحدّد عمل هذه الذكريات الأولى وأن أرتّبها منظّمة، لعلّني أفهم، لعلّني أصل إلى البداية...لكن هذا صعب، شديد الصعوبة. ثم إنَّ الذكريات تخدع.
>
> I often tried—and soon you'll find out why this is so important—to determine the age of those first memories, arranging them systematically so that I could understand them, so that I could perhaps find my way back to the beginning. . . . But this is difficult, extremely difficult, and then there's the fact that memories can be deceiving…[285]

[284]Ibid, 30.
[285]Rabī Jābir, *Al-Iʿtirāfāt* (Casablanca and Beirut: Al-Markaz Al-Thaqāfī Al- ʻArabī and Dār al-Ādāb lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 2008), 13; Rabee Jaber, *Confessions* (New York: *New Directions Publishing*, 2016), 5. All translations are

His memories are slippery and uncertain; it is often unclear to Mārūn whether the events he relates actually took place, happened in dreams, or are the products of imagination rather than memory:

كل ذكرياتي من تلك الفترة الأولى متشابكة ولا أثق فيها، لا أدري هل هي ذكريات حقيقيّة أم ذكريات متخيّلة، تتشابك بالمنامات وتتشابك بما سمعته بعد ذلك من أخواتي وأخي الكبير وأمي…

> ...all of my memories from that first period are jumbled, and I don't trust them, I don't know if they're real or imagined, if they've become intertwined with dreams, if they're stories I later heard from my sisters and my big brother and my mother...[286]

The reason for Mārūn's uncertain memories is revealed several chapters into the text; as a small child, Mārūn's entire family was shot and killed on the demarcation line between East and West Beirut. Mārūn was shot but survived; the man who shot him then took him home and adopted him so that he could act as a replacement for his own kidnapped and murdered son, a boy who was also called Mārūn. These mysterious origins leave Mārūn uncertain which memories belong to his life with his birth family, which belong to his life with his adoptive family, and which are dreams, delusions, or deceptive.

Because Mārūn does not learn of his origins until he is an adult, he grows up under his murdered brother's shadow, uncertain why he is treated with fear and suspicion by nearly everyone who surrounds him. The murdered Mārūn's picture dominates the living room, the second Mārūn's clothes are all hand-me-downs from the first Mārūn, and the second Mārūn is not allowed to play soccer because the first Mārūn was kidnapped while playing. Although his new family largely accepts the new Mārūn as a replacement, he also remains an unsettling figure, constantly subjected to "strange looks" and expressions that resemble "unfathomable masks."[287]

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from the English edition unless otherwise noted. Citations include page numbers from both the Arabic and the English editions.

[286]Ibid 11; 3.

[287]Ibid, 49; 39, 16; 8.

These strange looks and faces seem to be searching him for signs of some buried secret; in the quote given above, for example, Mārūn's brother stares at him "as if he wanted to see something that he *couldn't* see-as if I were hiding another body within my own, a body beyond my body."[288] Later, he falls in love with a girl but her father refuses to allow their marriage, giving Mārūn a "strange look" before replying vaguely, "She's not right for you, and you're not right for her."[289] As the double of a murdered child, Mārūn is an uncanny figure both strange and familiar, both accepted as a member of the family and community and treated with suspicion and fear.

Mārūn's doubling, however, also functions on a second level: he is the son of two families, the child of both a murder victim and a murderer, born on one side of the demarcation line that divided wartime Beirut and raised on the other. Consequently, he is plagued by uncertain memories and unsettling dreams that he does not understand, given that he does not learn the truth about his origins until he is an adult. As a child, he finds that his memories are unstable; a childhood memory of a family meal, for example, suddenly transforms:

المشهد كلّه يتغيّر: هذا ليس بيت الأشرفيّة! هذا بيت آخر! وأرى وجوهاً غريبة وليست غريبة.

> The entire scene was changing before my eyes: it wasn't the Achrafieh house anymore, it was a different house. And I saw faces, at once strange and familiar.[290]

As a result, Mārūn often feels that he is more than one person or that his self is divided:

أذكر نفسي ولا أذكر. كأنّني أتذكّر حياة عاشها غيري. غريب هذا الإحساس. وفي الوقت ذاته ليس غريباً.

> I remember myself and I don't. It's like I'm remembering a life someone else has lived. Strange, this feeling. And at the same time not strange at all.[291]

[288]Ibid, 49; 39.
[289]Ibid 103; 86.
[290]Ibid 12-13; 4.
[291]Ibid 27; 18.

This contributes to his inability to tell his own story; he is hindered by memories that shift as he tries to grasp them. When he tries to organize his story in an "orderly fashion," "The images flood in and I'm powerless to stop them."[292]

After he learns the true story of his origins (that his father kidnapped him as a child after murdering his birth family, then renamed him and raised him as his own son), Mārūn's identity crisis intensifies. He is unable to focus on his studies; when he reads over what he has written, the words do not make sense to him. It is as if he has forgotten the English language and no longer understands mathematical equations. "Mārūn used to know these things, but how could I know them? I? Who was that?" he wonders.[293] When he passes his exams anyway, he wonders "Who was studying in my place while I looked at the symbols without grasping their meaning, without knowing what they were?"[294]

Mārūn's efforts to uncover his past and come to terms with his own unresolved traumas bring him into confrontation with unresolved Lebanese pasts and collective traumas. As a kidnap victim, Mārūn numbers among the roughly 17,000 individuals who went missing during the war whose fates remain unknown. He comes into contact with this collective trauma at a symposium at his university organized by an association for the kidnapped and the deceased in the war. They hand out "lists of names of those who'd been lost in the war and whose corpses hadn't been found."[295] As he pores over the columns of names, Mārūn asks himself:

أين إسمي؟ هل إسمي بين هذه الأسماء وأنا لا أعلم؟ وأمّي؟ وأبي؟ وأخوتي؟ هل أسماؤهم هنا أيضًا؟ لكن ماذا لو أنّ أبي بقي حيًّا؟ أو أمّي؟ أو أخوتي؟

> Where's *my* name? Is my name here somewhere and I don't know it? And my mother? My father? My siblings? Are their names here too? But what if my father's still alive? Or my mother? Or my siblings?[296]

[292]Ibid 21; 13.
[293]Ibid 112; 92.
[294]Ibid 115; 96.
[295]Ibid 139; 117-118.
[296]Ibid 140; 118. Emphasis in original.

Like the other 17,000 disappeared, Mārūn's own disappearance will likely never be solved; his memories are too uncertain to yield any clear clues. After being shot in 1976 during his kidnapping, he remembers only being "bedridden, feverish, caught between life and death";[297] his memories of this time are "dark and strange and fluid," they are "jumbled, and I don't trust them, I don't know if they're real or imagined..."[298]

As he attempts to solve his own kidnapping, Mārūn confronts a second national trauma: the erasure of the war's memory. After failing to recover his personal memories of his family, Mārūn turns to archival research; he begins in the library of the American University of Beirut, where he and his friend Anṭūn pour over newspapers on microfilm, looking for articles from 1976 (the year of Mārūn's kidnapping) for references to a white car "burned or riddled with bullets, empty or full of corpses."[299] They find hundreds of references to wrecked cars in the area of his kidnapping, but nothing to distinguish the car in which Mārūn's birth family was killed. They turn to the obituaries, also unsuccessfully. Anṭūn then attempts to convince a judge to look through the records of the domestic security services. The judge told him that all of the records from the war had "been burned or lost or stolen or destroyed"; records from the motor vehicles registry, their next line of inquiry, have also been destroyed.[300] Ilyā suggests that Mārūn speak with Iyfilīn (Evelyn) ʾĀzār, a woman who had helped find adoptive families in Lebanon and abroad for orphans, but she does not remember anything about Mārūn or his family. She suggests that he speak with the mayor (*al-mukhtār)*, but he has been dead for years. Anṭūn, finally, suggests that they take out an ad in the paper; Mārūn asks, "What would we write in the ad?"[301]

[297]Ibid 10-11; 3.
[298]Ibid, 11; 3.
[299]Ibid, 116; 96.
[300]Ibid, 116; 97.
[301]Ibid, 116-117; 97.

Again like *Bīrytūs*, Jābir as unreliable author implicates himself in this erasure. Jābir is often a distant figure in the novel; the narrator will occasionally address him directly and by name, but for many pages the reader is able to forget his presence in the text entirely. When Jābir does appear directly in the text, he does so in ways that make his interference-and the role that he played in constructing the text-visible. The text opens with the following line: "My father used to kidnap people and kill them."[302] Mārūn, however, tells Jābir in the middle of the novel:

إذا كتبت يوماً حياتي في كتاب يا ربيع أرجو أن تبدأ قصّتي بهذه الجملة: قوّصوني على خطّ التماس الذي يقطع بيروت نصفين سنة ١٩٧٦، وأبي حملني وأخذني إلى بيته.

> Rabee, if you ever write about my life one day, I want you to begin with that sentence: *They shot me in 1976, on the demarcation line that split Beirut in two, and my father picked me up and took me to his home*.[303]

The reader is aware that Rabīʿ Jābir did not honor this request; instead, Jābir delays the revelation of the protagonist's origins. This gesture implicates Jābir in Mārūn's inability to narrate his story and points, more broadly, to the inability of literature to offer the closure that Mārūn seeks. Such closure, the novel suggests, can only be found elsewhere, if at all.

In the novel, this closure is also portrayed as elusive because of a lack of resolution for the war itself. Mārūn's uncanny doubling situates him as not only a kidnap victim but the adopted son of a kidnapper and murderer. Mārūn is a hybrid figure, the son of both sides of the demarcation line and of both a victim and a perpetrator, although these lines are difficult to draw cleanly; his father, after all, kidnapped Mārūn in response to the kidnap and murder of his own son, the original Mārūn. This plot line, involving a child separated from his family due to violent conflict and raised by a family of a different religion or sect, evokes Ghassān Kanafānī's novella *ʿĀʾid ilā Ḥayfā* (1969; *Returning to Haifa*, 2000), which portrays Khaldūn, a Palestinian infant

[302]Ibid 9; 1.
[303]Ibid 31-32; 23.

left behind when his parents are forced to flee Haifa and given no opportunity to return home to collect their son. Years later, they return to Haifa only to find their son still living in the home they left behind; he has been adopted by a Jewish couple who had immigrated to Israel from Poland after fleeing the Holocaust, renamed Dov, and is currently serving in the IDF. The novella points to the impossibility of a return to the Palestine that exists only in the nostalgic memory of the refugee; this loss, it suggests, is a loss that cannot be redeemed.

As the son of a victim/perpetrator of violence, Mārūn is the heir to not only unredeemable losses but also the heir to a legacy of horrific crimes that have gone unpunished. During the war, Ilyā tells Mārūn, their father "turned from a human into a beast":[304]

خَطَفَ عائلات وقتلها. على طريق الشام خَطَفَ، على ساحة البرج خطف، وراء اللعازاريّة خطف، على المتحف خطف، على بشارة الخوري خطف، على السوديكو خطف، على مستديرة الصيّاد خطف، على المونتيفردي خطف، على جسر الباشا خطف...كان يدور ويدور ويدور، يخطف ويقتل، يخطف ويقتل.

> He kidnapped families and killed them. He kidnapped them on al-Sham Road, he kidnapped them at al-Burj Square, he kidnapped them behind the Lazariyyah Complex, and at the Museum, and at Bechara al-Khoury. He kidnapped them at Sodeco Square, at the al-Sayyad circle, by the Monteverde district, he kidnapped them on the bridge in Jisr al-Basha. . . .He went all over the place, everywhere, kidnapping and killing, kidnapping and killing.[305]

Mārūn also learns that their father participated in some of the most notorious massacres of the war, including the 22 January 1976 Karantīnā massacre, in which Phalangist militias massacred the residents of the Karantīnā shantytown, controlled by the PLO and home to a mixed population, including Kurds, Syrian migrant workers, Palestinians, and poor Lebanese.[306] His

[304]Ibid 18 ; 9. Here, I modified Kareem Abu-Zeid's translation.
[305]Ibid 28; 19.
[306]Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 364; Traboulsi, 192-193.

father also participated in the 12 August 1976 massacre at the Tal al-Zaʿtar Palestinian refugee camp, which resulted in hundreds of deaths.[307]

Ilyā and his friends, too, commit atrocities during the war; Mārūn recalls a friend of Ilyā's showing a group, including a twelve or thirteen year old Mārūn, a mysterious bag:

كان يفتح الكيس وعيونهم معلّقة على الكيس. فتحه ثم قلبه على الكفّ المبسوطة: رأيت ‹‹كلاً›› زجاجاً، ظننت أنّها ‹‹كلل››، طابات زجاج صغيرة غريبة الألوان لا أدري لماذا يجمعها مقاتل. عندما قال أحدهم إنّ هذه كلّها من ‹‹شاتيلا›› لم أفهم ماذا يقصد. لماذا أخبرك هذه القصّة؟ كيس مملوء عيوناً بشريّة!

> He was opening the bag, and everyone's eyes were glued to it. He opened it and turned it upside down over his outstretched palm. I saw marbles, or what I thought were marbles. They looked like small strangely colored glass globes, and I couldn't figure out why a fighter would collect them. When one of them said they were all from Shatila, I didn't understand what he meant. Why am I telling you this story? The bag was full of human eyes. Why am I telling you about this? Because it's a part of me.[308]

The reference to Shatila is a reference to one of the worst atrocities of the Lebanese war, namely the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres of Palestinian refugees perpetrated by the Lebanese Forces, a right-wing Maronite militia, as occupying Israeli troops looked on. The massacre left over a thousand Palestinians (and roughly one hundred Lebanese) dead.[309]

All of these crimes remain unresolved in the novel; their perpetrators remain unprosecuted, free to resume their normal lives after the end of the war. Mārūn's father leaves his past behind entirely, never speaking again about the crimes that he committed. The friend who participated in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, meanwhile, moved to Australia in 1987, where he married, had children, and started a small farm and a business selling carved wooden masks in

[307]Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 73-74; Traboulsi 201.
[308]Jābir, *Al-Iʿtirāfāt*, 90; 74.
[309]Traboulsi, 218.

the indigenous Australian style. Ilyā, too, remains free to walk the streets of postwar Beirut with Mārūn, pointing out bullet holes and telling him, "We used to gun them down right here."[310]

This lack of resolution for wartime crimes, the novel suggests, contributes to what appears like a cycle of violence in Lebanon. Mārūn narrates:

18 سنة مضت على انتهاء الحرب الأمليّة والآن يكتبون في الجرايد أنَّنا على باب حرب جديدة: من جديد سنقتل بعضنا. الجرايد تكتب هذا والناس يقولون هذا لكن أنا لا أصدّق. لا أصدّق لأنَّنا تحاربنا 15سنة وبعد 15 سنة على أن نرتاح، ربما بعد أربعين سنة أو خمسين نتحارب مرّة أخرى، هكذا يقول إيليّا. <<لا أنصح أحداً أن ينجب سلالة في هذا البلد>>، هكذا يقول إيليّا.

> Eighteen years have gone by since the end of the Civil War, and now we're on the brink of a new war, soon we'll be killing each other again. The papers are saying it, the people are saying it, but I don't think they're right. I don't believe it because we fought each other for fifteen years, and we need a break. Maybe we'll start fighting again in forty or fifty years—that's what Ilya says. 'I wouldn't advise anyone to start a family in this country,' that's what Ilya says.[311]

Immediately after this passage, Mārūn references wartime atrocities committed by his adoptive father, including the Karantīnā massacre referenced above. Positioning the memory of this massacre alongside Mārūn's fears that further violence will break out ("soon we'll be killing each other again") suggests a link between unresolved violence in the past and the potential future outbreak of violence.

The novel, however, also explores the consequences of unresolved war crimes from the perspective of the victim. As the son of a victim of violence, Mārūn experiences the trauma of becoming a frightening Other in the eyes of those around you. He is subjected to suspicious gazes throughout this child, which make him feel as if he is not a person at all but rather an inhuman "creature" (*makhlūq*). He narrates,"I see myself as two, as if I'd been split into two creatures, as if I weren't human."[312] These dehumanizing gazes even occasionally expose Mārūn

[310]Jābir, *Al-Iʿtirāfāt*, 28; 19.
[311]Ibid 26; 17.
[312]Ibid 111; 92. Here, I modified Kareem Abu-Zeid's translation.

to violence. One day, for example, Mārūn is playing with his brother Ilyā, who suddenly pushes him down the stairs; "Something had changed in him for no apparent reason, as if he'd remembered something, as if something had suddenly crossed his mind—and in the blink of an eye, he'd turned on me."[313] Mārūn's experience of becoming suddenly frightening and even inhuman in the eyes of a brother after engaging in friendly play, and being exposed to violence on that basis, can be read as an allegory for the outbreak of an internal war in which "sons" of the same nation turn on one another.

Mārūn's experience is portrayed in the novel as a collective one; to those in East Beirut, West Beirut, on the other side of the demarcation line, is home to terrifying and inhuman figures. As a child, Mārūn recalls a student asking their English teacher "Who lives behind the demarcation line, in West Beirut?" "Beasts and monsters," the teacher replies in English.[314] Later, Mārūn looks up the two words in English and comes to the conclusion that the people who live behind the demarcation line are "Beasts and monsters. Killers and ghosts. Animals and demons."[315] Later, Mārūn recounts rumors that he hears in class about people from "the other city":

إحدى البنات في صفّنا قالت إنها رأت في منامها <<هؤلاء>> يتسلّلون في الليل من وراء أكياس الرمل وأنّهم كانوا ناساً، مثل الناس، مثلنا، لكن وجوههم طويلة وتشبه وجه الكلب، وأظافرهم طويلة، ويخطفون الأطفال من أسرة الأطفال الصغيرة، ويصرخون ويركضون ويختفون ولا يبقى منهم أثر إلّا الرائحة الغريبة.

> Some of the girls in our class said they'd seen, in their dreams, "those people" sneaking in at night from behind the sandbags, and that they were humans just like everyone else, just like us, except their faces were longer and looked like the faces of dogs, and they had long fingernails, and they kidnapped young children from their families and then screamed and rushed away, leaving no trace but their strange smell.[316]

[313]Ibid 16; 7.
[314]Ibid 59; 47.
[315]Ibid.
[316]Ibid 63; 50.

After growing up with this image of West Beirut, Mārūn is startled to finally encounter the city himself when he begins his studies at the American University in Beirut; "I didn't find a ruined black city-no, I saw a city that looked like East Beirut."[317]

The novel's use of the word "beast" (*waḥsh*) to refer to both Mārūn's father, the kidnapper and the murderer, and the frightening Others who dwell in West Beirut raises the question for the reader of who the true monsters of the novel might be-are the frightening Others the source of horror in the text or is it those individuals who, in their savage violence during the war, lose their humanity? The novel ultimately suggests that it is the production of the frightening, bestial, and inhuman Other that is what truly drives cycles of violence in Lebanon. Ilyā tells Mārūn:

ربما اضطررت يوماً إلى حمل السلاح فهذه الحروب الطويلة ولا تنتهي الواحد إذا خسر معركة فهو لم يخسر الحرب ومن يربح مرّة يخسر في مرّة أخرى وهكذا دواليك حتى يمحو أحدنا الآخر، إمّا نحن إمّا هم، ونحن منذ قرون هنا ولن نذهب إلى مكان آخر.

> One day you might be forced to carry a weapon, because wars like this never end, and you might lose a battle but not the war: you win some battles and you lose some, and it will keep on going and going until one of us wipes out the other, it's us or them, but we've been here for centuries and aren't going anywhere.[318]

The only possible outcome of a war based upon the logic of "us or them," Ilyā suggests, is annihilation.

The novel's exploration of the "Othering" inherent in sectarian violence is also a critique of its logic. Mārūn is a hybrid figure who is both unsettling and largely accepted as a brother, a son, and a community member. He is both "us" and "them," existing outside the schema Ilyā identifies and, in doing so, seeming to offer an alternative to cyclical violence. That Mārūn has the power to disrupt sectarian violence based upon fear of the other is suggested by two separate incidents in the novel, one concerning Mārūn's father and the second concerning Ilyā. The first

[317]Ibid, 104; 86.
[318]Ibid, 77; 63.

incident is Mārūn's adoption; his adoptive father fired on a car filled with sectarian others with the intention of massacring them all. However, when a child jumps out of the car, bleeding and crying, who reminds him of his own son, Mārūn's father picks him up and takes him to his home rather than completing his massacre. Later, Ilyā, too, stops short of committing violence after a moment of empathy. While participating in the fighting, he is shot by a young boy; his friends tease him for being shot by a child and Ilyā confides that he was shot because he hesitated to shoot the boy, who reminded him of Mārūn.

Although resolution remains out of reach in the novel (Mārūn realizes that he will never uncover his birth identity and it is clear none of the novels' perpetrators will ever be brought to justice), it nevertheless ends on a somewhat hopeful note. One year on his birthday (or at least, on the date that his ID lists as his birthday; his actual date of birth remains unknown), Mārūn goes to a cafe to eat cake:

قطعت القطعة قسمين. أكلت القسم الأوّل ثمّ وضعت الشوكة من يدي ونظرت إلى الخارج. من دون أن أغمض عينيّ رأيت صوراً، ذكريات كثيرة مرَّت وأنا قاعد هكذا، والمكان ساكن...كنت في ذلك الباتيسري، ولم أكنْ. كنتُ في مكان آخر. حملت الشوكة وأكلت النصف الثاني من القطعة. كانت أطيب قطعة جاتوه أكلتها في حياتي. أكلت القطعة الكبيرة كلّها وجمعت الفتات بالشوكة وأكلته أيضاً. أكلت القطعة كلها وشعرت بالسعادة.

> I cut the piece in two. I ate the first half, then set down the fork and looked outside. Images, memories—so many of them—came and went as I sat there like that, though I didn't close my eyes. The place was calm...I was there and I wasn't. I was somewhere else. I picked up the fork and began eating the second half of the piece. It was the most delicious cake I'd ever had. I ate the whole piece and gathered up the crumbs on the fork and ate them too. I ate the whole piece, and felt happy.[319]

The two pieces of cake are a clear symbol for Mārūn's own divided self; by consuming both, he turns them into a "whole piece," a phrase which he repeats. Although Mārūn's efforts to discover his identity and his past are met with gaps and silences, not only in the archive but in his own

[319]Ibid, 142; 120.

memories, leaving him without resolution, here he seems nevertheless able to come to terms with a past that will remain unknowable. The passage implies that, when the past seems destined to remain unresolved and haunting, the only alternative that remains is learning to live with its unassimilated presence in the present. Such a task entails learning to live with the Other, an uncanny figure who allows unresolved trauma to maintain a haunting presence in the present instead of remaining repressed and invisible. Learning to live with this figure, the novel suggests, has the potential to disrupt a temporality characterized by cyclical violence and the fear of the Other that drives it.

CHAPTER 2: GOTHIC TEMPORALITIES IN POST-2003 IRAQI FICTION

Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of the post-2003 Iraqi novel has been the centrality of the grotesque, namely corpses presented to the reader in evocative passages that linger over descriptions of dead and mutilated bodies, rotting flesh, horrific odors, and severed limbs. Many of the novels that draw on this literary trend, I argue, can be situated in the postcolonial gothic genre, a genre that emerged in the colony and postcolony as a literary response to the gothic genre, which rose to popularity in Europe, particularly Britain, in the mid to late eighteenth century. The gothic genre is linked to psychoanalysis; the shadowy, antiquated settings of the genre are often read as representations of the unconscious mind, particularly Freud's understanding of it "as a deep repository of very old, infantile, and repressed memories or impulses, the archaic underworld of the self."[320] Entering these settings, then, allows the protagonist (and, by extension, the reader) to confront buried memories and anxieties, often embodied in monstrous, grotesque figures who blur the boundaries between the living and the dead.[321]

The buried anxieties explored by the gothic genre often centered around colonialism and race; with the rise of colonialism came increased contact with colonized "Others," producing, according to Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, a "growing fear in British society around 1800 of the consequences of the nation's exposure to colonial societies, nonwhite races, non-Christian belief systems, and the moral evils of slavery."[322] The gothic genre, in its attention to figures that provoke horror, "offered a language that could be appropriated, consciously or not, by racists in a

[320]Hogle, 3.
[321]Ibid, 3-4.
[322]Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction,* ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 229.

powerful and obsessively reiterated evocation of terror, disgust, and alienation."[323] British gothic novels, consequently, often explored colonial anxieties by depicting colonized lands and people as frightening and even grotesque Others.[324] As it did so, the genre tacitly supported the colonial projects that relied on such Othering.[325]

As the gothic genre traveled (in Edward Said's sense of the term)[326] to the colony and the postcolony, writers produced literary responses to the gothic genre that drew on its aesthetics of terror to represent and critique colonial violence and the ways in which its legacy lives on in the present. In "Writing the Dismembered Nation: the Aesthetics of Horror in Iraqi Narratives of War," Haytham Bahoora argues that the genre has traveled to post-2003 Iraq, where authors have drawn on its aesthetics in order to represent the "unspeakable violence" that has pervaded Iraq since the US invasion as well as "the return of the repressed and the deliberately silenced histories of the colonial," often to uncover the roots of ongoing issues, especially the failure of postcolonial national projects and the threat of national fragmentation.[327] In "Gothic Poets in Hassan Blasim's Fiction," Ikram Masmoudi also situates contemporary works of Iraqi fiction, particularly short stories by Ḥassan Blāsim, in the Gothic genre; to Masmoudi, these works also have a political resonance, working to offer "a counter claim to the false narrative of progress heralded by the new age of military intervention and occupation" and, ultimately, to "create a further affect that may lead to action and possibly change."[328] The publication of these articles reflects the growing prominence of the gothic genre in contemporary Iraqi fiction; a substantial

[323]H.L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3.
[324]Ibid.
[325] Sarah Ilott, "Postcolonial Gothic," in *Twenty-First Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 19.
[326]Edward W. Said, "Travelling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226–247.
[327]Haytham Bahoora, "Writing," 185; 192.
[328]Masmoudi, "Gothic Poetics," 67; 63.

and growing number of authors have produced works drawing on the thematic and aesthetic conventions of the genre, including Sinān Anṭūn, Ḍiyāʾ Jubaylī, Luʾay Ḥamza ʿAbbās, and the authors that I have selected for discussion below.

Although I draw on existing literature on the postcolonial gothic genre in post-2003 Iraq, especially its attentiveness to the ways in which the genre brings (neo)colonial narratives into question, I also foreground a dimension of the genre that has been neglected by this scholarship, namely the uncanny and the abject, a term which Julia Kristeva understands as that which "disturbs identity, system, order," or that "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[329] It consists of all that we expel from ourselves in order to maintain a coherent sense of our own identity; dung, for example, is abject because it blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, between the animate and the inanimate.[330] Once cast off, abject objects become unfamiliar and frightening, objects of terror that "both threaten to re-engulf us and promise to return us to our primal origins."[331] The frightening figures of gothic fiction have traditionally been abject figures who enabled the genre's often white and middle-class readership to "deal with the tangled contradictions fundamental to their existence by throwing them off onto ghostly or monstrous counterparts that then seem 'uncanny' in their unfamiliar familiarity while also conveying overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible by established standards of normality."[332]

The abject, crucially, has a temporal dimension. Abjection, in Kriesteva's terms, is an act of "primal repression"[333] It is the process through which humans establish a barrier between Self/Other; it "preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the

[329]Kristeva, 4.
[330]Ibid, 2-3.
[331]Hogle, 7.
[332]Ibid, 7.
[333]Kristeva, 12.

immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."[334] Kriestva associates it with the "primal," with "primitive societies," with "archaism";[335] this temporal language points to Kristeva's understanding of the abject as a temporal realm, one associated with a distant and primeval past. Although Kristeva is clear to separate the abject from the unconscious (the abject in Kristeva's formulation predates the formation of the unconscious), the language with which she speaks of the abject is reminiscent of Freud's understanding of the unconscious as the realm of the repressed, the primitive, and the infantile. Although Kristeva also separates the abject from the uncanny (understood in Freudian terms as the return of repressed content from the unconscious), the emotions evoked by the abject are quite similar to those sensations that Freud associates with the uncanny-namely a disturbing, uneasy feeling caused by that which is both familiar (in the case of the abject, because it was once internal to me) and unfamiliar (in that I have violently expelled it from myself).

In Iraqi fiction, the abject is a mode that authors have used to explore the return of content, especially traumatic pasts, that has been abjected from dominant narratives. Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād*, for example, foregrounds pasts left out of Iraq's national narrative, including the expulsion of Iraq's Jewish population from 1950-1952. The revelation that seemingly coherent narratives are in fact based on exclusion is an uneasy experience; Susanne Knittel's work on the "historical uncanny" is particularly relevant here. Knittel writes of uncanny "sites of memory" or *lieux de mémoire,* a term Pierre Nora defines in opposition to *milieux de mémoire*, "real environments of memory."[336] The terms are part of a broader distinction Nora draws between memory and history:

[334]Ibid, 10.
[335]Ibid, 10-13.
[336]Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, No. 26, 1989, 7.

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting…History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.[337]

History, to Nora, is the constructed narrative of a national past; sites of memory or *lieux de mémoire* are the embodiments of this construction, including physical sites like monuments and archives as well as textbooks, anniversaries, etc.[338] Knittel argues that these sites of memory are "not only a source of coherence and community but also an object of contestation and disagreement."[339] As a result, these sites are inherently uncanny, having the potential to "unexpectedly [extend] into the present, forcing a group of people to reevaluate their understanding of who they are and where they come from."[340] As Knittel describes them, sites of memory aim to produce "coherence and community," a process that entails the never entirely successful concealment of incoherence and disunity. When the disunity that these sites conceal unexpectedly reveals itself in the present, this produces the historical uncanny, a sensation that results when familiar and shared national histories have suddenly become unfamiliar sites of contestation.[341]

The works studied here reveal that which has been excluded from dominant narratives; as they do so, they play with the boundaries between truth and fiction, raising questions about the possibility of producing a coherent narrative at all. Because they are abject, the unwanted pasts these texts explore are also the realm of the fantastical, of superstition, of the irrational; these texts work to contaminate the "'purity' of history," and to establish a tension between

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[337]Ibid, 8.
[338]Ibid, 11-12.
[339]Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 7.
[340]Ibid, 9-10.
[341]Ibid, 7-8.

"counterfeit and authenticity, artifice and truth, fictions and histories."[342] As a genre, the gothic explores "the ways in which history itself, and certainly narratives of history, are not stable, do not constitute a rock to which we might cling…There is, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, only distortion – slips of the tongue, tricks of the eye, which ensure that what we see is always haunted by something else, by that which has not quite been seen, in history or in text."[343]

In Iraq, gothic fiction works to bring dominant historical narratives into question by staging the return of abject, repressed pasts embodied in fantastical figures who act as powerful metaphors of the ways in which silenced pasts continue to haunt the present, including animated corpses and ghosts. By exploring the resurgence of repressed pasts in supernatural or fantastical figures, these texts explore the inherently mythical and constructed dimension of historical and national narratives. Through abject and frightening figures like ghosts and the animated corpse, these texts suggest that such histories are based upon abjection and exclusion, ultimately advocating instead for a historical narrative that leaves room for the abject, the nonlinear, the haunting, and for events so horrific or outside of normative experience that they defy narrativization or documentation.

Azhar Jirjīs' Al-Nawm fī Ḥaql al-Karaz *(2019;* Sleeping in the Cherry Field*)*

Azhar Jirjīs (b. 1973) is an Iraqi author and journalist currently residing in Norway. In 2005, he published a satirical book titled *al-Irhāb...al-Jahīm al-Dunyawī* (*Terrorism...Earthly Hell*), which proved so controversial that it resulted in an assassination attempt. This prompted the author to flee Iraq and eventually settle in Norway, where he currently resides. *Al-Nawm fī Ḥaql al-Karaz* (2019; *Sleeping in the Cherry Field*), which was longlisted for the IPAF in 2020,

[342]Karen Grumberg, *Hebrew Gothic: History and the Poetics of Persecution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 1-2.
[343]David Punter, "Introduction: The Ghost of a History," in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 3.

is Jirjīs's first novel. He has also published two short story collections, titled *Fawqa Bilād al-Sawād* (2015; *Above the Country of Blackness*) and *Ṣāniʿ al-Ḥalwā* (2017; *The Sweetmaker*),[344] and a second novel, *Ḥajar al-Saʾādah* (2022; *Stone of Happiness*).

The protagonist of *Al-Nawm fī Ḥaql al-Karaz* is an Iraqi man living in exile in Norway, where he works as a mailman but writes in his free time. His life in Norway is bleak and stagnant; he spends much of his time in isolation and complains about the long winters and bitter cold of his new home. He suffers from chronic insomnia and intense migraines, which he treats with a ketamine prescription. At work, he is tormented by his tyrannical boss. He is unmarried and lives alone; early into his life in Norway, he fell in love with Tūnā Yansīn (Jensen), his former English teacher. Although he had hoped to marry her, she suddenly ends their relationship and disappears. Eventually, Saʿīd is able to discover that she has died, having broken off their relationship after receiving a terminal cancer diagnosis.

Saʿīd's bleak and empty life in Norway is interrupted only by periodic visits from the grotesque ghost of his father, a left-wing opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime who was arrested and vanished into a regime prison before his son's birth; presumably, he is deceased, but his family has never received his remains or a death certificate. After his arrest, his wife destroys all records pertaining to her husband and all photographs, meaning that Saʿīd has never seen his father's face. The father's erasure situates him in the realm of the abject, a cast-off, excluded figure who is visible to his son only in a variety of gristly guises that conceal his face, each of which seems to represent a potential fate that may have befallen his father's remains. This ghost is described in evocative, even gruesome passages:

[344]Tugrul Mende, "Azher Jirjees: Writing an Iraqi Postman in Norway," *ArabLit*, February 6, 2020.

زارني ذات مرّة في شُرفة الشقّة مقطوع الرأس يخرج الصوت من ثقب أسود في عنقه، وحين اقتربت منه تلاشى مع الريح. وفي وقت لاحق ظهرَ أمامي في محطة المترو مشطوراً إلى نصفين لا يشبه أحدهما الآخر. ورأيته في أحد المساءات نائماً قربي على هيئة عجينة بشريّة غير مكسوّة بالجلد.[345]

> He visited me once on the balcony of my apartment, decapitated, his voice emerging from a black hole in his neck. When I approached him, he vanished with the wind. Later, he appeared before me in the metro station split into two halves, each unlike the other. I saw him one evening sleeping near me in the form of a skinless pile of flesh.

The intrusion of the horrific into banal and everyday settings is a frequent and uncanny occurrence in the text, which portrays Saʿīd as haunted by the unwanted and often intrusive burden of a traumatic past that he can neither cast-off entirely nor resolve.

This past has haunted Saʿīd since childhood; although Saʿīd has no images of his father, Nāṣir Mardān, his mother is determined to preserve his memory for her son:

لقد أدمنتْ أمي على تذكيري بحكايتها مع ناصر مردان؛ المعلّم الذي خسر حياته لأنه لم يكتفِ بأن يحلم بالحريّة، بل تطاول وتحدّث عن حلمه بصوت مسموعٍ.[346]

> My mother was dedicated to reminding me of her story with Nāṣir Mardān, the teacher who lost his life because he did not stop dreaming of freedom and, instead, had the audacity to speak about his dream out loud.

His mother, however, does not repeat this story so that Saʿīd might be inspired by his father's example but rather to teach him an important lesson, that "speaking about freedom under the shadow of an oppressive regime is like having sex in the middle of the road," that is to say, dangerous and extremely taboo.[347] Fearing that the fate of her husband will also befall her son, his mother raises him to avoid provoking the ire of the regime, warning Saʿīd constantly that "the walls have ears."[348] She lives in fear that her son will also be arrested and disappear, a fear that

[345]Azhar Jirjīs, *al-Nawm fī ḥaql al-karaz* (Beirut: Dār al-Rāfidīn, 2019), 14-15. All translations of Jirjīs's novel are mine.
[346]Ibid, 35.
[347]Ibid.
[348]Ibid.

nearly becomes reality when she learns that Saʿīd is wanted by the authorities for telling a joke about the president to a friend who turns out to be an informant. Rather than risk her son's arrest, she helps Saʿīd to flee the country; he eventually reaches Norway, where he currently resides. Even in safety abroad, he remains haunted by his father's ghost, the traumatic legacy of dictatorship.

The novel's portrayal of a son haunted by his father's ghost draws on a gothic trope, that of a historic misdeed or buried crime which has gone unpunished and, therefore, returns insistently in the present (as in, for example, Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"). The return of the father's ghost is reminiscent, in particular, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, arguably a gothic tragedy. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of the father returns to place a demand upon his living son, asking him to avenge his death. The ghost of Saʿīd's father also haunts him with a demand, repeatedly asking him to find his grave and to give him a proper burial. Also as in *Hamlet*, Saʿīd's efforts to fulfill the task set before him transform him into an unreliable narrator, one who uneasily blurs the line between reason and madness, as well as reality and imagination.

As an abject figure, the ghost also blurs boundaries, transgressing the barriers that separate the living from the dead and the "real" from the illusory or imaginative (or, perhaps, the "real" from the fictional, given that the novel is presented to the reader as a text "authored" by Saʿīd himself). The ghost appears in a variety of everyday locations, often appearing as an ordinary individual before transforming abruptly into a grotesque corpse. In one scene, for example, Saʿīd is riding a bus home. The ride begins normally, then a passenger boards the bus and rides for several stops. Some time later, Saʿīd looks up from his book and notices that blood is running down the man's head and onto the floor of the bus, flooding it; the man, Saʿīd's father,

approaches and begins to remove his blood-stained scarf to show him his face. Before he can, Saʿīd wakes up and realizes that he had fallen asleep on the bus.[349]

Saʿīd's account of his efforts to lay his father's ghost to rest similarly plays with the reader's perceptions and expectations, repeatedly revealing scenes initially presented as true to be imaginary and leading the reader to anticipate a resolution that ultimately proves elusive. The first chance at resolution begins when Saʿīd receives a phone call from his journalist friend, ʿAbīr, who tells him that a mass grave believed to contain his father's remains has been uncovered. [350] He immediately leaves for Iraq; upon arrival, however, his hopes of laying his father's remains to rest are repeatedly dashed. Once Saʿīd reaches the grave site, he realizes that the remains have not been identified; relatives are left to peer at piles of bones, hoping that they will recognize their missing relatives. After 37 years, only bones remain, leaving relatives unable to identify the corpses; each group selects a skeleton more or less at random. Saʿīd does the same, choosing a skull that feels connected to him, snapping a photo of it and placing the skeleton into a bag to take with him,[351] suggesting that he has achieved resolution despite his inability to properly identify his father's remains.

This brief moment of connection, however, is soon ripped away when the bones are run over by a car and crushed.[352] Undeterred, Saʿīd hopes to return to Norway with the photo, planning to have it buried with him so that his father can at last rest in peace. This plan, too, is foiled when Saʿīd is killed in an explosion. After his death, Saʿīd sees his father waiting for him and at last sees his face, suggesting that Saʿīd has managed to find closure despite all odds. An epilogue written by the frame narrator, however, reveals that this encounter was imaginary; Saʿīd

[349]Ibid, 104-105.
[350]Ibid, 125-126.
[351]Ibid, 193.
[352]Ibid, 195-196.

in fact died in Norway alone without ever reuniting with his father or returning to Baghdad.[353] He is unable to bury his father or even return to Iraq himself, a country that he had been forced to flee years earlier; the novel ultimately leaves both of these two injustices unresolved.

Saʿīd's failed journey plays with the reader, repeatedly offering the possibility that Saʿīd's father will be laid to rest and that Saʿīd's life will move forwards only to place it out of reach; in the end, the entire journey is revealed to have been imaginary, the plot of a novel Saʿīd finishes shortly before his death. Saʿīd's imaginary journey is part of a much larger tension in the novel, namely the tension between reality and fiction that is often associated with the gothic and with the uncanny. The novel establishes this tension from its opening pages, which present the text as a "found" manuscript, a stylistic gesture that is common in gothic fiction.[354] Jirjīs's novel is introduced by a frame narrator, who presents the novel to the reader as a "real" text authored by its protagonist, who initially appears to be relating the events of his life as they actually occurred. The frame narrator (who tells the reader that the text is a "manuscript" (*makhṭūṭah*) rather than a novel) is given the text at a party and informed that the author is Saʿīd Yansīn[355] (who bears a number of similarities to Azhar Jirjīs, including a background in producing satirical fiction, leaving the reader uncertain if the text contains autobiographical elements or is entirely fictional). Because he is familiar with Saʿīd's work, the frame narrator agrees to prepare the text for publication.[356] At the end of the novel, he provides the reader with information that exposes certain aspects of the text as true and others as false. This structure lends the novel an air of authenticity by presenting it as a manuscript with a "real" author. The frame narrator, however,

[353]Ibid, 219-222.
[354]Grumberg, 2.
[355]Saʿīd takes the surname of his partner, Tuna Jensen, after her death.
[356]Jirjīs, 8-9.

also disrupts this illusion of authenticity by telling the reader which parts of the story actually took place and which parts sprung from the author's imagination.

This uncanny interplay between reality and illusion and between past and present allows the novel to stage an often biting and sarcastic critique of the ways in which the US narrativized the invasion of Iraq, playing with the boundaries between reality and fiction in order to expose the gaps between this narrative and reality. Saʿīd's experience at the mass grave site takes place in 2005, by which time it had become clear that the initial justifications for the invasion, namely the Bush administration's claims that the Iraqi government possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and that it had ties to al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks in 2001, did not hold water. This left the Bush Administration struggling to justify the invasion to an increasingly dissatisfied American public, leading it to increasingly focus on the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime to justify the invasion as a humanitarian mission aimed at establishing Iraq as a bastion of democracy in the Middle East. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence was the mass graves that began to be unearthed soon after the invasion, which were filled with executed opponents of the regime or the victims of regime-perpetrated massacres. The US, however, ultimately failed to live up to its promises to uncover the graves in a way that would facilitate identification of the remains and the prosecution of those responsible for their deaths. US-led forces failed to preserve evidence that could be used in future prosecutions at mass grave sites and failed to secure the sites, leaving relatives to exhume mass graves and attempt to identify their family members themselves.[357]

The novel's portrayal of Saʿīd's repeated failures to lay his father's ghost to rest can be read as an allegory for the ways in which the US invasion seemed to offer hope that the victims

[357]"Iraq: State of the Evidence," *Human Rights Watch* 16.7 E (2004), https://www.hrw.org/reports/iraq1104.pdf, 2-3; 25-26.

of the regime would finally receive justice, only to replicate the abuses of the regime by failing to identify uncovered remains, ensure that they received a proper burial, or prosecute those responsible for their deaths. Not only did the invasion fail to ensure justice for the regime's victims, it also unearthed their bodies to justify further violence, namely the US invasion, in their name. The novel's staging of a tension between fiction and reality ultimately points to the gaps between the ways in which the US invasion represented itself (as a humanitarian mission seeking justice for the regime's victims) and what it actually accomplished. Through its depiction of Saʿīd's repeated failures to lay his father's ghost to rest, the novel refutes the portrayal of the invasion as a humanitarian mission and emphasizes, instead, the ways in which the US invasion replicated the necropolitical violence of the regime and ensured that its violent and traumatic legacies would continue to haunt the present as abject ghosts, uneasy reminders of the never completely erased abuses of the regime and US invading forces.

In addition to the failure of the US to ensure justice for the victims of the regime, the novel also makes a number of references to the devastating impact of the invasion on the living, especially the looting, destruction, and deteriorating security situation.[358] Saʿīd laments, "It seemed as if they had made an alliance to bring down a country, not a regime."[359] One particularly noteworthy scene takes place in a library in Norway; Saʿīd flips through a book and comes across a photograph of a plane with a US soldier standing next to it. The caption informs Saʿīd that the plane was used in the Vietnam War; the soldier standing next to it making a victory gesture was doing so, Saʿīd reflects, after "dropping his cargo of death" on the Vietnamese people.[360] Looking at the photograph causes Saʿīd to recall his own childhood experiences living through bombings, either during the Gulf War or the Iran-Iraq War (it is unclear which). He

[358]Jirjīs, 31.
[359]Ibid.
[360]Ibid, 28.

recalls playing soccer in an alley with friends when a siren went off, causing all of the children to flee in terror to their homes. Once home, he hid under his equally terrified mother's dress waiting for disaster to befall them.[361] These memories speak to the devastating impact of war on those who must live through it, even if they are fortunate enough to survive.

After placing the US's narrative of the invasion into doubt, the novel suggests that the invasion was motivated by the imperatives of disaster capitalism, namely the fact that, due to post-invasion involvement of foreign corporations in the extraction of Iraqi oil, a substantial portion of Iraq's oil revenues leave the country. The novel makes this case in a key scene which, despite its illusory nature, ultimately proffers the possibility of an exit from a temporality characterized by the repetition of necropolitical violence and the haunting presence of its victims. The scene takes place in Iraq during Saʿīd's journey to recover his father's remains. The van transporting him and a group of other passengers to Baghdad runs out of gas mid-route; the group is stranded on the side of the road until a group of American soldiers stops and offers the stranded travelers gas from a strange can with a picture of a "blue ghoul" (*ghūl azraq*) on it. When the travelers resume their journey, they discover that the new fuel works too well, propelling the van forward at a terrifying speed. When the van arrives in Baghdad, Saʿīd and his fellow passengers discover that they have traveled forwards in time from 2005 to 2023. The Baghdad of the future that greets them is beautiful and clean, filled with skyscrapers; Saʿīd describes it as a paradise (*jannah*).[362] After discovering that he has traveled in time, Saʿīd looks for information about the blue ghoul gasoline on the internet, discovering that it was invented by the US Defense Department in 1994, yet not tested until 2003; Saʿīd and his fellow passengers were unwitting participants in an experiment.[363] Soon, however, the skyscrapers begin to sway

[361]Ibid, 28-29.
[362]Ibid, 141-146.
[363]Ibid, 156.

and Baghdad begins to crumble; Saʿīd wakes up to find himself back in the van, having just arrived in 2005 Baghdad, which is yellow with dust and looks "as if it had been hit by a hurricane."[364] The magical gasoline that propels Saʿīd into a bright, if ultimately illusory, future, is a clear allegory for the future that could have awaited Iraq had it been able to profit from its oil resources and, perhaps, if the US had not treated Iraq as a site in which to experiment with nation building.

The alternative future that this passage briefly conjures, in which Iraq has become a modern and paradisiacal utopia, echoes the vision of Saʿīd's friend and fellow Iraqi in exile, Jamāl Saʿdūn. Unlike Saʿīd, Jamāl greets the US invasion and the fall of "the tyrant" with excitement; Saʿīd is much more pessimistic, telling Jamāl,"The country is burning, man, and people are dying!"[365] Jamāl dismisses his concerns, replying:

> لن يموت أحد، صدّقني، هم يعرفون عملهم، المهم أننا ينتخلّص من الطاغية أخيراً، ويغدو العراق جنّةً مثل لاس فيغاس.[366]
>
> No one will die, believe me. They know what they're doing. What matters is that we'll finally be rid of the tyrant and Iraq will become a paradise like Las Vegas.

He then informs Saʿīd that he plans to return to Iraq to participate in rebuilding the country.[367] Although Jamāl's position is clearly overly optimistic and naive (as would be clear to any reader aware of the real and devastating consequences of the US invasion), his portrayal also situates him as an active and forward-thinking person, in contrast to the stagnant and pessimistic Saʿīd. Jamāl suffered much more under the regime than Saʿīd; he was imprisoned for two years on a treason charge after his long beard and visits to the mosque aroused the suspicions of the authorities. When he emerged from prison, his changed appearance, the result of torture and a lack of food and sunlight, rendered his father unable to recognize him; the torture, also caused

[364]Ibid, 161.
[365]Ibid, 25.
[366]Ibid.
[367]Ibid.

him to "lose his manhood," or become impotent.[368] His suffering (and the loss of his manhood) does not prevent him from remaining active and hopeful in the present; in fact, he has been so for as long as Saʿīd has known him:

كان جمال، ومنذ أن عرفته، يعدّ الأيام بلا كلل لسقوط النظام و بدل السلطة في العراق. لم يساوره الشك يوماً ولم ييأس من مجيء تلك اللحظة. وعندما جاءت، راح يرقص حتى الصباح من المرح والسعادة...[369]

> For as long as I've known him, Jamāl has been tirelessly counting the days until the fall of the regime and the transfer of power in Iraq. He was not beset with doubt for a single day and never gave up hope that that moment would come. And when it came, he would dance until morning with joy…

His optimism sets him apart from Saʿīd, who mocks him for his optimism and opts to remain in Norway alone. This portrayal is ironic; although Jamāl is sexually impotent, Saʿīd is politically impotent.

Saʿīd comes into contact with this alternative temporality once more in the novel, in an imagined conversation with his father, the ghost of a murdered political activist. In this conversation, Saʿīd tells his father that he plans to return to Norway without his bones, having given up on ensuring that they receive a proper burial. His father's ghost urges him to remain in Iraq and to fight for the future of the country; Saʿīd replies, irritated:

وماذا جنيتَ أنتَ من النضال؟ كوْم عظام في مقبرة جماعية! أتريد أن ينتهي بي الحال في مقبرة جماعية كي لا تنعتني بالجُبن؟ لا يا أبي، دعني فوق التراب، وقلْ عني ألف جبان.[370]

> And what did you gain from fighting? A pile of bones in a mass grave! Do you want me to end up in a mass grave so that you won't call me a coward? No, father, I'll stay above ground and you can call me a coward a thousand times.

His father tells him that the time of mass graves is over; Saʿīd insists that it is ongoing. His father asks him if there is no hope and Saʿīd replies that there is, "but it was kidnapped, bound with

[368]Ibid, 27-31.
[369]Ibid, 27.
[370]Ibid, 210.

thick rope, thrown into a dark cellar, and locked in with an iron key."[371] As this conversation suggests, the novel ends on a rather pessimistic note; Saʿīd dies alone in Norway of a ketamine overdose, either a suicide or an accidental overdose aimed at easing the pain of his inability to mourn his father's death and the loneliness of his life in exile. He is buried in a cherry field, his chosen burial site; in exile, he has succeeded in finding only a "suitable death, not a suitable life."[372]

The alternative temporality that the novel conjures remains unrealized; it is a naive dream or a fantastical moment of time travel in which Iraq is fully modernized in the space of a few years, transforming into a "paradise" or "Las Vegas." Although the novel presents this alternative vision of the future as fantastical and efforts to reach it as naive, the novel also portrays ongoing reality as illusory, haunted by the abject victims of violence, uncertain, and even deceiving. As the novel explores the constructed nature of the US narrative of the invasion and the ways in which it constituted a repetition of past violence perpetrated by the regime, it also destabilizes this reality with illusion and the supernatural in ways that allow alternative temporalities, ones no longer haunted by the ghosts of unresolved pasts, to become visible even if they remain, for the moment, out of reach.

Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād *(2013;* Frankenstein in Baghdad, *2018)*

Aḥmad Saʿdāwī, a novelist, poet, and documentary filmmaker, was born in Baghdad in 1973.[373] Formerly a journalist, Saʿdāwī worked for a number of media organizations before joining the BBC in 2005; he later left this position in order to pursue literary writing full-time.[374]

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[371]Ibid, 210.
[372]Ibid, 211.
[373]ʿAbd al-Razzāq Būkabba, "Aḥmad Saʿdāwī…al-Kitāba bil-Dam," *Al-Jazeera*, May 1, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2014/5/1/أحمد-سعداوي-الكتابة-بالدم.
[374] Zahra Hankir, "Ahmed Saadawi Wants to Tell a New Story About the War in Iraq," *Lit Hub*, Jan. 18, 2018.

Journalism, as he notes in interviews, offered him the opportunity to document ongoing war yet could not capture the full complexity of ongoing events:

> In journalism, a headline might say "13 people dead and 20 wounded", but that's that. Journalism can be forgotten…But in literature, I will find one of the deceased, go to his family home, meet his wife and his children, see into his dreams, and learn about what he was thinking and feeling—even what he felt the moment he died.[375]

Saʿdāwī has written several poetry collections and five novels, *al-Balad al-Jamīl* (2004; *The Beautiful Country*), *Innahu Yaḥlum aw Yalʿabb aw Yamūt* (2008; *He is Dreaming or Playing or Dying)*, *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* (2013; *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, 2018), *Bāb al-Ṭabashīr* (2017; *The Chalk Door*), and *Mudhakkirāt Dī* (2019; *Diary of D*).

The abject figure at the center of Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkishtāyn fī Baghdād* is an animated corpse, a composite of stitched-together fragments of bombing victims that comes to life and begins to seek justice for the deaths of its parts. The corpse is a horrifying figure; one of the more noteworthy aesthetic features of the novel is its tendency to linger over descriptions of the corpse's repellant appearance and decomposing flesh in evocative passages that provoke an almost visceral feeling of disgust, producing an aesthetic of the grotesque that is common in the gothic genre.[376] Saʿdāwī introduces the corpse to the reader, for example, in this passage:

كانت المساحة المتبقية مشغولة بشكل كامل بجثة عظيمة. جثة رجل عارٍ تنزُّ من بعض أجزاء جسده المجرّح سوائل لزجة فاتحة اللون... لم يكن لون الجثة واضحاً، لم يكن لها لون متجانس على أية حال...كان موضع الأنف مشوهاً بالكامل. وكأنه تعرض لقضمة من حيوان متوحش.

> The rest of the shed was dominated by a massive corpse-the body of a naked man, with viscous liquids, light in color, oozing from parts of it...It was hard to say what color the skin was-it didn't have a uniform color...The area where the nose should have been was badly disfigured, as if a wild animal had bitten a chunk out of it.[377]

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[375]Ibid.
[376]Hogle, 6-8.
[377]Aḥmad Saʿdāwī *Frānkshtāyin fī Baghdād,* (Freiberg: Al-Kamel Verlag, 2013), 33-34; Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 26.

The corpse is a composite of victims left behind in the aftermath of explosions. These fragmented remains are gathered by a junk-seller, Hādī, who is horrified by the sight of literally disposable corpses left to rot in the streets like trash, especially after the death of his friend, Nāhim, in an explosion that left his fragmented remains mingled with those of the horse pulling his cart. In the morgue:

وهناك أصيب بصدمة كبيرة، حين شاهد كيف اختلط جثث ضحايا التفجير مع بعض. قال موظف في المشرحة لهادي؛ اجمع لك واحداً تسلّمه، خذ هذه الرجل وتلك اليد وهكذا.

> Hādī was shocked to see that the bodies of explosion victims were all mixed up together and to hear the mortuary worker tell him to put a body together and carry it off—take this leg and this arm and so on.[378]

After this experience, Hādī begins to collect the severed remnants of victims left behind in the aftermath of bombings,[379] explaining his actions to in a story related to customers at his local coffee shop as follows:

-كنت أريد تسليمه الى الطب العدلي، فهذه جثة كاملة تركوها في الشوارع وعاملوها كنفاية. انه بشر يا ناس..إنسان يا عالم...أنا عملتها جثة كاملة حتى لا تتحول الى نفايات...حتى تحترم مثل الأموات الآخرين وتدفن يا عالم.

> "I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like trash. It's a human being, guys, a person…I made it complete so it wouldn't be treated as trash, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial," Hadi explained.[380]

Hādī's project is inspired by witnessing the effects of necropolitical violence, particularly the ways in which it reduces the lives of human beings to trash or to little more than animal life, as the scene in which Nāhim's remains mingle with those of his horse suggests. In the face of such violence, Hādī collects the literally disposable human remains left behind at bomb sites and attempts to restore them to their proper status as human beings. In this respect, Saʿdāwī's text

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For all citations of this novel, the pages for the Arabic original are given first, followed by the pages in the English translation.

[378]Ibid 265; 222.

[379]Ibid, 32; 24.

[380]Ibid, 34; 27.

(and Hādī's project) can be read in line with recent scholarship on the posthuman gothic, scholarship that delves into the overlap between gothic texts that feature monstrous characters who blur the boundaries between the human and the non-human and posthumanism, a philosophical framework that seeks to "redefine the boundaries of the human, and call into question the hierarchies of human/non-human."[381] Hādī's project attempts to reinsert the disposable, bare lives of bombing victims back into the realm of humanity, allowing them to receive a proper burial and to reclaim their human dignity.

Interestingly, the scenes at the morgue that inspired Hādī's project (and his narrative of the corpse) closely parallel scenes from Saʿdāwī's life that inspired this novel. In 2006, as Saʿdāwī states in an interview, he was working as a journalist for the BBC covering the war in Iraq. Although he saw "many dead bodies…Many body parts" over the course of this assignment, one incident at the morgue particularly captured his attention.[382] A young man entered the morgue to claim the remains of his brother who had recently been killed in an explosion; the morgue attendant led him into a room filled with severed remains and directed him to one body part in a corner. When the young man asked for the rest of his brother's body, the morgue attendant told him to "take what you want, and make yourself a body."[383]

An abject figure, the corpse embodies a temporality characterized by the mingling of the rational and the supernatural, the modern and the pre-modern; it is the product of necropolitical violence, of modern warfare, and of various supernatural forces that led to its animation. After Hādī stitches it together, the corpse is inhabited by the soul (*rūḥ*) of a security guard, Ḥasīb Muḥammed Jaʿfar, who has been killed in a car bombing that fragmented his remains. Left without a body, his soul wanders aimlessly until he encounters another soul who tells him that he

[381]Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 14 .
[382]Hankir.
[383]Ibid.

must find a body to inhabit "or else things are going to end badly."[384] He stumbles across the corpse that Hādī has stitched together and inhabits it; the corpse is then called to life by Īlīshwā (rendered Elishva in the English translation), an elderly Christian woman who mistakes it for her son, Dānyāl (Daniel), who was conscripted to fight in the Iran-Iraq war and never returned.[385]

The corpse is part of a broader post-invasion milieu marked, in Saadawi's novel, by the confluence of modern warmaking and intelligence apparatuses and supernatural forces. In Saʿdāwī's Iraq, the old regime employed a team of magicians that "cast spells to keep the Americans away from Baghdad"; the Americans, however, "besides their arsenal of advanced military hardware, possessed a formidable army of djinn, which was able to destroy the djinn that this magician and his assistants had mobilized."[386] After successfully taking power in Iraq, the Americans establish a "special information unit" with "analysts in parapsychology, astrologers, people who specialize in communication with spirits and with the djinn, and soothsayers":

مهمتها متابعة كل الجرائم الغريبة، والأساطير والخرافات التي تنشأ حول حوادث معينة من أجل الوصول إلى القصة الواقعية الفعلية، والأهم من ذلك هو قيامهم بوضع نبوءات عن الجرائم التي ستحدث مستقبلاً؛ التفجيرات بالسيارات المفخخة، وجرائم اغتيال المسؤولين وكبار الشخصيات…

> Its mission was to monitor unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumors that arose around specific incidents, and then to find out what really happened and, more important, to make predictions about crimes that would take place in the future: car bombings and assassinations of officials and other important people.[387]

Placing the corpse in this temporality in which the modern and mythical, the fantastical and the real mix allows the corpse to explore the mythical dimension of narratives, both of the

[384]Saʿdāwī, 46; 39.
[385]Ibid, 72-73; 62-63.
[386]Ibid, 159; 145.
[387]Ibid, 86; 75.

invasion/war and of Iraqi history itself, which offer an illusion of coherence but are necessarily constructed, imagined, and incomplete. As Saʿdāwī states in an interview:

> Religious belief, political belief, dogma: all of them tell a story and say, This is the truth. People will fight another to assert the truth of their story. Novels tell us that in fact there isn't one story. Everybody has a piece of a true story. It is like the story of the blind people and the elephant.[388]

The novel deliberately positions the corpse as a site in which a variety of narratives intersect. The first attempt to narrativize the corpse takes place at the hands of the man who originally sewed it together, Hādī; he relates the story of the corpse, which he names the "Whatsitsname" [*al-shismah*], in a coffee shop in a chapter tellingly titled "The Liar." His listeners doubt the veracity of his story; two listeners, a German journalist and an Iraqi journalist, Maḥmūd al-Sawādī, exchange the following comments:

> -هذا يروي فلماً...إنه يقتبس من فلم شهير لروبرت دي نيرو.
>
> -نعم..هو يشاهد افلاماً كثيرة على ما يبدو..إنه شخص مشهور في المنطقة.
>
> -كان عليه أن يذهب إلى هوليوود إذن.

> "That guy's recounting the plot of a movie," she said to Mahmoud as he walked out of the coffee shop.
>
> "He's stolen his story from a Robert de Niro film."
>
> "Yes, it looks like he watches lots of movies. He's well known in the area."
>
> "Then he should have gone to Hollywood."[389]

Maḥmūd, who dismisses Hādī's story as a sensationalized piece of plagiarism, is himself unable to offer a credible narrative of the Whatsitsname that is free of sensationalism. He writes an article on Hādī's story, which his boss retitles "Frankenstein in Baghdad," even adding a picture of Robert de Niro from the film adaptation of Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* against

[388]"The blind and the elephant: a conversation with Ahmed Saadawi and Jonathan Wright," *Pen Transmissions*, Nov. 2, 2018.
[389]Saʿdāwī, 26; 19.

Maḥmūd's wishes.[390] Although Maḥhmūd had wanted to write a "truthful and objective" account, his boss, who "was all about hype," undermines his attempt.[391]

The novel itself is an unstable narrative of the corpse that blurs the lines between truth and fiction, often through the use of metafictional techniques that produce a "tension between counterfeit and authenticity, artifice and truth, fictions and histories," which is a major preoccupation of the gothic genre.[392] The novel opens with a top-secret government report that references a mysterious figure referred to only as "the author" who has written a story about the Whatsitsname. The "story" referenced is "about 250 pages long, divided into seventeen chapters";[393] the novel is divided into nineteen chapters and is somewhat longer. In the first of these two additional chapters left out of the top-secret report, "the author" makes an appearance as a first person narrator. This figure, who bears a number of uncanny similarities to Aḥmad Saʿdāwī, interviews a number of the novel's key figures, purchases the recordings made by the Whatsitsname from Maḥmūd al-Sawādī, and receives leaked government documents.[394] Then, he is detained after attracting the attention of the authorities and a copy of his novel is confiscated (this confiscated text is the "story" referenced in the top-secret report).[395] These scenes both portray the events of the novel as "real" events researched by the author and highlight the text's constructedness, presenting the text's account of the Whatsitsname's story as another unreliable narrative mediated through the perspective of its author, a figure who, in the novel, offers a number of possible conclusions about the Whatsitsname (is he Hādī himself, or Hādī's neighbor Abū Sālim, whose voice resembles the voice of the Whatsitsname in the recordings, or truly an animated corpse?) but ultimately leaves the text's central questions unanswered. The unreliability

[390]Ibid, 153; 139.
[391]Ibid, 153; 139.
[392]Grumberg, 2.
[393]Saʿdāwī, 7; 1-2.
[394]Ibid, 306-326; 248-261.
[395]Ibid, 338.; 270-271.

of the author's narrative is also suggested by the novel's title, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: the sensationalistic title of a news article which neither Hādī, nor Maḥmūd, nor the Whatsitsname liked or would have chosen themselves.

The fantastical, mythical elements of the text, as well as the text's emphasis on narrative instability, open an engagement with Iraq's national narrative through the body of the corpse who is, in the eyes of one of his followers, "Iraqi citizen number one."[396] The Whatsitsname is composed of body parts which belong to all of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups; he also came to life in al-Batāwīn, a neighborhood in Baghdad which Saʿdāwī spent a year and a half researching prior to writing this novel.[397] As stated in interviews, he selected this neighborhood "because of the multiplicity of communities that have lived there"; the neighborhood is known for having been home, at various points in its history, to Christians, Jews, and Muslims, as well as immigrants from various parts of the Arab world.[398] The novel reflects this diversity in its selection of a range of characters from various religious backgrounds from al-Batāwīn.

Although the Whatsitsname reflects Iraqi diversity, the national narrative that it ultimately embodies is one based upon abjection; the animated corpse/Iraqi citizen embodies those histories that needed to be abjected in order for a coherent Iraqi narrative to come into being. The first of these is the colonial era. Because the Whatsitsname is composed of body parts which belong to all of Iraq's ethnic and sectarian groups, one of his followers sees him as "the model citizen that Iraq has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I." This passage links the corpse's origin story to the colonial era, when Britain received a mandate from the League of Nations to rule Iraq after World War I; Britain united the former Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra, bringing Iraq into being as a unified entity for the first

[396]Ibid, 169; 154.
[397]Hankir.
[398]Ibid.

time. Shortly afterward, Faisal I, a Sunni Arab supported by proponents of pan-Arab nationalism, was installed as king of Iraq. The colonial period has often been linked to the rise of sectarian tensions in the Middle East in that it led to the creation of new states with no historical precedent that united diverse populations, although recent scholarship has brought this narrative into question.[399] Some also link the colonial period to sectarian tension in Iraq because it marked the beginning of Sunni Arab dominance in government and positioned pan-Arabism as the dominant nationalist movement in Iraq, rather than a more inclusive Iraqi nationalism that recognized Iraq's ethnic and sectarian diversity (although this narrative is not universally accepted).[400] According to this narrative, the colonial era was a historical moment that abjected non-Arabs from the dominant nationalist narrative; the link the novel establishes between this moment and the animated corpse situates the corpse as the embodiment of a history of exclusion.

The second historical period that the corpse embodies is the Iran-Iraq War. After Hādī stitches it together, the corpse is called to life by Ilīshwā who mistakes it for her son, Dānyāl, who was conscripted to fight in the Iran-Iraq war and never returned.[401] Despite the years that have passed, Ilīshwā continues to bear a deep resentment towards Abū Zaydūn, a Baathist responsible for tracking down men who were avoiding the draft, including Dānyāl. Iylīshwā holds him responsible for the death of her son and refuses to forgive him, rejoicing when the Whatsitsname later murders him on her behalf. The novel's references to the Iran-Iraq War are references to a significant national trauma, not only because the war led to the forced conscription and deaths of so many Iraqi men but also because of the deep resentment towards

[399]See, for example, Harith Hassan, "State Building, Sectarianization, and Neo-Patrimonialism in Iraq," in *The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval*, edited by James L. Gelvin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).
[400]Marr, 21-26.
Other scholars de-emphasize the role of the colonial period in the birth of Iraqi sectarianism, including Fanar Haddad (2011) and Harith Hassan (2021).
[401]Saʿdāwī, 72-73; 62-63.

the regime and the Ba'th Party that the war's "length and brutality" produced.[402] In the novel, this resentment outlives the regime itself, continuing to drive ongoing violence as represented by the Whatsitsname's murder of Abū Zaydūn in order to get justice for Dānyāl's death.

The Whatsitsname, finally, is linked to the expulsion of Iraq's Jewish community. Before Ilīshwā calls the corpse to life, Hādī stitches it together in an old, decrepit house known to locals as "the Jewish ruin" (a*l-kharābah al-yahūdiyyah*).[403] The home is, presumably, the former residence of an Iraqi Jewish family, members of Iraq's once sizable Jewish community that largely left the country from 1950-1952. The large-scale exodus of Iraqi Jews who are represented by this house was the result of increasing discrimination in the years prior to and in the aftermath of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 that effectively transformed Iraqi Jews into "second-rate citizens."[404] This history dramatically resurfaces in the novel when the Throne Verse (*āyat al-kursī*) of the Qur'ān that hangs on Hādī's wall falls, revealing a niche which holds a statue of the Virgin Mary. When policemen come to the house to interrogate Hādī about the crimes the animated corpse has been committing, they tell him that the statue is "*ḥarām*" (religiously prohibited) and smash it. This reveals a wooden plaque hidden behind the statue with Hebrew inscriptions.[405] Toward the end of the novel, a bomb near Hādī's house explodes, leading the building to collapse; during the explosion, the carving flies out of the niche and shatters.[406] In this novel, the disappearance of Iraq's Jewish population, and the abjection of this population from membership in a shared sense of Iraqi identity, is a buried historical moment that uncannily resurfaces in the aftermath of a bombing that flings it from the dark niche that concealed it into the light.

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[402]Rizk Khoury, 83.
[403]Saʿdāwī, 30; 23.
[404]Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 118-122; Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 183-188.
[405]Saʿdāwī, 219-220; 191-192.
[406]Ibid, 303; 247.

By bringing these abject histories back into view, the novel establishes a link between historical violence and ongoing violence, suggesting that the unresolved injustices of the past drive violence in the present. In particular, the novel's resurrection of Iraq's Jewish community allows the novel to demonstrate that this history is threatening to repeat itself with Iraq's Christian population. Ronen Zeidel has noted that references to Iraq's Jewish community in post-2003 fiction often seek "to underline the pluralism of Iraqi society in the past and to admonish against similar fate [*sic*] awaiting other small communities in Iraq today."[407] In Saʿdāwī's novel, an explicit link is established between Iraq's Jewish population and its Christian population in the passage above; the wooden plaque with Hebrew inscriptions is only destroyed in a bombing after the Virgin Mary statue that had concealed it is smashed, suggesting a link between violence against Iraq's Christian population and the disappearance of Iraq's Jewish community.

Should the country's Christian community vanish, the novel indicates that this will only lead to more violence. Ilīshwā, an elderly Christian woman who stubbornly remains in Iraq waiting for her son to return even though the rest of her family, and many other members of her community, have long since left the country, is portrayed as a protector of her community. Her Muslim neighbors believes that she possesses "spiritual powers" (*baraka*) that protect the neighborhood from harm,[408] citing as evidence the fact that only one explosion, which took place while Ilīshwā was away at church, has affected the ethnically and religiously diverse neighborhood.[409] No serious harm comes to any of her neighbors, in fact, until Ilīshwā finally decides to sell her home and leave Iraq at the end of the novel.[410] Shortly after she leaves, a bomb

[407]Zeidel, 161.
[408]Saʿdāwī, 15; 9.
[409]Ibid, 11; 5.
[410]Ibid, 287-289; 236-238.

which destroys her neighbor Hādī's home and injures several of her neighbors explodes.[411] In these scenes, Ilīshwā's departure symbolizes the broader loss of ethnic and sectarian diversity in wartime Iraq, a loss that the novel portrays as contributing to worsening violence. Ultimately, the novel's resurrection of buried histories allows it to demonstrate that sectarian violence in the past begets sectarian violence in the present and to suggest that only preserving Iraq's ethnic, religious, and sectarian diversity will bring about an end to violence.

The novel also suggests that past violence drives present violence in its account of the Whatsitsname's transformation from a composite of abject victims into a composite of perpetrators. Although the Whatsitsname begins its life pursuing justice for the victims of violence, as his body parts rot away, he is forced to replace them and seek revenge for those parts, as well, leaving him with "an open-ended list of targets that would never end."[412] As he replaces his rotting body parts, he unintentionally uses parts from criminals, until one of his followers tells him, "half your flesh comes from criminals...later you'll wake up to find you've become totally criminal."[413] As the Whatsitsname's body becomes more criminal, so does his mission. Soon, he begins to kill people not because they have killed others but because they have offended him; eventually, he begins to kill people for replacement body parts, simply to stay alive rather than for any more noble purpose.

This transformation recalls the plot of the novel's main intertext, Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein*, whose central figure is a monster who is initially portrayed sympathetically before descending into animalistic rage and the violent pursuit of vengeance. The monster, as H.L. Malchow argues in *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, drew on a variety of racist tropes in circulation at the time. Frankenstein's monster is large and grotesque,

[411]Ibid, 294-303; 242-247.
[412]Ibid, 168; 153.
[413]Ibid, 174; 158.

with dark skin, "brutelike strength" and an "apelike ability" to climb mountains; he is both "wild and dangerous, unpredictable and childlike."[414] Malchow reads the monster's descent into violence as an expression of British anxieties surrounding abolition in the West Indies, where enslaved people, viewed sympathetically by the abolitionist movement, carried out rebellions that resulted in the deaths of white slave owners and the destruction of their property.[415]

Saʿdāwī's text both draws on and subverts Shelley's account of a terrifying and racialized monster. As Haytham Bahoora has argued, the Whatsitsname's descent into an endless cycle of revenge killings can be read as a critique of the logic of tit-for-tat sectarian violence.[416] Saʿdāwī's monster, however, is deliberately dissociated from any particular sectarian group, acting instead as an embodiment of the fear that drives sectarian violence. As Saʿdāwī's animated corpse becomes increasingly violent, different groups in Baghdad come to see him as the embodiment of whatever they most fear:

> ففي منطقة مثل حي الصدر كانوا يتحدثون عن كونه وهابياً، اما في حي الأعظمية فإن الروايات تؤكد أنه متطرف شيعي.
> الحكومة العراقية تصفه بأنه عميل لقوى خارجية، اما الأميركان فقد صرح الناطق باسم الخارجية الأميركية ذات مرة بأنه رجل واسع الحيلة يستهدف تقويض المشروع الأميركي في العراق...الصورة المؤكدة عنه هي تلك التي ترقد في رؤوس الناس فحسب، تغذيها مخيلة الخوف ويضخمها اليأس من حل لهذا الموت المتناسل، وهي صورة تتغير وتتضاعف بعدد الرؤوس النائمة وسائد الليل بقلق وحذر.
>
> In Sadr City they spoke of him as a Wahhabi, in Adamiya as a Shiite extremist. The Iraqi government described him as an agent of foreign powers, while the spokesman for the U.S. State Department said he was an ingenious man whose aim was to undermine the American project in Iraq...The definitive image of him was whatever lurked in people's heads, fed by fear and amplified by hopelessness that there would be an end to the spread of death. It was an image that had as many forms as there were people to conjure it. [417]

[414]Malchow, 18-19.
[415]Ibid, 19-23.
[416]Bahoora, "Writing," 196.
[417]Saʿdāwī, 335; 268. Here, I modified Jonathan Wright's translation.

It is this fear of the Other, the novel suggests, that is driving ongoing violence; a guest on a talk show states this plainly in the novel:

...كل الحوادث الأمنية والمآسي التي نمر بها لها مصدر واحد هو الخوف...المناطق التي آوت القاعدة وقدمت لها الدعم فعلت ذلك بسبب الخوف من المكون الآخر، والمكون الآخر هذا جنّد نفسه وصنع مليشيات لحماية نفسه من القاعدة...على الحكومة وقوات الاحتلال أن تقضي على الخوف. تلقي القبض عليه، إذا أرادوا حقاً أن ينتهي مسلسل الموت هذا.

> ...all the security incidents and the tragedies we're seeing stem from one thing-fear...The groups that have given shelter and support to al-Qaeda have done so because they are frightened of another group, and this other group has created and mobilized militias to protect itself from al-Qaeda... The government and the occupation forces have to eliminate fear. They must put a stop to it if they really want this cycle of killing to end.[418]

In these passages, the corpse becomes the embodiment of the fear of the Other that drives an ongoing cycle of violence; the novel's gothic monster is not the embodiment of a racial Other but of the kind of fear of the Other that provokes a cycle of sectarian violence more broadly.

This allows the text to render sectarian violence itself, rather than any particular segment of society, the source of horror and fear and to point to the inadequacy of overarching explanatory narratives of ongoing violence that rely on simplistic divisions between victims and perpetrators. In an interview on the novel, Saʿdāwī himself suggest this interpretation:

> No one today can claim they are entirely a victim and that they have not contributed, in one way or another, to the perpetuation of the violent atmosphere and the process of victimization…If there is a lesson to draw and a moral moment to stop at today as Iraqis, it is to acknowledge that we are not purely victims and that we have all helped to produce victims in one way or another.[419]

Instead of identifying victims and perpetrators, the novel suggests that violence in Iraq is a phenomenon in which many are implicated and, at the same time, to which many are exposed.

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[418]Ibid, 137; 123.
[419]Al-Mustafa Najjar, "Iraqi Author Ahmad Saadawi: 'The Novel Implicitly Questions This Concept of Salvation,'" *Arab Lit*, March 26, 2014.

As the embodiment of abject histories, the corpse demonstrates that these histories constitute the historical roots of ongoing violence. By situating these histories of exclusion in the narratively unstable and supernatural figure of the animated corpse, the novel underscores the mythical dimension of national narratives which rely upon abjection in order to produce an illusion of coherence. While rejecting such narratives, the novel itself offers an alternative. In its offering of an authorial figure whose authority is undermined, in its staging of a proliferation of narratives, many of which contradict one another and whose authenticity cannot be confirmed, and in its resistance to satisfying conclusions and explanations, the novel offers an alternative to the simplistic overarching narratives that it critiques, narratives which the novel portrays as producing coherence at the cost of producing a frightening Other. The novel, instead, offers a multifaceted, multidimensional monster who embodies Iraq's sectarian diversity in a rejection of simplistic divisions between victims and perpetrators and self and terrifying Other, in favor of underscoring the shared exposure to and implication in violence in Iraq. This raises the possibility of an exit from a narrative based upon abjection and the continuation of violence, proposing instead a narrative that leaves room for multiplicity and, perhaps, communality based on common exposure to fear and violence.

Ḥassan Blāsim's Maʿriḍ al-Juthath *(2015;* The Corpse Exhibition*, 2014)*

Iraqi writer, poet, and filmmaker Ḥassan Blāsim was born in Baghdad in 1973. He studied at Baghdad's Academy of Cinematic Arts before leaving the country in 1998 after his films began to attract the attention of the regime. He has lived in Finland since 2004.[420] He is best known for his short stories, originally self-published online in Arabic before being translated

[420]"Hassan Blasim," *Words Without Borders*.

into English and published in collections.[421] Arabic publications of his work have been hindered by censorship; his work has been banned in a number of Arab countries, including Jordan.[422] Despite this, a "toned down" version of *The Madman of Freedom Square* was published in Arabic (under the title *Majnūn Sāḥat al-Ḥurriya*) by a Lebanese publishing house in 2012;[423] *The Corpse Exhibition* was published in Arabic under the title *Maʿriḍ al-Juthath* in 2015 by Almutawassit Books, which is based in Milan, Italy. The stories discussed here are drawn from this Arabic edition.

The unusual publishing trajectory of Blāsim's work has meant that it received significant recognition in the West before attracting critical attention in the Arab world. His reception in the West has been largely positive and he has been awarded or nominated for a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014 and English PEN's Writers in Translation Programme Award.[424] Blāsim's reception in the Arab world has been more mixed; while some, like Iraqi author Muḥsin al-Ramlī, have praised Blasim for his ability to write liberated from any form of censorship, whether it be moral, political, religious, personal, etc.,[425] his work has also met with frequent criticism, often for its use of obscene language. Bahraini author and literary critic Shaymāʾ al-Waṭanī, for example, describes the language of his work as "indecent and obscene" (*badhīʾa wa fāḥisha*) and argues that such language is bothersome to the reader and not necessary to express the "ugly reality" of life in Iraq.[426]

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[421]Lane Ashfeldt, "Literary Defiance: an Interview with Hassan Blasim," *World Literature Today,* 89, no.1 (2015): 10.
[422]Nadia Atia, "The figure of the refugee in Hassan Blasim's 'The Reality and the Record,'" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54, no. 3 (2019): 320.
[423]Ibid.
[424]Atia, 320; "Books by Hassan Blasim, Adania Shibli Win PEN Translates Prizes," *ArabLit & ArabLit Quarterly*.
[425] Rayāna al-Nahām, "Al-Udabāʾwa al-Kuttāb Tunaẓẓim Faʿāliyyah Qirāʾah lil-Majmūʿah al-Qiṣṣaṣiyyah 'Maʿriḍ al-Juthath,'" *Al-Watan*, 21 Oct. 21, 2019, https://alwatannews.net/Bahrain/article/851115/الأدباء-و الكتاب-تنظم-فعالية-قراءة-للمجموعة-القصصية-معرض-الجثث.
[426]Ibid.

A number of critics have situated Blāsim's work, and his distinctive writing style (which he terms "nightmarish realism"[427]) in the gothic genre, including Ikram Masmoudi, Haytham Bahoora, and Rachel Fox.[428] His controversial use of an obscene and vulgar writing style (his works often contain overt sexual references, utilize profane and obscene language, insult or mock religion, etc.), furthermore, contribute to his deployment of a gothic aesthetic, one that draws heavily on the abject. I focus here on Blāsim's deployment of a gothic aesthetic of the abject characterized by the mingling of dream and nightmare, the real and the fictional, and the realistic and the fantastical to narrate the experience of migration, an experience with which Blāsim himself is intimately familiar; he fled Iraq in 2000 after directing a film, *The Wounded Camera*, on the forced migration of Iraqi Kurds from Kurdistan by regime forces after the 1991 uprising, eventually settling in Finland in 2004 after traveling through Europe illegally as an undocumented refugee.[429] The hardships faced by refugees attempting clandestine border crossings, the challenges associated with navigating the complex bureaucratic processes of asylum seeking, and the pressures faced by Iraqi migrants to assimilate into European societies are consequently all major themes of his work.

Blāsim's work situates clandestine migrants and refugees in the realm of the abject, a realm with a distinct temporal dimension. As migrants cross the border, they introduce a threat of contamination, provoking European fears regarding the savage, backwards, and otherwise pre-modern practices that they might bring across the border with them into modern and civilized Europe. Blāsim's portrayal of abject migrants explores these fears (a gothic gesture) yet ultimately subverts them; in his stories, violence is not perpetrated by migrants but against them,

[427]Biwu Shang, "Delving into Impossible Storyworlds of Terror: The Unnaturalness of Hassan Blasim's Short Narrative Fiction," in *Unnatural Narrative across Borders Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 70.
[428]Masmoudi (2019-2020); Bahoora (2015); Rachel Fox, "Narrating horrific refugee experiences in Hassan Blasim's short fiction," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing,* 59, no. 1 (2022): 43-56.
[429]Ibid, 2.

both by border patrol forces during crossings and by the immigration/asylum process itself, which demands a coherent and linear narrative rather than unnaratable and traumatic pasts. His stories offer an alternative to the violent abjection of the immigration process, offering a space of solidarity in which abject and traumatic pasts can be spoken.

"Al-Arshīf wa al-Wāqiʿ" ("The Reality and the Record")

The protagonist of "Al-Arshīf wa al-Wāqiʿ" is an Iraqi refugee narrating his story to a Swedish immigration officer in the hope of receiving asylum. As the title, (rendered "The Reality and the Record" in English translation; a more literal translation, however, would be "The Archive and Reality") suggests, the dominant theme in the story is the conflict between the official, documentary, and archival accounts of migration and the "real" story. The title plays on dominant understandings of the documentary and the archival as realms of unbiased truth and certainty, introducing to the reader from the very beginning the idea that something is left out of or distorted by the process of documentation. The theme continues in the opening paragraph of the story, narrated by an unnamed frame narrator:

لكل نزيلٍ في محطة استقبال اللاجئين حكايتان: واحدة واقعية وأخرى أرشيفية. الحكايات الأرشيفية هي الحكايات التي يرويها اللاجئون الجدد من أجل الحصول على حق اللجوء الإنساني. وتُدوّن هذه الحكايات في دائرة الهجرة وتحفظ في ملفات خاصة. أما الحكايات الواقعية فتبقى حبيسة في صدور اللاجئين ليعتاشوا [*sic*] على ذكراها بسرية تامة.

> Everyone staying at the refugee reception center has two stories—the real one and the one for the record. The stories for the record are the ones the new refugees tell to obtain the right to humanitarian asylum, written down in the immigration department and preserved in their private files. The real stories remain locked in the hearts of the refugees, for them to mull over in complete secrecy.[430]

[430]Ḥassan Blāsim, *Ma'riḍ Al-Juthath* (Milan, Italy: Almutawassit Books, 2015),11; Hassan Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 157.
English quotations are taken from Jonathan Wright's published translation unless otherwise noted. Page numbers will be given in the Arabic edition followed by the English edition.

The passage establishes two narratives: the official, recorded story which is marked by deception and secrecy (perhaps because some stories are too traumatic to be told or must be edited or embellished in order to result in a successful application) and an unofficial narrative which remains secret and untold.

The story links the "unreality" of the archival story to its performativity; the story repeatedly explores and pokes fun at the demands that the bureaucratic processes of migration place on the asylum seeker, namely the "burden of narrating oneself into a place of safety, or performing worthy victimhood."[431] As Nadia Atia notes, the text repeatedly uses the Arabic word *ḥikāya* (rendered "story" in the English translation) a word often associated with folktales and (largely female) oral storytelling traditions; this choice of words, she argues, emphasizes the "unreal, performative, and degrading nature of the asylum experience."[432] The performative dimension of the refugee's story is also evoked by the frame narrator's description of the man "telling his story at amazing speed, while the immigration officer asks him to slow down as much as possible," an account that "reads almost as a stage direction" and "situates the reader in a performative space characterized by the panicked and uncomfortable pace of the man's delivery."[433] While narrating his story, furthermore, the refugee is aware of his audience; he begins to digress yet stops himself, telling the Swedish immigration officer, "What I'm saying has nothing to do with my asylum request. What matters to you is the horror."[434] This brief aside once again underscores the demands that the asylum process places upon the refugee to relate an adequately horrifying tale of suffering in order to narrativize himself as a victim worthy of refuge in Europe.

[431]Atia, 319.
[432]Ibid, 323.
[433]Ibid, 325.
[434]Blāsim 17; 167.

Despite the refugee's attempts to play his role, the content of his story is ultimately incomprehensible to the immigration officer recording it. His account is inconsistent, fantastical, and unsuitable for entry into the archive. His story begins in Baghdad where, while working as ambulance driver, he is tasked with collecting six severed heads and transporting them to the morgue. Before he can do so, a group of masked men in police uniforms kidnap him and the bag. This kidnapping leads to a year and a half of captivity in which he is sold to various groups and militias as a performer; each group forces him to stand before a camera and read various false statements. First, he is forced to read a statement claiming to be an officer in the Iraqi army standing beside the heads of other officers with whom he had "raided houses, raped women, and tortured innocent civilians" and claiming that he had worked as a hired killer for the US army; later, he is forced to "confess" to beheading hundreds of Sunni men for the Mehdi army with the support of Iran and to being a "treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist, a Syrian Baathist intelligence agent, or a Revolutionary Guard from Zoroastrian Iran."[435] One of his filmed statements appears on *Al-Jazeera*, where it is confirmed authentic in another interplay between the authentic and the staged or performative. When he is finally set free, he discovers that although he has spent the last year and half in captivity, he has been absent only a single night and has no proof of his story. The role that the refugee plays as a performer/kidnap victim is ironically similar to the role that he is forced to take on as performer before the Swedish immigration officer.

The refugee's performance fails; he is unable to produce an account consistent with the logic of the archive. Western archival theory, as Michelle Caswell argues, "relies on and reinforces a host of Enlightenment concepts, including a linear notion of time."[436] "In dominant

[435]Blāsim, 16-17; 164-168.
[436]Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 35.

archival temporal logic," Caswell continues, "the past is singular and it is over."[437] The temporality of the archive cannot contain the refugee's story which is uncertain, nonlinear, and fantastical; instead, the Swedish immigration officer relegates it to the realm of madness, sending the refugee to a psychiatric hospital where he finally narrates, in the words of the frame narrator, "his real story": "I want to sleep."[438] Unsuitable for the archive, his story is legible only in the marginal space of the psychiatric hospital and to the frame narrator, a figure whom the story implies is himself a refugee, given that the narrator's perspective situates him among the "Everyone at the refugee reception center" rather than among the "they" of the immigration officers.

The story offers a space in which this story, unsuited for the archive, can be narrated. The story, crucially, does not offer an alternative "truth"-it remains unclear whether the asylum seeker is lying, delusional, or telling the truth. What is clear is that, whatever the "truth" is, it cannot be found in the archive; the story portrays the documentary and the archival as constructed, performative and, ultimately, unreliable. Rather than offering an alternative to this archival narrative, the story offers an alternative to narrativization itself. It offers a space in which truth is uncertain, narrative is unreliable, and demands to produce a linear and "believable" narrative can be resisted. It is a space where migrants might speak to one another, from the margins.

"Kawābīs Kārlūs Fūyntis" ("The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes")

The short story "Kawābīs Kārlūs Fūyntis" ("The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes") explores another demand that the migration process places on the refugee: assimilation. The story opens in Baghdad; its protagonist, Sālim ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn, is employed by the municipality to clean the streets of debris in the aftermath of explosions. As he sweeps the streets, he looks

[437]Ibid.
[438]Blāsim, 20; 170.

carefully for human remains and any valuables that might have been left behind, hoping to raise enough money to buy a visa for Holland. One day, he finds a man's finger with a silver ring on it; he feels a connection to the ring and decides to keep it rather than sell it. Nevertheless, he is later able to successfully apply for asylum in Holland after falsely claiming that he had worked as a translator for the US forces.

Upon arrival in Holland, Sālim is immediately impressed:

انظر إلى الشوارع كم هي نظيفة! انظر إلى مقعد المرحاض، يلمع من النظافة!...لماذا الأشجار خضراء جميلة كأنها مغسولة بالماء كل يوم! لماذا لا نصبح مسالمين مثلهم! نعيش في بيوت كالزائب بينما بيوتهم، دافئة، آمنة، ملونة! لِمَ يحترمون الكلاب مثل البشر! لماذا نمارس العادة السرية أربع وعشرين ساعة! من أين نأتي بحكومة محترمة مثلهم!

> Look how clean the streets are! Look at the toilet seat; it's sparkling clean!...Why are the trees so green and beautiful, as though they're washed with water every day? Why can't we be peaceful like them? We live in houses like pigsties while their houses are warm, safe, and colorful. Why do they respect dogs as much as humans? Why do we masturbate twenty-four hours a day? How can we get a decent government like theirs?[439]

Longing to become a part of the society that he admires, Sālim works hard to assimilate into Dutch society; he changes his name to Carlos Fuentes in order to pass as Cuban or Argentine, takes classes on Dutch culture, becomes rapidly fluent in Dutch, and marries a Dutch woman, working hard to "treat her as a sensitive and liberated man would, like a Western man, in fact a little more so."[440] His efforts at becoming a model immigrant are initially successful; he quickly acquires citizenship and every day "ma[kes] progress in burying his identity and his past."[441]

The process of assimilation in the novel is portrayed as a move from a pre-modern, "backwards" temporality to a modern one, a move that is contingent upon the abjection of Carlos Fuentes' previous identity. His name change is the beginning of this process; by becoming

[439]Ibid, 63; 189.
[440]Ibid, 64;190.
[441]Ibid, 63; 189

Carlos Fuentes, he is able to claim to be "someone of Mexican origin whose father had left his country and settled in Iraq to work as an engineer with the oil companies" and to distance himself from the Iraqi people, whom he describes as "an uncivilized and backward people who did not know what humanity means."[442] Iraq, and the other countries which migrants and refugees leave behind to enter Holland, are to Carlos the realm of "retarded gerbils" *(jarābīʿmutakhallifah*) "Stone Age savages" (*hamaj min al-ʿaṣr al-ḥajarī*) and "savage clans" *(ʿashāʾir mutakhallifah*).[443] To Fuentes, the move from Iraq to Holland is a move to a modern, advanced country from a country characterized by "backwardness" (*takhalluf*), "shit" (*kharāʾ*), "piss" (*bawl*) and "misery" (*buʾs*).[444] Fuentes is determined to leave this backwardness behind and prove himself worthy of "be[ing] adopted by this compassionate and tolerant country"; the Dutch government, he believes, "should expel all those who did not learn the language properly and anyone who committed the slightest misdemeanor, even crossing the street in violation of the safety code."[445] "Let them go shit there in their shitty countries," he adds.[446] Becoming worthy of admittance into Dutch society entails playing the role of a "sensitive and liberated" Western man; it entails entering into a "modern" temporality and leaving the "shit" and "backwardness" of his former homeland behind.

Despite Fuentes' success at integrating into Dutch society, his past and abject identity uncannily float to the surface in disturbing dreams in which his efforts at integration are a fragile facade, easily disrupted. In one dream, he finds himself standing in front of his boss unable to speak Dutch. In another, he sees children from the poor district in Iraq where he was born taunting him for his changed name. Later, he dreams that he planted a car bomb in the center of

[442]Ibid, 64; 190.
[443]Ibid, 63-64; 190.
[444]Ibid, 62; 189.
[445]Ibid, 63; 190.
[446]Ibid.

Amsterdam; the judge refuses to allow him to defend himself in Dutch, insisting on bringing in an Iraqi translator who cannot understand his "incomprehensible rustic accent."[447] In line with the Freudian understanding of dreams as manifestations of unconscious thoughts, desires, and fears, Fuentes' dreams appear to reflect his own suppressed anxieties regarding his ability to assimilate into Dutch society. Although he appears on the surface to be fully integrated, his unconscious retains his Iraqi identity. Fuentes is desperate to take control of his unconscious mind:

فقد صار طموحه أكبر من التخلص من الأحلام المزعجة. يجب التحكم بالأحلام لتشذيبها وتنقيتها من كل الهواء الفاسد ودمجها بقوانين الحياة الهولندية النقية. على الأحلام أن تتعلم اللغة الجديدة للبلد كي تتمكن من تخيل صور وأفكار جديدة. يجب أن تختفي كل الوجوه الكالحة والبائسة القديمة.

> His ambition went beyond getting rid of troublesome dreams; he had to control the dreams, to modify them, purge them of all their foul air, and integrate them with the salubrious rules of life in Holland. The dreams must learn the new language of the country so that they could incorporate new images and ideas. All the old gloomy and miserable faces had to go.[448]

He first endeavors to solve this issue using a modern, rational, and scientific logic; he goes to the library and researches dreams. When these efforts fail, he turns to magic and superstition, avoiding, for example, eating root vegetables because he has read that doing so could lead to dreams "related to a person's past and roots."[449] He begins to perform mysterious rituals, dying his hair and toenails green, "repeating obscure words," painting his face "like an American Indian," sleeping in "diaphanous orange pajamas," and putting bird feathers under his pillow.[450]

All of these efforts are unsuccessful; Fuentes' dreams become even more distressing. One night, however, he succeeds in realizing in his dream that he is dreaming so that he can "activate

[447]Ibid, 65; 192.
[448]Ibid, 66; 193.
[449]Ibid, 66; 193.
[450]Ibid, 66-67; 194.

his conscious mind inside the dream" and "sweep out all the rubbish of the unconscious."[451] He finds himself inside an apartment building in Baghdad holding a rifle; he goes from apartment to apartment shooting everyone he encounters, worried that he will wake up before he finishes his project. On the sixth floor, he comes face to face with his former self, Sālim ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn, standing naked next to a window holding a bloody broom. As Sālim mocks him ("Salim the Dutchman, Salim the Mexican, Salim the Iraqi, Salim the Frenchman, Salim the Indian, Salim the Pakistani, Salim the Nigerian…") Fuentes aims his rifle at Sālim's head.[452] Fuentes shoots at him, but Sālim jumps out the window and escapes unscathed.

The next morning, Fuentes' wife finds him dead on the pavement outside the window, the victim of an apparent suicide. An amateur photographer captures an image of the incident; it shows the body lying on the ground, covered in a blue sheet, the ring on his finger "glow[ing] red in the foreground, like a sun in hell."[453] Sālim plucked the ring in question from the severed finger of a bombing victim whose remains he cleared from a street in the aftermath of an explosion. Although he is trying to raise money to buy a visa to immigrate to Holland, he decides not to sell it; "Might one say that he felt a secret spiritual relationship with the ring?"[454] The ring glowing "like a sun in hell" on Fuentes' dead finger is the resurgence of his past life as a street sweeper, a past life that Fuentes never entirely succeeded in abjecting.

The story portrays assimilation as a process haunted by the return of the abject, or the return of the filth, shit, and "backwardness" which the refugee attempts to leave behind in order to integrate himself into a "modern" temporality. This portrayal has two dimensions. First, it allows Blāsim to play on-and ultimately subvert-European fears regarding the potential

[451]Ibid, 67; 194-195.
[452]Ibid, 67-68; 195.
[453]Ibid, 68; 196.
[454]Ibid, 61; 188.

consequences of increased immigration, especially from non-European countries. Fuentes appears on the surface to be a model immigrant; he works to support himself, he has learned fluent Dutch, assimilated into Dutch culture, and appears to have left his past behind him. This facade of perfect assimilation, however, conceals a dark and unresolved past. This image, of a "backwards" foreigner lurking behind the facade of an assimilated refugee, is a play on European fears about the consequences of increased migration, especially an increase in crime or acts of terrorism (as the scene in which Fuentes dreams that he commits bombings suggests). The gothic genre, as described above, originated in Europe during the colonial era and often drew on the gothic trope of the terrifying other to explore increasing European anxieties about increased contact with non-white and non-Christian others; Blāsim's work brings this element of the gothic into the contemporary period, characterized by massive flows of migrants and refugees into Europe and elsewhere in the West.

Although Blāsim's story plays on European fears about the criminality lurking beneath the facade of the model immigrant, his work stops short of confirming them. Although Fuentes has nightmares about planting bombs, the only individual harmed in the story is himself and the only perpetrator is his own internalized Other, the embodiment of an unresolved traumatic past. The story's account of the resurgence of pasts repressed by the assimilation process, which in the story lead to violence against the self, are also a message to Blāsim's diasporic Iraqi audience about the urgent need for an alternative memory culture that resists the demands that assimilation places upon the migrant to suppress his violent past.

"Berlin Truck" ("Shāḥinat Birlīn")

Like "The Reality and the Record," this story is narrated by a frame narrator, himself an Iraqi immigrant who has made the perilous journey across the borders of Europe. This frame

narrator is a writer, perhaps a stand-in for Blāsim himself, who opens the story with a metafictional reflection on the other ways in which this story could have been told:

هذه القصة حدثت في الظلام. ولو قدر لي أن أكتبها مرة أخرى/ لكتبت ما أطلقت حينها من صيحات فزع فقط، وما أطلقته من تلك الأصوات الأخرى الغامضة التي رافقت المجزرة. يصلح قسم مهم من هذه القصة لعمل إذاعي تجريبي. ومن المؤكد أن غالبية القراء ترى القصة مجرد تلفيق قام به كاتب قصصي، أو قد تكون مجازاً متواضعاً عن الرعب. لكنني لا أجد نفسي بحاجة إلى أن أقسم لكم كي تصدقوا غرابة هذا العالم. إن حاجتي هي كتابة هذه القصة، كلطخة خراء في قمصان النوم، وربما لطخة على شكل زهرة برية.

> This story took place in darkness and if I were destined to write it again, I would record only the cries of terror which rang out at the time and the other mysterious noises that accompanied the massacre. A major part of the story would make a good experimental radio piece. For sure most readers would see the story as merely a fabrication by the author or maybe as a modest allegory for horror. But I see no need to swear an oath in order for you to believe in the strangeness of this world. What I need to do is write this story, like a shit stain on a nightshirt, or perhaps a stain in the form of a wild flower.[455]

Like the protagonist of "The Reality and the Record," this story, it seems, is too incredible to be accepted as a factual, documentary account; it is suitable only for "an experimental radio piece," a "fabrication," or a "modest allegory." It is a story, too, which will attract little attention. The frame narrator notes that " the media…have focused first and foremost on migrants drowning," adding, " My view is that as far as the public is concerned such mass drownings are an enjoyable film scene, like a new Titanic."[456] Not only does the media prefer spectacle, it also neglects stories about the abuses of European border enforcement officials, or "stories about what the armies of European democracies do when at night, in a vast forest, they catch a group of terrified humans, drenched in rain, hungry and cold."[457]

Like "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes," this story stages the return of the abject, here conceived in temporal terms as the primeval, the savage, and the bestial. The story is filled with

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[455]Blāsim, 21.
The English translations are taken from Jonathan Wright's translation unless otherwise noted: "The Truck to Berlin," *The Markaz Review*, Feb. 3, 2023, https://themarkaz.org/the-truck-to-berlin-fiction-from-hassan-blasim/.
[456]Ibid, 22.
[457]Ibid.

bestial imagery; the first references to this come from the frame narrator's account of his own decision to flee to Europe from Iraq during the post-Gulf War sanctions, which led to economic crisis, food shortages, and malnutrition. The frame narrator, however, claims that he fled the country "not out of fear of hunger or of Saddam Hussein."[458] Instead:

> بل كانت هارباً من نفسي. ومن وحوش أخرى. كان الخوف من المجهول في تلك السنوات القاسية يضاعف من طمس هوية الانتماء إلى الواقع المألوف ويدفع الى السطح بوحشية كانت مطمورة تحت حاجات الإنسان اليومية البسيطة. في تلك السنوات شاعت قسوة حيوانية سببها الخوف من الموت جوعاً. كنت أشعر بأنني مهدد بالتحول إلى فأر.
>
> In fact I was on the run from myself and from other monsters. In those cruel years fear of the unknown helped obliterate the sense of belonging to a familiar reality and brought to the surface a savagery which had been buried beneath a man's simple daily needs. In those years a vile and bestial cruelty prevailed, driven by fear of dying from starvation. I felt I was in danger of turning into a rat.[459]

The passage contains multiple examples of bestial imagery; the word rendered as "savagery" is *waḥshiyya*, a word which also denotes "bestiality" and which is derived from *waḥsh*, a word rendered in this passage as "monster" but which could also be translated as "wild beast." The passage references "bestial cruelty" (*qaswah ḥayawāniyya*) and fears of turning into a rat (*faʾr*). The narrator understands the desperation of the sanctions years, which imposed widespread poverty and hunger, as a force which transformed human beings into savage beasts.

The narrator deploys similar imagery to describe the plight of refugees attempting clandestine border crossings. He narrates to the reader a tale that he has heard from ʿAlī the Afghan, a "treasure trove of smuggling stories" who relates this one to the narrator after he hears that the narrator is contemplating crossing the border by truck.[460] The Afghan's narrative describes a group of 35 migrants from Iraq who have paid a smuggler to transport them from Turkey to Berlin in a canned fruit truck. The journey is difficult; "The dark and heat inside the

[458]Ibid, 21.
[459]Ibid.
[460]Ibid, 22.

truck was intense" and, as the trip continues, "the smell of bodies, sweaty socks and the spicy food they were eating in the darkness made it even stuffier."[461] After their first night of travel, the truck stops at a garage, a "former cowshed" where the two smugglers traveling with them take them to a dirty toilet so that they can take turns "shitting."[462] On the third day of the journey, the truck stops; the drivers have abandoned the truck and left the men inside to die or be found by the police. After the truck stops on the third night, the situation deteriorates rapidly. They begin to run out of water and need "to take a shit," leading unrest to break out.[463] A few hours later, the men begin to defecate in food bags and "the repulsive smell built up inside the truck"; their breathing seems louder and louder, "like that of a monster roaring in the dark."[464] Fights break out then calm, leaving everyone whispering "like a hive of bees."[465] By the third day there is "chaos"; "the sound of farts and insults"; "Quranic verses and prayers"; "unbearable" smells; and, finally, a "resounding scream which suddenly burst from the chaos":[466]

كانت صرخة خارجة من كهوف لم تفك أسرارها. بعد سماعهم الصرخة أرادوا تخيّل مصدر هذا الصوت اللا إنساني، كما للا حيواني، والذي زلزل ظلام الشاحنة.

أخذت الشاحنة تهتز بعنف وهو في مكانها. تعالى الصراخ والرعب من جديد. بدوا أفواهاً لعملاق شبت به النار. نعم، بدت أصوات الاستغاثة والوجع تلك مثل حمم البراكين هذه المرة. بدا الأمر كأن قسوة الإنسان والحيوان ووحوش الحكايات الخرافية قد تكثفتْ، وأخذت تعزف لحناً جحيمياً مشتركاً.

> It was a scream that emerged from caves whose secrets have never been unraveled. When they heard the scream, they tried to imagine the source of this voice, neither human nor animal, which had rocked the darkness of the truck. The truck began to shake violently. Screams of terror rang out again. It seemed that the cruelty of man, the cruelty of animals and legendary monsters had condensed and together had started to play a hellish tune.[467]

[461]Ibid, 23-24.
[462]Ibid, 24.
[463]Ibid, 25.
[464]Ibid.
[465]Ibid.
[466]Ibid, 26.
[467]Ibid.

Days later, the Serbian police discover the truck:

في الشاحنة كانت هناك أربعة وثلاثون جثة. لم تمزقها السكاكين، أو أي سلاح آخر، بل كانت أجساداً عملت بها مخالب ومناقير نسور وأنياب تماسيح وأدوات مجهولة أخرى. كانت الشاحنة مليئة بالخراء والبول والدم والأكباد الممزقة، والعيون المقلوعة، والأحشاء، تماماً كما لو أن ذئاباً جائعة كانت هناك. تحول أربعة وثلاثون شاباً إلى عجينة كبيرة من اللحم والدم والخراء.

> In the truck, there were thirty-four corpses. They hadn't been ripped open with knives or any other weapon. Rather it was the claws and beaks of eagles, the teeth of crocodiles and other unknown instruments that had been at work on them. The truck was full of shit, piss, blood, torn up livers, torn out eyes, and entrails, just as if hungry wolves had been there. Thirty-four young men had turned into a large soggy mass of flesh, blood, and shit.[468]

The police chase the man who fled but fail to capture him. One Serbian police officer swears that when the man went into the woods, he walked on four legs and turned into a gray wolf before disappearing into the forest, but the other police officers laugh and do not believe him.

The story's depiction of refugees reduced to animals or beasts at the border is reminiscent of Agamben's understanding of the *homo sacer*, a designation granted to criminals under Roman law who could be killed without a homicide being committed and yet who could not be sacrificed.[469] The life of the *homo sacer* is, to Agamben, "the hidden foundation on which the [political order] rests"[470] because the right of the sovereign to expose his subjects to death is the basis of sovereign authority; "life exposed to death is the originary political element."[471] Agamben classifies life exposed to death at the hands of the sovereign as "bare life."[472] Agamben's analysis is based upon the Greek division of life into two types: *zoe*, or the simple fact of being alive shared by all living beings, including animals, and *bios*, or "the qualified way of life proper to men."[473] The kind of life lived by the human being is qualitatively different from

[468]Ibid, 27. Here, I modified Jonathan Wright's translation.
[469]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8
[470]Ibid, 8-9.
[471]Ibid, 88.
[472]Ibid, 88.
[473]Ibid, 66.

the simple fact of living enjoyed by animals according to this schema. Life exposed by death to Agamben constitutes bare life, *zoe*, and ceases to be the kind of life properly enjoyed by human beings.[474] This becomes clearer in Agamben's description of an additional figure poised between life and death, the *wargus* or "wolf man" of Germanic law.[475] The wolf man was a criminal exiled from a city who could be killed by anyone; he was seen as dead by his community, and viewed as a "monstrous hybrid between man and animal."[476] To Agamben, life exposed to death by sovereign power ceases to be the kind of life lived by human beings and takes on an animalistic character.

The *homo sacer* or "wolf man" is an abject figure, one who occupies a hybrid position both inside/outside the political orders he inhabits. In Blāsim's account, like Agamben's, such figures are produced by exposure to death by sovereign power. For the frame narrator, this transformation took place under the sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United States after the 1991 Gulf War in which Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait, sparking a US-led intervention that quickly forced Iraqi forces to withdraw.[477] The Gulf War was also followed by a UN-imposed sanctions regime which Dina Rizk Khoury describes as the "most comprehensive embargo ever enforced on a nation"; the sanctions were accompanied by periodic bombing by the United States and Britain, "effectively a continuation of war."[478] The sanctions led to an economic and humanitarian crisis; inflation soared, malnutrition was widespread, and the absence of oil revenues meant that the state could no longer fund essential services like water treatment, public health programs, or education.[479] The sanctions regime was a sustained exercise of sovereign violence, one that exposed broad segments of the Iraqi population to hardship,

[474]Ibid, 88.
[475]Ibid, 104.
[476]Ibid, 105.
[477]Tripp, 243-246.
[478]Rizk Khoury, 1.
[479]Ibid, 44.

poverty, and even death. Sovereign violence, in Blāsim's account, also exposes the bodies of migrants to death at the border. His story features multiple accounts of such violence; "I have seen how the Bulgarian police beat a young Pakistani with a spade until he lost consciousness";[480] the media does not report "what the armies of European democracies do when at night, in a vast forest, they catch a group of terrified humans, drenched in rain, hungry and cold."[481]

As in "The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes," the refugees in this story draw on the gothic trope of the terrifying Other, here the criminal and "savage" migrant who brings violence and crime over the borders to this Europe. This threatening figure is one in which savagery lurks beneath the surface like "a monster roaring in the dark."[482] In the story, however, this savagery emerges at the border crossing, a journey that is initiated by Western violence abroad (sanctions or the US invasion) and during which migrants are exposed to violence at the hands of armed border patrols. The emergence of the savage, the barbaric, and the non-modern, then, is the result of the violent power dynamics in operation at the border, power dynamics that degrade human life.

The story is, on one level, an effort to make those stories left out of the "official" record, or out of media coverage of the refugee crisis, visible to Blāsim's European audience. Rather than tragic, cinematic images of drownings, this story foregrounds those who die or suffer alone in the dark, in the woods at the border or in smuggler's trucks, violence that takes place within Europe, often perpetrated by European armies or police forces. On another level, however, the story is a call for an alternative narrative of migration, one based upon orality and the exchange of stories along informal networks of migrants and refugees. The narrator himself is a migrant

[480]Blāsim, 22.
[481]Ibid.
[482]Ibid, 25.

attempting to travel through Europe illegally; after hearing this story from a smuggler, ʿAlī the Afghan, clearly himself a migrant, the narrator passes the tale on in a narrative that is not an "experimental radio piece" or a record of "cries of terror" but rather a horror story.[483] These stories, which foreground the un-aestheticized, horrific, and unredemptive aspects of the migration experience, are passed orally along networks of migrants seeking information about how to safely cross the border themselves. They are, ultimately, a call for an alternative memory culture at the margins, for stories passed along and among clandestine networks of refugees that would otherwise go untold.

This memory culture, the story implies, should be based upon a transnational solidarity with other refugees and migrants. This story-and many of Blāsim's other stories that depict clandestine border crossings-make frequent references to other large migrant/refugee populations in Europe, including Afghans and Pakistanis. This story, too, is itself a reference to perhaps the best known account of clandestine migration in the Arabic language: Ghassān Kanafānī's novella *Rijāl fī al-Shams* (1963; *Men in the Sun*, 1999). The novella depicts three Palestinian men who pay to be smuggled into Iraq in an empty water truck, hoping to send home money to their families in refugee camps. Because of a delay at the border crossing, the three men die of suffocation or the heat and their corpses are left to rot in the desert. The most famous (and controversial) line of the novella is the driver's repeated question as he dumps the bodies in the desert: "Limādhā lam taduqqū judrān al-khazzān?" ("Why didn't you knock on the walls of the tank?").[484] Blāsim's story is a retelling of Kanafānī's novella; unlike Kanafānī's migrants, who die quietly in the sun, Blāsim's migrants roar like beasts in the dark. In both cases, however, their voices go unheard. Kanafānī's decision to leave his Palestinian protagonists to die passively was

[483]Ibid, 21.
[484]Ghassān Kanafānī, *Rijāl fī al-Shams* (Beirut: Dār Manshūrāt al-Rimāl, 2015), 109.

at the center of the novella's critical reception. In Blāsim's reading, whether the migrants knock on the walls of the truck or not is immaterial; their voices are unhearable regardless and both sets of migrants confront a similar fate. Kanafānī's migrants are left to rot on a trash heap in the desert, while Blāsim's migrants turn into "a large soggy mass of flesh, blood and shit."[485] The outcome is the same for both sets of migrants who find themselves exposed to death at the border by the functioning of sovereign power which degrades human life. The intertextual reference to Kanafānī's tale, furthermore, can also be read as a gesture of solidarity towards the Arab World's historically most significant refugee population-a status that the Palestinians now share with Iraqis and Syrians. The gesture is another call for a memory culture based upon solidarity and networks of migrants and that offers an alternative to the violent erasure of the migration process.

[485]Blāsim, 27.

CHAPTER 3: UNCANNY LEGACIES OF DICTATORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY SYRIAN FICTION

Introduction

Current Syrian President Bashar al-Asad has been in power since the death of his father, Hafez al-Asad, in 2000; groomed to assume the presidency after the death of his older brother, Bassel, in a car accident in 1994, Bashar was "elected" to the position shortly after his father's death and after the constitution was hastily amended to lower the minimum age for president from 40 to 34, Bashar al-Asad's exact age at the time.

The story of the autocratic and ultimately dynastic Asad regime's rise to power begins in the 1960s, when the Baath Party, of which Hafez al-Asad was an influential member, seized power in the "Eighth of March Revolution" [*thawrat al-thāmin min ādhār*] which is often described as a military coup but, as Raymond Hinnebusch notes, also had features of "what Walton (1984) calls 'national revolts' from below, that is, social movements which have many of the ingredients of 'great revolutions,' albeit less explosively combined."[486] The Baath Party, now strongly associated with authoritarian rule of the Asad family in Syria and Saddam Hussain in Iraq, was initially founded on an ideology far removed from this reality. As put forth by its founders, including Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, the Party's major ideals were (pan-Arab) nationalism, freedom, constitutionalism, socialism, and anti-imperialism.[487] The Party's founders drew on a vocabulary associated with the global Left, advocating for land reform, the displacement of the traditional land-owning elite strongly associated with

[486]Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.
[487]Matthieu Rey, "Free Elections Versus Authoritarian Practices: What Baathists Fought For," in *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s–1970s*, ed.Laure Guirguis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 57-58; Hinnebusch, 3.

imperialism, and various socialist projects, mobilizing a broad base of support among Syrian peasants.[488]

The 1960s in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab World was a decade of revolutionary possibility; left-wing and socialist movements were on the rise and the success of projects like the United Arab Republic (1958-1961), a short-lived political union between Egypt and Syria, offered hope for the future of pan-Arabism. By the time Hafez al-Asad assumed the presidency in 1971, however, the Arab Left and pan-Arabism had already weathered a number of defeats, including the collapse of the UAR, a crushing defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, and a broader shift among socialist Arab regimes toward increasingly authoritarian rule.[489] These defeats left the Syrian Left, and the Arab Left more broadly, melancholic, "scarred by successive defeats" and having lost faith "in the ability of Arab regimes to achieve the long-awaited social, political and national emancipation and the liberation of Palestine."[490] Because of the possibilities represented by the 1960s, it is a period to which the Arab Left has tended to remain melancholically attached. Fadi Bardawil, writing on Lebanon but in words that also have relevance in the Syrian context, describes the generation active in the 1960s as "the last great revolutionary, and intellectual, generation," a generation that marked "the last great leap into emancipation."[491]

The collapse of longed-for visions of the future, like pan-Arab unity, the liberation of Palestine, and the rise of socialist regimes in the Arab world, produced, as Bardawil argues, melancholic attachments to the past; the collapse of these visions also produced what Walter

[488]Rey, 59-60; Hinnebusch, 2-3.
[489]Laure Guirguis, "Introduction: The Arab Lefts from the 1950s to the 1970s: Transnational Entanglements and Shifting Legacies," in *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s–1970s*, ed. Laure Guirguis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 6-7; Hinnebusch, xiii.
[490]Guirguis, 6-7.
[491]Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), xiv-xv.

Benjamin refers to as "left-wing melancholy," a state that befalls leftists after the collapse of their political projects along with their hopes for the future.[492] This form of melancholy, Wendy Brown argues, is marked by temporal disorientation in which the future appears uncertain and unmoored from the past[493] or a sense that time itself, as Jacques Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*, is "out of joint,"[494] leading the future to appear uncertain and inalterable. Brown relates this temporality to Walter Benjamin's angel of history, a figure in a Paul Klee painting who stares backwards in horror while being propelled relentlessly into a future against which it is powerless to act.[495] Feelings of confusion and anxiety are coupled with feelings of "political impotence"; a future is coming which we have no power to alter.[496]

In the context of Syria, this temporal crisis was heightened by the temporally-inflected discourse of the Asad regime, which has long centered its durability and permanence, as exemplified by the regime slogan "*Al-Assad ilā al-Abad* [al-Asad forever]," a slogan which refers to the surname of former President Hafez al-Asad and his son and successor, Bashar al-Asad, and portrays them as members of a dynasty ruling over Syria in perpetuity.[497] This discourse has a distinct religious dimension; the notion of *al-abad* (eternity, perpetuity, permanence) evokes the expression "*Lā ilaha ilā Allāh dāʾimān wa abadān*" (always and forever there is no god but God).[498] By using the term, the regime "is conveying that it has no end and will last forever, much like God.[499] The term, also, is part of a broader tendency of Asad regime discourse to deify or sacralize the figure of Hafez al-Asad and, later, Bashar al-Asad as "a figure

[492]W. Brown, "Resisting," 21; W. Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 139.
[493]W. Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," 4-5.
[494]Derrida, 1.
[495]W. Brown, *Politics out of History*, 139.
[496]Ibid.
[497] Eylaf Bader Eddin, "*Al-Abad*: On the Ongoing," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication,* 15 (2022), 368.
[498]Ibid, 369.
[499]Ibid.

of national salvation" and "as an omnipotent being in possession of exceptional qualities and attributes."[500] Through this discourse, the Asads portrayed themselves as uniquely and solely capable of ruling Syria, and, especially after 2011, of protecting the country from disaster, foreign occupation, and the threat of national fragmentation.[501] This savior image, however, also has a threatening dimension; Syrian poet and intellectual Adūnīs describes the eternal Arab leader as a figure akin to Shahryar in *1001 Nights*, a figure who threatens his subjects with death and requires his subjects to venerate him as "the absolute lord, the best representative, the most reverend and the most capable to endure and last to rule" in order to stave off their own executions each day.[502]

For the Asad regime, the concept of *al-abad* has functioned as not only a discourse but a ruling strategy. Eternal rule requires the production of a constant state of instability, or what Salma Ismail terms a "civil war regime": "a latent permanent war between rulers and ruled and between different components of society differentiated along various lines of division: sectarian, tribal, ethnic, regional, urban–rural and class" that establishes a "division of the population into 'us' and 'them'... 'us' to be read as the Asad regime and its loyalists, and 'them' as opponents or as the political opposition constituted as expendable."[503] Related to this latent war is Syria's nearly fifty year long state of emergency, which began in 1963 and finally came to an official, if largely symbolic, end in 2011. This state relied upon a portrayal of Syria as under constant threat from internal and external threats, producing a daily life "lacking any sense of normalcy and producing a phobia that prevents even conceiving of any normalcy in the future."[504] In this

[500]Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 35.
[501]Ibid.
[502]Qtd. in Bader Eddin, 369-370.
[503]Ismail, 189.
[504]Dina Haddad, "Human Rights in Syria: The Never-Ending Emergency," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41, no. 4 (2009), 545-546.

context, the regime has been able to use the discourse of *al-abad* to emphasize the regime's stability in the face of political unrest and sectarian conflict, "creating the pretext of the regime as the only peacemaker and savior of all."[505] Creating a constant sense of insecurity, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ has argued, also encouraged individuals to "resort to older forms of affiliation like the extended family, the tribe, and the sect..."[506] By taking refuge in these forms of affiliation, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ continues, individuals not only become resistant to change but also become "political refugees" who have normalized the Asadist notion of eternal rule.[507] In other words, "eternal rule" proceeded hand in hand with political complacency and sectarianization.

The notion of *al-abad* also conjures another Asad regime ruling strategy: massacres, especially the 1982 Hama massacre. As Eylaf Bader Eddin has observed, *al-abad* is etymologically related to the verb *abāda*, meaning to commit genocide; the term recalls not only past massacres but also "relies on the echo of previous massacres, a more successful strategy than committing new atrocities." [508] As al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ argues:

> هناك تكرارات كثيرة في الأبد الأسدي، أبرزها اثنان: المهرجان والمذبحة، الاحتفال بعظمة القائد وذبح العصاة.[509]
>
> There are many repetitions in the Asadist eternity, the most prominent of which are two: the festival and the massacre and the celebration of the greatness of the leader and the slaughter of the disobedient.

The notion of *al-abad*, crucially, has a clear temporal dimension marked by a sense of endlessness or timelessness. It produces a sense of unchanging stability and repetition. Al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ defines it as follows:

ما هو الأبد؟ جوهرياً نفي التاريخ، نفي التغير الاجتماعي والسياسي، وفرض حاضر دائم لا يتغير. يجري استخدام الدولة كقوة مسلحة للحرب على المستقبل، لمنعه من القدوم. هناك زمن، هناك تعاقب لليل والنهار، وللشهور والسنوات، والعقود والأجيال، هناك ولادة وموت. لكن تحذف أولاً بأول

[505]Bader Eddin, 370.
[506]Yāsīn al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, "Al-Abad ka-Manfā min al-Tārikh," *Al-Jumhurriya*, Apr. 15, 2018, https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/04/15/الأبد-كمنفى-من-التاريخ
[507]al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, "Al-Abad."
[508]Bader Eddin, 371.
[509]al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, "Al-Abad."

كل كوامن التغير السياسي في المجتمع، ويقمع، بل يستأصل، الأفراد والمجموعات المنظمة الذين يعملون من أجل التغيير العام، ويفكرون بأنفسهم كوكلاء تغيير. الموت نفسه لا يستطيع تحدي الأبد. يموت الأب، فيرثه الابن، فتدوم السلالة، ويسود الأبد.[510]

> What is *al-abad*? Essentially, it is the negation of history, the negation of social and political change, and the imposition of an eternal present that does not change. The state is being used as an armed force to make war on the future, to prevent it from coming. There is time, there is the succession of day and night, months and years, decades and generations, there is birth and death. But it eliminates, first and foremost, all potential for political change in society and it suppresses, or rather eradicates, individuals and organized groups who work for general change and who think of themselves as agents of change. Death itself cannot challenge forever. The father dies, the son inherits, the dynasty continues, and eternity reigns.

Here, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ suggests that *al-abad* is based upon the production of an endless present, preventing any future of political change from arriving.

In sum, the Asadist discourse of *al-abad* portrays the regime as eternal, durable, and omnipotent. While under the rule of this omnipotent leader, Syrians experience themselves as under constant observation, as Lisa Wedeen observes:

> Asad's image as the transcendent leader, his gaze monitoring the actions of Syrian citizens, by signifying the anonymous, panoptic security forces-in the words of one Syrian, Asad's 'eyes and ears' allows the police to be 'present' even when one knows that they are not. Although certainly not the only apparatus through which Syrians have come to discipline themselves, the image of the ubiquitous, all-seeing Asad and the proliferation of occasions for citizens to demonstrate their obedience to him have facilitated the construction of a nation-state composed of people who have internalized their own surveillance, imagining themselves as objects of the regime's observation.[511]

Part of this self-discipline includes rigid control over one's speech:

> People are even careful about how or whether they speak of the president in the most informal public settings, such as during a bus ride, in a store, at the park, or in a cafe. Unscripted comments are generally assumed to be insulting rather than glorifying of Syria's leader, implying that Asad's power resides not only

[510]Ibid.
[511]Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago:The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 147.

> in orchestrated displays of obedience, but also in the silence about domestic politics that characterizes everyday life.[512]

The psychological impact of this silence is, much like power in Asadist Syria, passed down through generations as an unspeakable and yet ever-present trauma. As such, it is akin to what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török term the "phantom," a hidden, unspoken family trauma which is passed down from an ancestor to a descendant without either being aware of this process.[513] Moving psychoanalysis beyond the realm of the individual mind, Abraham and Török suggest that fragments of another generation's traumas and secrets can be hidden within in the individual, only appearing to the descendant in the form of symptoms to be decoded by the psychoanalyst.[514] The phantoms of folklore, they suggest, are a "metaphor" of the presence of an unspoken secret which has never entered the conscious mind; instead, it has passed across generations from one unconscious mind to the next and continues to "wreak havoc" upon the living.[515] Only when this phantom is brought to light and becomes speakable can it be exorcized, allowing healthy psychic activity to resume.

The 2011 uprisings, which broke the "wall of fear" that prevented Syrian citizens from opposing the regime, seemed to offer the possibility of disrupting this temporality and exorcizing the phantom of dictatorship. In a book titled *Mawt al-Abad al-Surī: Shahādāt Jīl al-Ṣamt wa al-Thawra* (*The Death of the Syrian Eternity: Testimonies from the Generation of Silence and Revolution*), Muḥammad Abī Samrā presents a series of testimonies from Syrians residing abroad about the abuses of the regime; the project took on a new significance, he writes, after

[512]Ibid, 145-146.
[513]Rand, "Introduction," 16.
[514]Nicholas Rand, "Editor's Note," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 166.
[515]Abraham, 172-175.

2011, when previously silenced Syrians felt free to speak about the regime for the first time.[516] As the title of the book suggests, to Abī Samrā the revolution represented a new opportunity for critique of the regime and a threat to the regime's discourse of *al-abad*, which is based upon stability, durability, and permanence. To Yāsīn al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, the revolution also represented a disruption to the discourse of *al-abad*:

ومنذ الثورة السورية، وكانت أكبر جهد سوري خلال أربعين سنة أسدية للخروج من الأبد إلى التاريخ، فقد الأبد القدرة على إعادة إنتاج نفسه، واندرج في أبديات أخرى، إيرانية شيعية تستند إلى لاهوت انتظار المهدي، وروسية استبدادية تروج لنسختها الخاصة من التكرار والأبد.[517]

> Since the Syrian revolution, which was the largest Syrian effort in the last forty years of Asadist rule to exit from eternity [*al-Abad*] into history, eternity has lost the ability to reproduce itself and has fallen into other eternities, like the Shi'i Iranian version based on the theology of waiting for the *mahdī* and authoritarian Russia's promotion of its version of repetition and eternity.[518]

The disruption of the discourse of *al-abad*, al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ continues, leaves an opening for Syrians to rethink their understanding of Syrian history and the potential for political progress and change.[519]

Syrian cultural production produced in the early years of the uprisings reflects a clear belief that, despite the discourse of *al-abad* that emphasized its permanence and durability, the fall of the regime was possible, if not imminent. Graffiti drawn by schoolchildren in Deraa, widely attributed to be the spark that ignited the uprisings, read "It's your turn, doctor" (*ijāk al-dūr yā duktūr*), a reference to the fall of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt that suggested that the Asad regime would be the next to fall. Posters adorned with slogans like "Revolution until the regime falls" (*thawra ḥattā isqāṭ al-niẓām*)

[516]Muḥammad Abī Samrā, *Mawt al-Abad al-Surī Shahādāt Jīl al-Ṣamt wa al-Thawra* (London: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2012), 11-13.
[517]al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ, "Al-Abad."
[518]Ibid.
[519]Ibid.

appeared on walls;[520] protest songs with titles like "Come on Bashar, Get Out!" (*yallā irḥal yā Bashār!*) were written; the Syrian film collective Abū Naḍḍāra produced videos like "Chronicle of a Fall Foretold" (*qiṣṣat suqūṭ muʿlin*), featuring images of graffiti calling for the fall of the regime.[521] As a number of observers noted, the "wall of fear" that had prevented Syrian cultural producers from directly criticizing the regime-or calling for its fall-seemed to have collapsed.[522]

As the regime intensified its crackdown on the uprising, deploying tanks, barrel bombs, and, later, poison gas, hope that the regime would fall quickly began to give way to despair-or at least to the realization that the regime was not going to fall quickly as had been the case in Egypt and Tunisia and to the awareness that Syria was in for a protracted war. Syrian cultural production took on an increasingly melancholic tone; the triumphant and hopeful early videos produced by Abū Naḍḍāra gave way, by 2015-2016, with videos with titles like "Suffocation" (*al-ikhtināq*), "What Justice"? (*Ayya ʿAdāla?*), "No Exit," (*Lā Makhraj*), and "The President Never Dies" (*al-Raʾīs lā Yamūt*). One particularly despairing video published in 2016 titled "Aleppo" features a blank screen and text that reads:

> In the time of Auschwitz, only God was supposed to see what happened in the showers. Today, the final solution is broadcast live on the world's screens.[523]

Syrian intellectuals began to produce books like Salāma Kayla's *The Syrian Tragedy: The Revolution and its Enemies* (*Al-Trājīdiyā al-Suriyya: al-Thawra wa Aʿdāʾuhā*) and Yāsīn al-Ḥājj Ṣāliḥ's *Salvation or Destruction? Syria at a Crossroads* (*Al-Khalāṣ am al-Khurāb: Suriyā ʿalā Muftaraq al-Ṭarīq*). A sense of despair is also evident in the increasing engagement of Syrian

[520]"Alshaab alsori aref tarekh," in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud (London: Saqi Books, 2014), 117.
[521] Abū Naḍḍāra, "قصة سقوط معلن Chronicle of a Fall Foretold," *Vimeo*, March 30, 2012, https://vimeo.com/39462904.
[522]Salamandra, 36; ooke, "It's a revolution"; Joshka Wessels, *Documenting Syria: Film-making, Video Activism and Revolution* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2019), 169.
[523]Abū Naḍḍāra, "Aleppo," *Vimeo*, https://vimeo.com/184030580.

fiction with an aesthetic that Max Weiss has termed "necroaesthetics" because of its attention to the grotesque figure of the corpse and to the politics of death and dying in wartime Syria.[524]

The *al-abad* temporality-and the ways in which the Syrian revolution disrupted it-is reflected in post-2011 Syrian fiction that, much like to the works of Lebanese fiction discussed in Chapter 1, depicts protagonists caught in temporalities marked by presentness, apathy, the anticipation of the repetition of violence, and a lack of access to future alternatives to this interminable and unbearable present. In this temporality of long-standing states of war and dictatorship, terrifying violence has been uncannily rendered banal and routine. The novels that this chapter will examine explore the long-lasting and weighty legacy of dictatorship through family sagas that portray dictatorship as an inheritance passed down through families and across generations, producing passivity, stagnation, and fear and leading to the total disintegration of familial and communal ties. In these novels, the revolution is presented as a moment of possibility already out of reach; the novels take place in the years that followed the revolution rather than while it was ongoing, in a period when hope that the regime would be overthrown had already begun to give way to despair, to the increasingly likelihood that the Asad regime would remain in power, and to the looming threat of national fragmentation. In response, these novels explore whether the uncanny is a mode that can resurrect the specters of alternative futures and, in doing so, allow the continuing terror of dictatorship to coexist with alternative possibilities and temporalities.

Dīma Wannūs' Al-Khā'ifūn *(2017;* The Frightened Ones*, 2020)*

Dīma Wannūs (b. 1982), the daughter of famed playwright Saʿdallah Wannūs, is a Syrian author, translator, and TV presenter. She studied French literature at Damascus University and

[524]Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic,* 272.

the Sorbonne.[525] She has published three novels, *Al-Kursī* (2008; The Chair), *Al-Khā'ifūn* (2017; The Frightened Ones, 2020), which was shortlisted for the IPAF in 2018, and *Al-ʿĀ'ila allatī Ibtalaʿat Rijāluhā* (2020; And The Family Devoured its Men), as well as one short story collection, *Tafāṣīl* (2007; Details). She has written on politics and culture for *Al-Safīr, al-Akhbār, Al-Hayāt*, the *Washington Post* and *Jadaliyya.*[526] In 2009, she was selected by the Hay Festival as one of the 39 most talented Arab writers under age 40.[527]

Wannūs' *Al-Khā'ifūn* is structured as a novel within a novel; the frame narrator, Sulaymā, receives an unfinished manuscript from her lover, Nasīm, a doctor/writer who has fled Syria to Germany. The novel is narrated in alternating chapters by Sulaymā and by the protagonist of Nasīm's novel, an unnamed woman who bears uncanny similarities to Sulaymā; toward the end of the novel, Sulaymā discovers that this unnamed woman is not fictional but a real person named Salmā. The voices of the two women are very similar, as are their writing styles. Both the frame narrative and the enclosed novel read like diaries and focus heavily on the two women's internal experiences, particularly their memories and fears. The mise-en-abyme technique introduces a doubled narrative structure, a structure that is paralleled thematically by the many similarities between the two women, a pair of uncanny doubles.

The most obvious parallel between the two women, as suggested by the title, is fear; the novel portrays Sulaymā and Salmā as women who have been tormented by the anxiety produced by life under dictatorship. The two women, Sulaymā observes, are both "shaped by fear";[528] their "souls spin in the same orbit."[529] Because of their fear, the two women live suffocating and static

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[525]"Dima Wannous," *Banipal*, https://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/542/dima-wannous/.
[526]"Ibid; "Dima Wannous," *International Prize for Arabic Fiction*, https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/DimaWannous.
[527]"Dima Wannous," *Banipal*.
[528] Dīma Wannūs, *Al-Khā'ifūn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 2017), 24; Dima Wannous, *The Frightened Ones* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2020), 21. All translations are from the English edition unless otherwise noted.
[529]Ibid, 61; 61.

lives, much like the protagonist of Imān Ḥumaydān's *Ḥayawāt Ukhrā* (Chapter 1). Sulaymā is an artist who can no longer paint, leaving a blank canvas to yellow on its easel; Salmā lives a temporary life in Beirut, refusing to furnish her apartment comfortably or to buy more than a day's worth of food as she is unable to accept that her exile from Damascus is permanent. There is little forward motion in the text and there are few plot developments; there is also little dialogue or access to any external perspective. The novel's interiority relegates the war to the background; the reader is able to forget that the novel takes place during an ongoing war for entire chapters in which the war is not referenced at all or is referenced only in brief, fleeting references, as in Sulaymā's off-hand remark that Nasīm's home had been destroyed in the shelling, killing his mother and sister and leaving his father paralyzed and stricken with survivor's guilt.[530] The two women ruminate endlessly, instead, on their painful memories and ongoing fears, in remarkably similar narrative voices between which it is often difficult to distinguish, producing an "oppressive, " "claustrophobic" atmosphere that, in one critic's reading, is reminiscent of life in Asad's Syria.[531]

The novel is a study of the horrifying turned mundane; everyday life has become a source of terror to these women, who fear everything from airports to the sound of the wind to feeling full to enclosed spaces. Although the war is only explored directly in fleeting references, war and dictatorship are also everywhere, terrifying yet routine. In one scene, Sulaymā organizes a meeting with Kamīl's receptionist, Laylā, at a nearby juice shop:

> انتظرتها هناك في محلّ العصير المطلّ على شارع الطلياني، حيث وسَّع صاحبه مساحته بأن وضع بشكل اعتباطيّ أربع طاولات على الرَّصيف أكلَّا المساحة المخصَّصة للمشاة؛ واشترى آلة صغيرة تقدِّم القهوة الجاهزة. شارع الطلياني كان يغصّ بالمارة. امرأة خمسينيَّة، مكتنزة، تفترش الرَّصيف بالقرب من محل العصير. تضع على عينيها نظّارتي غوص! وفي فمها الأنبوب المخصَّص للتنفُّس تحت الماء! والموبايل على أذنها تتحدَّث بصوت عالٍ مع لا أحد على ما أعتقد. تقول إنَّها في البحر وستنتشل ابنها، لكنَّها لم تعثر حتَّى الآن سوى على

[530]Ibid, 71; 74.
[531]"Wannous, Dima: THE FRIGHTENED ONES," *Kirkus Reviews*, June 1, 2020.

حطام قارب ممزَّق. أحدٌ من المارَّة لم يكترث لكلامها، أو يضحك من منظرها تسبح على الأرض. حتَّى شرطيّ السَّير الواقف أمامها لم يعطِ كبير اهتمام لحديثها عن غرق ابنها…

> I waited for her at a juice shop on al-Taliani Street, where the owner had expanded his shop by staking four tables on the pavement, which ate into the pedestrians' pathway. He'd also bought a little machine that made coffee to order. Al-Taliani Street was crowded. I saw a heavyset woman in her fifties lying down on the pavement, and noticed that she was wearing swimming goggles. She had a snorkel in her mouth, too, and was holding a phone to her ear. She was shouting into it, but it didn't seem like anyone was on the other end; she was at sea trying to rescue her son, she said, but so far she'd only found pieces of a wrecked boat.
>
> None of the passers-by paid attention to what she was saying, nor did they laugh at the sight of her swimming on land. Not even the policeman standing there paid attention to the story of her drowned son…[532]

The scene starts normally, with a banal description of a juice shop and its setting. The appearance of the woman snorkeling is a "surreal" gesture,[533] a bizarre moment that fails to catch the attention of anyone in the area; the sight of a woman gone mad with grief, it seems, has become a routine one. The scene that ends the novel inserts horror into everyday life even more explicitly; in the scene, Sulaymā wakes up to her mother's screaming. She finds her mother in the bathroom by the toilet, pointing at the hose which had "turned into meat" that was "a deep blood-red, so fresh it glistened."[534] Then, Sulaymā wakes up again, suggesting that the previous scene had been a nightmare. Her mother is sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee, which she invites Sulaymā to drink with her. This illusion of normality is soon disrupted, however:

وأنا…كانت رائحة الخرطوم اللَّحم تملأ أنفي، وتفور من معدتي مخلِّفة طعمًا صدئًا. ابتسمت لها، وتوجَّهت إلى المطبخ متفادية النَّظر باتِّجاه حمّام الضُّيوف حيث يتدلَّى خرطوم اللَّحم الطازج.

[532]Wannūs, 149; 163.
[533]Maya Jaggi, "The Frightened Ones by Dima Wannous review – love and loneliness in Syria," *The Guardian*, Apr. 15, 2020.
[534]Wannūs, 176; 194-195.

> And as for me…the smell of meat filled my nose; it rose up from my stomach and left a sharp, rusty taste behind. I smiled at her, and headed to the kitchen, taking care not to glance towards the guest bathroom, where the hose of living flesh was hanging.[535]

The intrusion of this nightmarish scene into the familiar domestic space of the home is a commentary on the ways in which horror becomes routine in wartime.

In the context of this normalized horror, the two women's visits to the same psychiatrist, Dr. Kamīl, for help managing their debilitating anxieties, appears like an exercise in futility. In the context of ongoing dictatorship and war where "fear is anything but irrational," Dr. Kamīl's deployment of Freudian psychoanalysis to diagnose and treat his patients is absurd, even darkly comedic.[536] Sulaymā, for example, tells Dr. Kamīl that, as a child, she often imagined her father and brother being brutally tortured, a not unrealistic fear in Asad's Syria, where people regularly disappear into the regime's prisons, especially given the fact that Sulaymā's family fled the 1982 Hama massacre.[537] Her fear is, in fact, later realized when her brother Fuʿād is detained due to his participation in the protests; his family hopes that he is dead because the alternative is that he is living through endless torture. Dr. Kamīl fails utterly to draw a connection between ongoing reality and Sulaymā's psychological state, instead wondering "How it was that a girl of nine or ten, living in a quiet home, not lacking for love or security, had such violent thoughts in her mind?" before informing Sulaymā that these thoughts are a form of "self-flagellation."[538]

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[535]Ibid, 176; 195.
[536]Jaggi.
[537]In 1982, the regime responded to an uprising led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which briefly succeeded in gaining control over the city of Hama, by sending its army to retake the city and brutally suppress the uprising, including by shelling entire quarters of the city and deploying cyanide gas. By the end of the crackdown, "entire neighbourhoods were flattened and became unrecognizable…Tens of thousands fled the city, homeless and traumatized (Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 128). The precise number of victims of the massacre is unknown; estimates range between 10,000 and 40,000 (Lefevre, 77).
[538]Wannūs, 56; 56.

Rather than a treatable medical condition, the two women's fears are presented as the product of long-standing dictatorship, a legacy which the novel portrays as a family inheritance, passed down through decades of oppression. In the case of both women, this legacy is transmitted primarily through the father. Sulaymā's family fled Hama for Damascus in 1982, the year of the massacre. Sulaymā's mother has never forgiven her father for his cowardice in fleeing; as a doctor, she feels, he ought to have stayed and aided the victims. Instead, he wet himself in fear and fled with his family to Damascus. He remains tormented by fear for the rest of his life until, finally, he dies of it. His fear shapes his daughter's life; she is not only tormented with nightmares of her father being tortured, she is also subjected to suspicion in school due to her family's origins in Hama. The youth military education instructor calls Sulaymā to her office and asks her what her father told her about the events in Hama. She replies, "Our father the leader has bloodied his hands for the entire Syrian people."[539] The instructor only smiles cryptically in response, leaving Sulaymā racked with fear that she has answered incorrectly.

Salmā's father, too, passes down a legacy of fear; he is made anxious by everything from chilly weather and minor illness to crowds and traffic. Out of fear that his daughter will choke, he closely observes her whenever she eats. Salmā's father, crucially, is ill for much of her life; he eventually receives a terminal cancer diagnosis that leaves her trembling with fear.[540] When Salmā is eleven, her father is told by his doctors that he has three months to live; he in fact lives for another three years, which Salmā spends in a constant state of anxiety:

كانت فكرة رحيله مستحيلة بالنسبة إليَّ. وكنت مقتنعة أنَّه لن يتركني. وأنا مع قناعتي بأنَّه لن يتركني، عشت تلك السنوات الثلاث على حافَّة الموت. أتلمَّس خطواتي من الصَّباح إلى المساء على وقع خوف راح يشكَّل في اللَّاوعي، ملاحمه تكتمل وتتراكم، تتراكم...إلى أن استفقت في الثامنة والعشرين من عمري على اضطراب نبضاب قلبي وضيق في الصدر ونوبات ملع تصل اللَّيل بالنَّهار.

[539]Ibid, 135; 145
[540]Ibid, 28-29; 27.

> The thought of his passing was incomprehensible. I was convinced he would not leave me. But despite my conviction, I lived those three years on death's razor edge. From morning until night, I walked in the shadow of fear. It took shape in my mind, as its features slowly gained definition…until I was twenty-eight, and awoke one morning with arrhythmic heartbeats, a tightness in my chest and panic attacks that lasted all day.[541]

Her father's cancer is the dominant source of fear in Salmā's life; intriguingly, the novel also portrays the cancer as being the result of fear. After his death, Salmā receives letters written by his father to a childhood friend:

> في واحدة من تلك الرَّسائل، كتب له والدي عن أرقه وعدم استطاعته النوم خوفًا من سرطان الحنجرة! كان وقتها في الخامسة عشرة من عمره، أصيب بسرطان الحنجرة في أواخر الأربعينيَّات. هل استدعى مرضه؟ هل عاش في خوف منه كلّ تلك السَّنوات؟ هل كان في انتظاره؟!
>
> In one, my father wrote of lying awake at night in fear of throat cancer. He was fifteen years old at the time! And it was not until his forties that he was diagnosed with throat cancer. Did he conjure illness from his imagination? Had he lived in fear for all those years? Had he been expecting it?[542]

This portrayal links the father's cancer to the same pervasive atmosphere of fear in Syria from which Sulaymā's father suffers.

Illness, and especially cancer, has been deployed elsewhere in post-2011 fiction as a means for exploring the psychological impact of living in constant confrontation with death under dictatorship or in wartime. In Shahlā al-ʿUjaylī's *Samā' Qarība min Baytna* (2015; *A Sky So Close To Us*, 2018), to name a noteworthy example, the novel's protagonist, Jumān Badrān, a Syrian humanitarian worker living in exile in Amman, Jordan, battles cancer alone far from her family, who are confronting a war of their own at home in Syria. The novel draws a number of parallels between life in a warzone and life with cancer, particularly the fact that both Jumān and her family members are forced to constantly confront the possibility of their own deaths. The

[541]Ibid, 82; 87-88.
[542]Ibid, 33-34; 32.

novel deploys cancer as a metaphor for the Syrian war; as cancer attacks Joumane's body from within, the war threatens to destroy Syria, also from within.

To return to Wannūs' novel, Salmā's father also passes down a legacy of fear due to his heritage; he is a member of the Alawite sect, the sect to which the Asads and, consequently, much of the Syrian ruling elite, belong, yet has married a Sunni woman. Consequently, Salmā is always treated like an outsider by her father's family; during her childhood, this manifests only in mild teasing for her skin color, but with the outbreak of war, a significant escalation takes place. At first, she is hopeful that the "rift" can be repaired; "We could listen to each other and maybe, just maybe (I was not completely sure) we could understand each other's points of view and forgive. We've always been different, that was true. But our differences had never been political…"[543] Then, matters escalate; her cousin marries a woman from Latakia whose family has ties to the *shabiha*;[544] two years after the start of the revolution, this cousin contacts her to tell her "that he had killed nine people so far, and would not mind making me the tenth."[545] Another cousin writes her a letter that reads, "I don't hope they kill your mother, oh no, I hope they rape you in front of her, and then slaughter you like an animal, so she spends the rest of her days in agony."[546] "This bit of savagery" is enough for Salmā to realize that the rift is irreparable; "we could not live alongside one another, not after that…They didn't see human beings, just filthy sperm to exterminate."[547]

Wannūs' portrayal of uncanny doubles-and a doubled narrative-allows her to explore the ways in which shared exposure to dictatorship creates a collective of "frightened ones"; every character in the novel, including its two narrators, suffers from paralyzing fear. From Sulaymā's

[543]Ibid, 64; 66.
[544]The term refers to armed civilian militia members who are loyal to the regime and generally belong to the Alawite minority sect.
[545]Ibid, 66; 67.
[546]Ibid, 67; 68.
[547]Ibid, 67; 69.

mother, who spends her days reading the same page of a book over and over, to Nasīm, who writes obituaries for his loved ones in advance so that he can cope with his fear of their deaths, to the patients in Dr. Kamīl's busy waiting room, the novel offers numerous portraits of individuals tormented by fear. In Sulaymā's case, however, encountering a double figure with uncannily similar fears does not lead her to feel a sense of kinship with Salmā. Instead, Sulaymā interprets the manuscript featuring Salmā as protagonist as an act of plagiarism. She becomes angry with Nasīm, accusing him of "stealing" or "borrowing" her story and her life; she wants to tell him, "You've lost your imagination so you're using me: my fears and anxieties, my looks and childhood memories."[548] Reading the manuscript disturbs Sulaymā's sense of self and puts her identity into question, leading her to tell Dr. Kamīl that she worries that she does not exist, "or maybe that no one exists, and that we're all just a figment of imagination."[549] She feels "sick with doubt about whether I really exist, or whether I simply invented myself" and even comes to question whether Nasīm himself really exists or if he-and the protagonist of his manuscript-are her own invention.[550]

Sulaymā's fears and anger that stems from her belief that her story has been stolen allow Wannūs, who currently resides in London, to explore the ethics of representing wartime trauma from exile. The author of the manuscript that contains Sulaymā's "stolen" story is her lover, Nasīm, who, as a Syrian writer living in Europe, resembles Wannūs. Nasīm reports losing his ability to write after the revolution; according to Sulaymā:

> توقَّعت أن يكتب نسيم عن الثورة. لن يستطيع إكمال روايته...نسيم ظنَّ أنَّ ما حدث عطَّل خياله. يقول إنَّ الكتابة عن ثورة لم تحصل، أمر ممكن. أمَّا الكتابة عن ثورة تحصل أمام أعيننا وفي حيّز أحاسيسنا، فهو أمر صعب للغاية.

[548]Ibid, 71-72; 74.
[549]Ibid, 153; 168.
[550]Ibid, 167; 184-185.

> I had expected Naseem to write about the revolution, but he couldn't seem to make progress in his novel…Naseem thought that current events were stalling his imagination. He said he could have written about a fictitious revolution, but that writing about the revolution happening in front of our eyes, something we had feelings about-that was too challenging.[551]

His sentiments echo those of Wannūs, who found her imagination "paralysed" by the revolution; consequently, nearly a decade separates the publication of Wannūs' first novel, *Al-Kursi* (2008; The Chair) and her second novel, *Al-Khā'ifūn* (2017; *The Frightened Ones*, 2020).

Wannūs attributes her inability to write about the revolution not only to paralysis but to the ethical questions raised by representing it from exile. Although she initially worked to document ongoing events, publishing stories about "women who had seen their houses collapsing under barrel bombs" and "about young people who had gone through living hell" after being detained by security services, Wannūs came to feel that she was "plagiarising their heroic deeds and myself becoming a pretentious, deceitful heroine."[552] It is activists "who dare not reveal their names," she says, "who are the real heroes," exposing themselves to danger so that they can remain in Syria and continue to document ongoing events; "Meanwhile, directors abroad use this footage and tour the world and festivals, wallowing in the applause."[553] In other words, to Wannūs, representing war from abroad entails stealing the stories of others and appropriating their acts of heroism and their suffering.

Wannūs' novel explores these ethical questions through a multi-layered narrative that blurs the boundaries between narrative layers, as well as between fiction and reality. In addition to Wannūs as author, the text features several writer figures as characters: Sulaymā, the purported author of the diary that constitutes the frame narrative, Nasīm, the author of the manuscript that

[551]Ibid, 116; 124.
[552]Dima Wannous, "An author on standby," *Qantara*.
[553]Ibid.

features Salmā as a protagonist, and Salmā, the purported author of the diary-like text that constitutes Nasīm's manuscript. Then there is Wannūs herself as author, a position complicated by the text's autobiographical elements. As critics have noted, there are clear parallels between Salmā, the protagonist of Nasīm's autobiography and the architect of Sulaymā's identity crisis, and Wannūs; both women lost their writer fathers at age fourteen to cancer, for example, and both women left Syria for Beirut after the 2011 revolution.[554] Wannūs's decision to place herself, a "real" figure, in the role of the copy, the protagonist of the fictionalized, stolen version of Sulaymā's story, contributes to a complex tension between the original and the stolen, the authentic and the artificial. This tension is exacerbated by Sulaymā's fears that she, the ostensible "original" is in fact a work of fiction, a metafictional gesture (given the fact that Sulaymā is in fact the protagonist of a novel). Sulaymā's status as the "original" is further complicated by her diminutive name, a name often used not as a proper name but as a nickname for Salmā, the name of the protagonist of the manuscript. This uneasy tension contributes to the novel's deployment of an aesthetic of the uncanny and to Sulaymā's state of tension and feelings that her sense of self is under threat. It is unclear to whom the story rightfully belongs-Sulaymā or Salmā? Does Nasīm have the right to narrate it? To whom do the anxieties and fears that permeate the novel belong?

The similarities between Sulaymā and Salmā provoke fear and unease, emotions that are strongly linked in the novel with the weighty legacy of dictatorship. The novel's positioning of the uncanny other as a source of fear is an exploration of the psychological effects of long-lasting dictatorship, in which any person could be an informant and daily life comes with the threat of detention or the exposure to violence. Although the other is portrayed in the novel as a source of

[554]Valentina Viene, "The Frightened Ones: 'I sometimes miss fear because it became a way of living,'" *Middle East Eye,* May 5, 2020.

fear, the novel also suggests that these similarities could, instead, form the basis of community. The novel suggests that these similarities are not limited to Sulaymā and Salmā, the uncanny double pair; instead, it suggests that, in Asad's Syria, everyone is a copy of each other. Sulaymā herself comes to this realization when she considers how Nasīm will respond to an accusation of stealing her story:

> ها هو نسيم يسرق قصص والدي وطفولتي الخائفة ويلبسها لشخصيَّته. لو قلت له، لادّعى أنَّني وأسرتي لسنا سوى أربعة من أصل ٢٣ مليون سوريّ خائفين…لقد أصبحنا قصَّة واحدة. كما كنّا نسخاً عن بعضنا بعضاً، في المدرسة وفي البيوت وفي الشوارع وفي صالات السينما القليلة الموجودة في دمشق وفي المسارح وفي دوائر حكوميَّة…ها نحن نصير قصَّة واحدة، نسخاً مريضة عن بعضنا بعضاً.
>
> Naseem has stolen stories of my father and my fear-flecked childhood, and animated them with his own character. If I tell him this, he will say that my family and I are just four people among twenty-three million frightened Syrians…That we all have the same story. We may as well be copies of each other. Here we are, at school, at home, in the streets, in Damascus's few cinemas, at the theatre, in government offices…all of us living one story, one aching version of humankind.[555]

The realization that everyone in Assad's Syria shares the same painful history is unsettling but also conjures the intriguing possibility of connection. Sulaymā's realization that her trauma is not personal but shared positions her as a part of a suffering, traumatized collective, one of "twenty-three million frightened Syrians,"[556] rather than an isolated individual.

Trauma theory has long suggested that an encounter between my/the other's trauma is a powerful moment that has the potential to build community ties. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, one of trauma theory's foundational texts, Cathy Caruth opens with a story Freud examines in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a romantic epic by Tasso. As Freud recounts it, the epic depicts the hero, Tancred, as he "unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an

[555]Wannūs, 76; 80.
[556]Ibid.

enemy knight."[557] Afterwards, he enters a magic forest and slashes a tree with his sword; the tree holds Clorinda's imprisoned soul and bleeds as it admonishes him in Clorinda's voice for harming her a second time.[558] Caruth reads this as an instance of traumatic repetition, an experience that can only be vocalized through the voice of the other. This tale, Caruth argues, demonstrates "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of the other, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound."[559] She continues, "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own…history is precisely the ways we are implicated in each other's traumas."[560] In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth extends this argument, suggesting that "In a catastrophic age…trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures."[561] Stef Craps has read this quote as suggesting that "listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and the creation of new forms of community."[562]

Similarly, Judith Butler has written on how the shared experience of loss can lead to the production of new ways of relating to others. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler notes that the United States quickly responded to the September 11, 2001 attacks with military force aimed at exacting revenge for the injury it had suffered, raising the question, for Butler, of "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war."[563] She asks, "If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some

[557]Qtd. in Caruth, 2.
[558]Ibid.
[559] Ibid, 8.
[560]Ibid, 24.
[561]Cathy Caruth, "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 11.
[562]Stef Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age," in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 46.
[563]Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), xii.

might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?"[564] Lingering with loss and grief, she suggests, may produce a kind of melancholia that moves away from narcissism and towards "a consideration of the vulnerability of others."[565] Sam Durrant reads Butler's work as a rethinking of Freud's understanding of mourning as "a withdrawing of the ties that bind or bound us to others" that instead sees loss as an opportunity for the production of a new relationality based upon our "common corporeal vulnerability."[566]

This collective remains, in the novel, yet-to-come. Sulaymā arranges a meeting with her double, a meeting that she believes could offer the two women the opportunity to glimpse their own trauma in the eyes of the other. Sulaymā reflects:

> أن نلتقي، هو بالضبط كذلك الفعل القاتم والكئيب، فيه استعادة لكلّ حياتنا، أنتِ وأنا. سأرى عينيّ في عينيك، وسألمح كلّ تلك الذاكرة التي حلمت بالتخصلُّص منها، ومازلت.
>
> If we do meet, it will be a dark and desolate act, a moment to recall our whole lives, yours and mine. I'll look into your eyes and see my own. I'll glimpse all the memories I still dream of giving up.[567]

This encounter, however, remains deferred; Sulaymā ultimately flees from her double, overwhelmed with anxiety. Nevertheless, the novel suggests that an encounter with one's own trauma in the figure of the other, and the realization that Syrians, despite the divides wrought by decades of war and dictatorship, share a traumatic history, has the potential to bring divided communities together, to turn, in Sulaymā's words, "*each of us*" into "*all of us*" in a future to come.[568]

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[564]Ibid, 30.
[565]Ibid.
[566]Sam Durrant,"Undoing Sovereignty: Towards a Theory of Critical Mourning, " in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 92.
[567]Wannūs, 168; 185.
[568]Ibid, 144; 157.

Mahā Ḥassan's ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb *(2018;* Good Morning, War*)*

Mahā Ḥassan (b. 1966) is a Syrian/Kurdish novelist and short story writer, currently residing in France. Her novels *Ḥabl Surrī* (2011; *Umbilical Cord*) and *al-Rāwiyāt* (2014; *Female Voices*) were both longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic fiction; two of her novels, *Mitrū Ḥalab* (2017; *Aleppo Metro*) and *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* (2018; *Good Morning, War*) were longlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Prize for Literature.[569] In 2021, her novel *Ḥayy al-Dahsha* (*Neighborhood of Wonder*) was shortlisted for the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature.[570] Many of her works deal with feminist topics or women's issues, like her 2011 novel, *Banāt al-Barārī* (*Girls of the Wilderness*) which deals with honor crimes; because many of her works address taboo topics, particularly sex, politics, and religion, they have often been controversial. She was banned from publishing in Syria because, as she puts it in an interview, "the authorities consider my writing too liberal, too feminist, and 'morally condemnable.'"[571]

After protests began in 2011, Mahā Ḥassan was quick to throw her support behind them. In 2012, she published a novel, *Ṭubūl al-Ḥubb* (*Drums of Love*), which Alaa Rashidi situates in a broader trend in post-2011 Syrian fiction toward "political commitment" and "narrative documentation."[572] The novel documents the early stages of the Syrian revolution, including contemporaneous debates between Syrian intellectuals, testimonials from foreign journalists, and slogans graffitied on the walls of Deraa.[573] As Manal Al Natour has noted, the novel contains significant autobiographical elements; its protagonist, Rīmā, is, like Mahā Ḥassan, a Syrian-Kurdish writer and journalist who resides in France.[574] Rīmā is both protagonist and

[569]"Maha Hassan," *The International Prize for Arabic Fiction*, https://arabicfiction.org/en/Maha-Hassan.
[570]"The Naguib Mahfouz Medal 2021 Shortlist," *The American University in Cairo Press,* February 8, 2021.
[571]Maha Hassan, "Interview with outspoken writer, Maha Hassan," *The New Humanitarian,* August 15, 2005.
[572]Alaa Rashidi, " Documentation and forms in the contemporary Syrian novel," *Syria Untold*, March 2, 2021.
[573]Ibid.
[574]Manal Al Natour, "Home, identity, and place in Syrian literature: Maha Hassan's Drums of Love and Ghassan Jubbaʿi's Qahwat Al-General,"*Contemporary Levant*, 7. no. 1 (2022).

purported "author" of the novel, presented as a "collection of testimonials about the Syrian revolution that [Rīmā] gathered when she visited Syria"; Rīmā describes her work as "a mixture of reality, research, and strong feelings [about the revolution] that deserve to be described as a creative work."[575] The work "blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality" in ways that allow the author to reflect on her exiled identity[576] as well as the challenges associated with representing ongoing events.

ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb, published six years later in 2018, similarly blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Unlike *Ṭubūl al-Ḥubb*, which features a fictionalized version of the author as protagonist, in *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* Mahā Ḥassan places herself directly into the work as its author and as the compiler and transcriber of her family members' stories. The novel's chapters are narrated in the third person by various members of Mahā Ḥassan's family, especially her brother, Ḥussām, and her deceased mother, Amīna. Some chapters are narrated in the first person by Mahā Ḥassan herself.

The novel's central theme is family, particularly the ways in which familial bonds can disintegrate in war time. The novel opens with a passage narrated by Mahā as she enumerates the disparate fates of her siblings; her oldest brother, Māhir, fled to the Netherlands, her third brother, ʿĀmir, to Finland, and her youngest brother, Ḥusām, continues to search for a safe harbor in Europe. Her sister Suhā lives in Sweden; her other sister, Nāʾila, is in Turkey. Mahā, meanwhile, lives in exile in France. This leaves her final brother, Luʾay, who "cut me off because of the war," as the only sibling remaining in Syria.[577] "The war tore us apart," Mahā laments, "It sowed hatred and disunity between siblings, kin, and friends."[578] No family homes remain in

[575]Ibid.
[576]Ibid.
[577]Mahā Ḥassan, *'Imtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb* (Milan: Almutawassit Books, 2017), 11. All translations are mine.
[578]Ibid, 13.

Syria; her mother's house was destroyed in a bombing carried out by the opposition, which Mahā and the majority of her siblings support. Her brother Luʾay's home, meanwhile, was destroyed in a bombing by the regime, which Luay supports; "The irony of war," Mahā notes, "is that your friends bomb your home."[579]

At the center of the novel's attention to family is the question of inheritance and legacy; the family's children are split into two factions, each of which is the heir to one of two legacies, represented in the novel by the two diametrically opposed figures of Mahā's parents. To begin with the father, his legacy is one of patriarchal violence. He is portrayed as an abusive husband and father who terrorizes the household; it is not the regime, which is a distant, background presence in the novel, that spreads fear in the novel but the father, a family patriarch and mini-dictator. Long deceased, he is granted no narrative voice in the novel and is visible to the reader only through the perspectives of his wife, Amīna, and daughter, Mahā. He is an authoritarian, frightening figure who enjoys striking his daughter as a "prank" and pointing his gun at his wife, also as a supposed joke.[580] He insists on cleaning his gun in the same room as his wife and infant daughter, even as his wife yells at him to do so in a different, safer location. He laughs at her fears before the gun goes off and strikes the same pillow on which his infant daughter's head rests. Even so, the father continues to play with his gun "as if it were a game"; he relies upon it to "display his manhood and feel powerful."[581]

The text draws clear parallels between patriarchy and dictatorship in Syria. Amīna's husband routinely wields the former Syrian president, Hafez al-Asad, as a boogeyman-like figure with which to threaten her. As a result, she does not understand that Hafez al-Asad is a person, believing him to be a frightening animal or a ghoul until her daughter explains:

[579]Ibid, 11.
[580]Ibid, 170-171.
[581]Ibid, 171.

حافظ الأسد اسمٌ…هذا اسمٌ لرجل، لكنّه رجلٌ مخيفٌ، يستطيع أنْ يفعل كلّ شيء. سألتُكِ: يعني مثل الأسد؟ يستطيع أكْلَ الحيوانات والبشر؟ هززتِ برأسِكِ، وأريتِني صورتَهُ على دفترِكِ: انظري، هذا حافظ الأسد! نظرتُ إليه مستغربة، كان رجلاً عاديّاً مثل بقيّة الرجال،مثل أبي وأبيك وكل الرجال…كنت أعتقد أنّ (حافظ الأسد) كائنٌ غيرُ بشريّ، حيوان ضخم مثل التّنّين…كان حافظ الأسد هو أقصى أشكال الخوف الممكنة التي أتخيّلها. تعرفين أنّ أباكِ أخافني كثيراً، كان أبوكِ يستمتعُ بتخويف الآخرين، كان يضحك وهو يدبّر المقالبَ والمؤمراتِ ضدّنا في العائلة… حدّثني طويلاً عن (حافظ الأسد)، أنّه هدّدني به: سأجعل حافظ الأسد يأكلُكِ دون ملْح، ويفصلُ لحمَكِ عن عظمِكِ… [582]

> Hafez al-Asad was a name…It was the name of a man, but he was a frightening man who could do anything. I asked you, "Do you mean like a lion who can eat animals and people?" You shook your head and showed me his picture in your notebook, "Look, this is Hafez al-Asad!" I looked at him, confused. He was an ordinary man like any other, like my father, your father, and all men…I had thought that Hafez al-Asad was an inhuman creature, a huge animal like a dragon…Hafez al-Asad was the worst kind of fear that I could imagine. You know that your father frightened me a lot. Your father enjoyed frightening others. He would laugh as he planned pranks and conspiracies against us in the family…he talked to me a lot about Hafez al-Asad, and that he threatened me with him. "I'll make Hafez al-Asad eat you without salt and tear your flesh from your bones…"

This scene draws a clear parallel between patriarchal violence and authoritarian violence. As a Kurd, the father fears the regime, moving his family to an Arab neighborhood because he believes that his family will be safer there than in a Kurdish one. The move is a reference to the fraught history of Syrian Kurdish communities, one marked by decades of systematic discrimination and forced assimilation. As a citizen, in other words, the father is terrorized by the regime; as a father, he terrorizes his family, borrowing many of the tactics of the regime as he plans "conspiracies" against his family and randomly hits his daughter's feet with his cane, a torture tactic often associated with the Asad regime.

Mahā Ḥassan has also explored the intimate relationship between familial and dictatorial violence in her non-fictional work; in an article titled "Women's revolutions in the shadow of the

[582]Ibid, 170-171.

Arab Spring: Has the time come?," she describes "despotism in Arab society" as "sedimentary layers":

> If you peel back political despotism you encounter religious despotism. Remove that and familial despotism lies exposed. Wheels within wheels, most of them borne by woman who, like man, is the victim of every one of these layers but in the end is the victim of man's despotism, too—no matter that he himself might have been victim of an earlier phase of oppression.[583]

Because of the links between political despotism and familial despotism, Mahā Ḥassan argues that any successful revolution against despotism in Syria will have to be attentive to the rights of women:

> When woman is in trouble, the revolution is in trouble, society is in trouble, man is in trouble. Woman is the revolution's rock. The revolution is in trouble if woman is in trouble: woman is the touchstone.[584]

The revolution itself, she concludes, must be "feminized," as "Revolutions that cannot be feminized can only become battlefields and mutual slaughter."[585]

In the novel, despotism is a masculine legacy passed down to Mahā's brother, Luʾay, who has sided with the regime and is portrayed as violent and abusive. Several chapters are narrated by Luʾay's young daughter, Faraḥ, whose descriptions of her father are reminiscent of Amīna's descriptions of her husband. Her father, Faraḥ narrates, beats her so often that at night she wets her bed out of fear.[586] Her grandmother, Amīna, she adds, told her once that Luʾay was also violent as a young man, beating his brother Ḥusām with a belt so severely that the beating left his face badly swollen.[587] Luʾay, the father's heir, sides with the regime after the outbreak of revolution and, later, war, a decision that leads to his estrangement from the rest of his siblings, especially Mahā and Ḥusām, who have chosen to side with the opposition. He and his wife are

[583]Maha Hassan, "Women's revolutions in the shadow of the Arab Spring: Has the time come?," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, April 24, 2014.
[584]Ibid.
[585]Ibid.
[586]Ḥassan, *'Imtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb*, 37.
[587]Ibid, 37.

portrayed as malicious people who are often hostile to Luʾay's siblings and mother. His wife even sends Mahā a gloating Whatsapp message after the fall of Aleppo to the regime in battles that, as Mahā observes from France, result in wounded left in the streets to die of their wounds or the cold, entire neighborhoods in rubble, and children running alone amid the corpses.[588]

The family however, has a second legacy: that of the mother, Amīna, a feminine legacy that, as Mahā Ḥassan's writing on "feminized" revolution suggests, offers an alternative to despotism. Unlike her husband, who terrorizes the family and stands for malice and disunity, Amīna's legacy is that of community building. After her husband moved the family to an Arab neighborhood in Aleppo, Amīna is the one who turns their house into a home and their neighborhood into a community. Amīna is intimately familiar with every piece of her home, having furnished it lovingly over the years by secretly saving money that her husband gave her for household expenses, enduring his beatings when he discovers her purchases.[589] The home is Amīna's refuge, a reassurance that she will not end up homeless in her old age and a place where she feels protected from the falling bombs once the war begins.[590] Her home is also the center of a community of neighborhood women; the area outside her home has long served as a meeting space where the neighborhood women would gather each day to chat and prepare food together.[591] Once the war begins, she offers her home as a shelter to displaced neighbors and continues to invite neighbors over for tea and food, even though food has become scarce and expensive.

The heir to her legacy as community builder is her son, Ḥusām, who strongly identifies with the neighborhood and feels a sense of kinship with its residents. Ḥusām makes many friends

[588]Ibid, 34.
[589]Ibid, 19.
[590]Ibid, 139.
[591]Ibid, 123.

in the neighborhood, coming to feel a greater sense of belonging with Arabs than with other Kurds; he narrates:

> كان انتمائي عربيّاً، أنا أتحدّث باللّغة العربيّة، ومعجب بها، وعلاقاتي مع العرب، وُلدتُ بينهم، كبرتُ، وذَهَبْتُ إلى المدرسة برفقتهم...[592]
>
> Among Arabs, I felt that I belonged. I speak Arabic and love the language. I have relationships with Arabs-I was born with Arabs, grew up among them, and went to school with them...

When protests break out in 2011, Ḥusām is quick to join them in the company of his neighborhood (Arab) friends. In the beginning, the protests are inclusive; Abū Ḥassān, a fellow activist, advises them to avoid religious topics and to be inclusive of all groups, including "Christians, Kurds, Arabs, Muslims, and even Alawis."[593] The atmosphere at the protests is electric, like a wedding; Ḥusām enjoys going out with friends, shouting slogans together, and feeling that he is participating in something collective and valuable.[594]

The outbreak of war, however, comes to pose a challenge to Ḥusām's loyalty to the revolution and to his hybrid identity as a Kurd who has grown up in a predominantly Arab environment. Despite Ḥusām's initial participation in the protests, where he experiences the empowering, electric sensation of breaking "the wall of fear" through collective action against the regime, as the violence intensifies, Ḥusām finds that his Kurdish identity is increasingly viewed with suspicion, culminating in his imprisonment by the Free Syrian Army, an organization that he had supported. Ḥusām experiences this as an enormous humiliation and a betrayal. The experience causes him to lose his "love for and belief in the revolution," and to feel that, if the revolution is being led by people like the ones who humiliated and betrayed him, "I don't belong to this revolution."[595] Ḥusām feels that the war has left no room for people with hybrid identities like his; he describes feeling as if he is in a hallway lined with doors, each of

[592]Ibid, 243.
[593]Ibid, 104.
[594]Ibid, 107-112.
[595]Ibid, 244-245.

which represents a particular identity ("Sunni-Shi'i-Kurdish"). He must choose a door to enter but cannot find one that corresponds to his multifaceted identity.[596] After his imprisonment, Ḥusām fears that he will be targeted further and decides to leave for Europe and a life in exile, breaking ties with his community, and his homeland, for good.

Not long after Ḥusām's departure, Amīna's home collapses in a bombing, putting a decisive end to her legacy of community building. Not long after the fall of her home, Amīna dies and is buried in the local cemetery alongside her neighbors who have also died during the war, many violently. From the cemetery, her animated corpse continues to pass on what is left of her legacy: memories and stories narrated to her daughter, Mahā, positioned in the novel as the guardian of her mother's memory and of the memory of the home her mother built in Aleppo. Although she lives in Paris, Mahā has always felt haunted by Aleppo; she recounts dreams and nightmares in which she wanders through familiar Paris landmarks, like the Paris metro, but believes herself to be in Aleppo.[597] After the destruction of the family home and the death of her mother, this sense of haunting intensifies; when Mahā cooks in Paris, she feels that she is moving through the kitchen of her family home alongside her mother, transforming her familiar domestic space into an uncanny threshold between worlds:

> أمينة… تزورُني…وأنا أُحضرُ الطعام في مطبخي الفرنسيّ، فأتحوّل إلى كائنَينْ معاً: امرأة أطبخ هنا، في بيتي في مورليه المُطلّة على الأطلنطي، وأخرى تتجوّل مع أمينة هناك، في حارتنا القديمة في حلب…تتسلّل أمّي من قبرها، وأهرب أنا من فرنسا، لنعودَ خفية إلى ذلك البيت، نتجادلُ، نتبادلُ القصص والخبرات، وفي الصباح، تتركُني لتنامَ، وأنهض أنا لأبدأ نهاري يتيمةً…[598]
>
> Amīna…visits me…as I prepare food in my French kitchen, so that I transform into two beings at once: a woman cooking here, in my house in Morlaix that overlooks the Atlantic, and another who wanders with Amīna there, in our old neighborhood in Aleppo…My mother creeps from her grave and I flee from France

[596]Ibid, 247.
[597]Ibid, 26.
[598]Ibid, 17.

to return secretly to that house and to argue and exchange stories and news. In the morning, she leaves me to go to sleep and I get up to start my day as an orphan.

More importantly, however, Mahā is also the heir to her mother's legacy of storytelling. As author of the text, Mahā initially appears to present the reader with an autobiography, including chapters narrated by herself and others which document the stories of her actual family members. Adding to the suggestion of veracity is the inclusion of a photograph at the end of the text that depicts Amīna's actual destroyed home in Aleppo. As author, Mahā is often an intrusive figure; in chapters narrated by her family members (presented as oral narratives documented by Mahā), the perspective often shifts from from first person to third person as Mahā's authorial voice takes over the narrative. Mahā's role as authoritative and at times intrusive author figure is subverted, however, by the introduction of a second authoritative figure: her mother, Amīna, a gifted storyteller whose talents, according to both Amīna and Mahā, have been passed down to her daughter. The passages narrated by Amīna are presented as oral narratives related to Mahā; Mahā's voice is apparent in these narratives as she corrects her mother's pronunciation, teases her for her naivety and lack of knowledge about the world, and converses with her. Even so, however, Amīna retains her own authority as narrator, often criticizing her daughter's writing:

ما هذا الكتابُ المُمِلّ؟ أنتِ لا تجدين الكتابة، لأنّك ما تزالين أسيرة، تقولين: إنّكِ ورثتِ عنّي السَّرْدَ، لكنّكِ لم تأخذي عنّي الحُريّة. أنتِ مثل أبيكِ، أسيرة رأي الآخرين بكِ...[599]

What is this boring book? You aren't good at writing because you're still a prisoner. You say that you inherited the ability to narrate from me but you didn't get freedom from me. You are like your father, a prisoner of what others think.

The mother's entry as authoritative narrator pushes aside the conventions of autobiographical writing in favor of oral narrative, a move that also pushes the text away from the veracity genre of autobiography and toward the conventions of oral storytelling, introducing

[599]Ibid, 63.

fantastical, magic realist elements into the text. Oral storytelling, as Mahā Ḥassan has stated in interviews, is a major influence on her work, particularly her childhood visits to relatives in a Kurdish village "full of stories."[600] She continues:

> All I contributed was documentation and technique, but the seed still comes from there, from the village myths and magical tales that those people live and believe.[601]

Mahā Ḥassan's earlier work reflects a keen interest in-and understanding of-the power of female narrative voices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her 2014 novel *Al-Rāwiyāt* (*Female Storytellers*; the title is also often translated as *Female Voices*), a "metafictional novel" narrated "through two intertwining stories: the first is the inner monologue of an author writing a novel; the second is the story of the characters she is creating."[602] The narrator, an aspiring author, is, like her characters, a creative, imaginative woman; one of her characters "lives in a parallel, imaginary world, overflowing with fictional characters" and has inherited from her grandmother "the magical ability to tell stories";[603] another is a PhD candidate who travels to Cairo out of a fascination with "the spirit of Pharaohs" and is a passionate believer in the Arab Spring who continues to that Egypt will transition to democracy despite significant evidence to the contrary, saying "Those who toppled Mubarak are capable of toppling the Muslim Brotherhood, and will not accept a new dictatorship."[604]

Al-Rāwiyāt has a number of magic realist elements. The novel has been described as metafictional because of its structure (a frame narrative in which a female author writes a novel and the rest of the narrative, which features her characters); this structure, however, also allows the author to integrate elements of magic realism. The novel begins with the author meeting a

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[600]Dellair Youssef, "Maha Hassan: 'I grew up surrounded by storytellers,'" *Syria Untold*, February 18, 2022.
[601]Ibid.
[602]"Female Voices," https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/female-voices.
[603]Al-Mustafa Najjar, "New Syrian Novel Expresses Distrust of Storytelling," *Arab Lit*, March 13, 2015.
[604]Ibid.

mysterious man; although the two seem poised to embark on a romance, the author convinces herself the next day that she had invented the encounter, given that she often has difficulties distinguishing events she imagines from reality.[605] The author also has a number of "companions" who follow her throughout her life; the first is a specialist in Eastern music, who died and then "fled from the cemetery and lived inside me."[606]

Magic realism is a long-standing preoccupation for Mahā Ḥassan. She often references Gabriel Garcia Marquez in her work and refers to Kafka as a literary influence, particularly the "fantastical element of his work," as well as Isabel Allende.[607] In particular, Mahā Ḥassan is attentive to the ways in which storytelling, especially oral storytelling, can introduce magic into a text. She often references Marquez's statement that he was born to tell stories;[608] the protagonist of *Al-Rāwiyāt* also references this quote, which she reformulates as "I was created to narrate" (*khuliqtu li-arwī*).[609] In *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb*, Mahā Ḥassan references the title of Marquez's *Living to Tell the Tale*, which she reformulates in relation to her mother as "I told the tale to live" (*rawaytu li-aʿīsh*).

Magic realist works have often been strongly associated with marginalized voices and stories;[610] the genre is often read as an effort to resist, "evade and unsettle" hegemonic discourses, including realism itself[611] and colonialism.[612] For example, magic realism in African and Afrodiasporic literatures often "explores and emphasizes the full potential of oral culture as

[605]Mahā Ḥassan, *Al-Rāwiyāt* (Beirut, Cairo, and Tunis: Dār al-Tanwīr, 2014), 29.
[606]Ibid, 54.
[607]Addie Leak, "Mirrors Across Cultures: Maha Hassan in Conversation with Addie Leak," *Arab Lit*, April 7, 2022.
[608]For example in Maha Hassan, "Women's Revolutions."
[609]Ḥassan, *Al-Rāwiyāt,* 7.
[610]Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 408.
[611]Mehmet Fikret Agaruc, "Preface," in *Patriarchy and Power in Magical Realism* by Maryam Ebadi Asayesh (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), x.
[612]Ousmane Ngom, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Aesthetics in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 47, no. 2 (2020): 196.

an alternative to Western mainstream discourses and as an effective tool against the erasure of the subaltern voice and the revisionist enterprise of neocolonialism."[613] Magic realism, however, has also allowed authors to bring other hegemonic discourses, including patriarchy, into question. As Ebadi Asayesh explains:

> As feminism attempts to give a voice to women, magical realism gives a voice to myth, and colonialism gives a voice to the colonized. Feminism shows how women become the Other in relation to Western males, postcolonialism shows how the colonized became Others in relation to Western whites, and magical realism shows magical views from the point of view of Western rationalism.[614]

In other words, the ways in which magic realism works to bring dominant discourses into doubt renders it a fruitful mode for critiquing other discourses like patriarchy and colonialism. In the case of *Al-Rāwiyāt*, the text foregrounds female voices which are creative, imaginative, and offer magical possibilities and naive aspirations, even if they ultimately go unrealized. The women's narratives offer a space in which the promise of the Arab Spring, an alternative to the often overbearing voices of men in the text, and other alternative realities can come into view.

In *ʿAmtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb*, magic realism offers an alternative discourse to the authoritarian and patriarchal discourse of the state. After Hafez al-Asad came to power following a 1970 military coup, his regime launched a "corrective movement" which led to new economic and political policies as well as revisions to the Baath Party's ideology. Part of this corrective movement was what Max Weiss terms the "Asadist-Ba'thist cultural revolution," which "sought to promote a new discursive and ideological agenda for Syrian writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals that was articulated in the militant language of an aesthetic ideology of cultural revolution."[615] Max Weiss describes this cultural revolution as follows:

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[613]Ibid, 211.
[614]Maryam Ebadi Asayesh, *Patriarchy and Power in Magical Realism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 34-35.
[615]Max Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic*, 44.

> The Asadist-Baʿthist cultural revolution was intercalated with the political objectives of promoting the collective liberation of the Arab peoples, unifying the Arab world in the face of colonialism, imperialism, and Zionism, and leading a socialist transformation on a national scale in Syria. Anticolonial nationalism and the doctrine of socialist realism produced an aesthetic ideology rooted in the practice of commitment literature—or committed cultural production more broadly—that would not only communicate the spirit of a political moment but also speak in a language that was accessible to and satisfied the taste of the masses.[616]

This cultural revolution charged Syrian writers with producing politically committed texts that promoted the ideology of the Asad regime. Critically, commitment in Syria literature has long been closely associated with a particular genre, namely Soviet-style socialist realism.[617] Such novels often featured heroic masculine figures, were written in accessible language, and demonstrated a clear commitment to key ideological tenets of the Baath Party, including socialism and pan-Arab nationalism.

Mahā Ḥassan's text rejects a realist narrative style in favor of a magic realist style that allows her to foreground marginalized female perspectives, particularly that of her mother, which work to overturn the authoritarian and patriarchal discourse of the Asad regime. The major element of magic realism[618] in the text is the figure of the mother, presented as a wondrous, magical figure, a "mythical being" (*kāʾin khurāfī*), a figure from a Márquez novel or from *Alf Layla wa Layla* (*1001 Nights*). She is the "Scheherezade of the war" (*Shahrzād al-ḥarb*), the embodiment of Márquez's *Living to Tell the Tale*, a phrase which, as described above, the author

[616]Ibid, 21-22.
[617]Alexa Firat, "Syria," *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail S. Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 440-445; Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 98.
[618]Magic realism is a significant trend in contemporary, pan-national Kurdish literature produced in both Iraq and Syria. A number of prominent Kurdish authors have produced magic realist novelist in recent decades; Salim Barakat's prolific novelistic output in Arabic is one noteworthy example, as is Iraqi-Kurdish author Bakhtiyar Ali's work in Kurdish. For more information, see Fadia F. Suyoufie, "Flying Over the Abyss: Magical Realism in Salim Barakat's The Captives of Sinjar," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 525-553 and Hashem Ahmadzadeh, "Magic Realism in the Novels of a Kurdish Writer, Bakhtiyar Ali," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 14, no. 3 (2011): 287-299.

reformulates in relation to her mother as "I told the tale to live" (*rawaytu li-aʿīsh*). To Amīna, storytelling is an act of survival, a way of keeping others around her in order to stave off the demise of her community for one more day or night and to ensure that she will not die alone.

The mother's positioning as a mythical storyteller, however, mixes uneasily with her portrayal as an animated corpse; for much of the novel, the mother is deceased, leaving her decomposing remains to tell her stories from the cemetery which she insists upon referring to as a garden. Even as an inhumed corpse, the mother remains a community builder; she has been buried beside her friends and neighbors, many of whom died violent deaths, and the group of women continue to chat with one another and exchange stories. The warmth of the bonds between these women stand in unsettling contrast to the women's grotesque remains. Amīna describes her decomposing body, with flesh slipping off her bones, while her friend Ibtisām, who was killed in a bombing, describes her "torn apart body, with pieces of flesh scattered about and clinging to walls or falling from the balcony."[619]

As a magical storyteller and grotesque corpse, Amīna is an uncanny figure, one who embodies both the horrors of war and the warmth and familiarity of community, portrayed in the novel as the domain of women. As a grotesque corpse, a woman who dies shortly after the devastating loss of her home, Amīna speaks to the war experience, one that is marked by the loss of home and homeland, where even death does not bring an end to her suffering. From her grave, she continues to live in fear, often forced to break off her narration as bombs fall overhead and expressing her fear that the cemetery will be struck by bombs that will send her remains flying into the air, depriving her of even her grave. As a magical storyteller, however, her terror in the grave coexists with warm memories of community, memories which she is determined to pass on

[619]Ḥassan, *'Imtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb*, 269.

to her daughter, another storyteller. As Mahā Ḥassan has stated in an interview, she conceives the role of this novel (and storytelling more broadly) in similar terms:

> The shock of my mother's death…and the shock of the fall of my country and its continued destruction, drove me to write to hold on to our humanity, so that war victims don't become numbers. I found myself, in a way, forced to tell their stories, as that way the stories stay alive and stay in memory, and no war can destroy stories and novels. That's why they are written, in order to keep the history alive.[620]

Writing a novel, this interview suggests, is a way to keep memories threatened with destruction by war alive.

By keeping these memories of community alive, the text works to accomplish one of the foremost aims of the magic realist genre, namely the displacement of dominant discourses by foregrounding marginalized voices in an effort to "create an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality."[621] In an ongoing reality marked by continued dictatorship and the collapse of communal ties, the alternative world that emerges through Amīna's narrative is a world apart from authoritarianism and patriarchy, a world in which memories of community remain alive despite the losses of war. When these memories are preserved through storytelling, an act that the novel portrays as a distinctly female one, the novel suggests that they remain available for potential reactivation in a post-war future to come. In her stories, Amīna denies her own death, calling the cemetery a garden and continuing to hope that one day she will rejoin the living:

> لا، لا تقلْ مقبرة، هذه حديقة، وحين تنتهي الحرب، سننهض جميعنا نحن الراقدات هنا، ونعود إلى البيوت، نحن لم نمتْ، نحن ندّعى الموت، حتّى لا يقصفُنا بالطيران والقذائف...[622]

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[620]Hend Saeed, "Syrian Novelist Maha Hassan on Trying 'To Pay Respect to the Victims of War,'" *Arab Lit*, April 10, 2018.
[621]Theo L. D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), 194-195.
[622]Ḥassan, *'Imtī Ṣabāḥān Ayyatuhā Al-Ḥarb*, 255.

> No, don't call it a cemetery. This is a garden, and when the war ends, all of us who are lying here will rise up and return to our house. We didn't die, we are pretending to be dead so that they don't attack us with planes and bombs…

She tells Mahā, her heir, to return to Syria with her siblings, rebuild the house, and become a family once more:

> لماذا لا نعود إلى البيت جميعاً الآن؟ لأنّ البيتَ سَقَطَ؟ أمَا من أملٍ لإعماره من جديد؟ أمَا من أملٍ لعودتِكُم؟ عُودُوا، يا أولادي، عُودُوا، وقفُوا قربي هنا …[623]

> Why don't all of us return home now? Because the house fell? Is there no hope of rebuilding it? Is there no hope that you will return? Return, my children, and stand beside me here…

The mother's legacy is her continued belief in the possibility of community and home in Syria, and her call to her children to participate in rebuilding their homeland alongside her. Although this possibility remains, by the end of the novel, out of reach, the novel does portray women as the continued bearers of the legacy of community, distant from the authoritarian, patriarchal, and divisive world of men, that persists as a spectral presence despite ongoing violence.

Khālid Khalīfa's Al-Mawt ʻAmal Shāqq *(2016;* Death is Hard Work*, 2019)*

Khālid Khalīfa (1964-2023) was born in Aleppo, Syria. He obtained a BA from the University of Aleppo law school in 1988 before writing screenplays for TV and film. He has written six novels: *Ḥāris al-Khadiʻa* (1993, *The Guard of Deception*), *Dafātir al-Qurbāṭ* (2000; *The Gypsies' Notebooks*), *Madīḥ al-Karāhiya* (2006; *In Praise of Hatred*, 2013) *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hadhihi al-Madīna* (2013; *No Knives in the Kitchens of this City*, 2016), *Al-Mawt ʻAmal Shāqq* (2016; *Death is Hard Work*, 2019), and *Lam Yuṣalliʻ Alayhim Aḥad* (2019, *Nobody Prayed for Them*). *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh Hadhihi al-Madīna* won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal

[623]Ibid, 361.

for Literature in 2013 and was short-listed for the IPAF. *Al-Mawt ʻAmal Shāqq* was also short-listed for the IPAF.[624]

The psychological impact of life under dictatorship has been a major concern of Khalīfa's oeuvre; his novels, including *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh hadhihi al-Madīna* and *Madīḥ al-Karāhiya* both explore the varying effects of oppressive governance on the members of a single family. *Lā Sakākīn fī Maṭābikh hadhihi al-Madīna*, in particular, thematizes the ways in which dictatorship produces stagnant, empty time. The novel is set in Aleppo from the 1960s-early 2000s, stretching from Hafez al-Asad's to Bashar al-Asad's rule and ending shortly before the 2011 uprisings. The family that the novel portrays lives in limbo; their lives are devoid of any milestones or change, like marriage or children (except for a surprise pregnancy at the end of the novel), as well as any satisfaction or achievement. Haunted by guilt and shame, the members of the family stagnate as their family home slowly decays around them. The repetitive structure of the novel, which frequently circles back to the deaths of the siblings' mother and sister, echoes the novel's thematic focus on the empty time of dictatorship.

Many of these same themes emerge, also, in *Al-Mawt ʻAmal Shāqq*, a novel which depicts a set of siblings in the immediate aftermath of the death of their father. In wartime Syria, as the novel's title suggests, death has become hard work; the novel follows three siblings (Bulbul, Ḥusayn, and Fāṭima) as they journey through war-torn Syria to fulfill their father's final wish to be buried in his hometown. The journey, which would take a matter of hours in peacetime, becomes, in a wartime Syria in which violent death has become commonplace and

[624]"Khaled Khalifa," *International Prize for Arabic Fiction*, n.d. https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/khalid-khaifa; "Writer Khaled Khalifa Receives Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature," *The American University in Cairo*, n.d. https://www.aucegypt.edu/news/stories/writer-khaled-khalifa-receives-naguib-mahfouz-medal-literature#:~:text=Syrian%20writer%20Khaled%20Khalifa%20was,the%20Kitchens%20of%20this%20City.

any grave at all a luxury, a "near-Sisyphean" journey, "a veritable odyssey."[625] Nevertheless, the siblings agree to undertake it, renting a minibus and transporting their father's corpse past bombings, snipers, and checkpoints, risking their own deaths at every turn of the interminable journey, all while enduring the rapidly worsening stench of their father's decaying corpse.

The siblings' journey is narrated by an omniscient narrator, who relates the hardships the siblings endure and the dangers they face from the perspective of an external, detached observer. The tone is often documentary, even journalistic; one critic terms Khalīfa's style "documentary surrealism" in its use of documentary language to narrate events far outside of normative experience.[626] For example, the siblings flee a bombing in a passage that reads:

> انحرف حسين بالميكرو في زواريب ضيّقة، أصوات قصف الطيران قريبة منهم، باستطاعتهم رؤية الطائرة وهي تطلق صواريخها من ارتفاع منخفض، الشظايا تتناثر حولهم. حاول حسين التركيز على الطريق كي لا يجدوا أنفسهم محاصرين وسط بساتين الزيتون المحترقة.
>
> Ḥusayn turned the minibus into narrow side streets. They heard bombings nearby, so close that they could see the plane shooting missiles from a low altitude. Shrapnel was scattering around them. Ḥusayn tried to focus on the road so that they would not find themselves pinned down in the middle of burned-out olive groves.[627]

The passage is dry and factual; the focus is largely on logistics (how Ḥusayn must alter their route, how he must focus on the road) rather than on the emotions of the siblings as they narrowly avoid violent death.

The text's unemotive and detached prose as it relates shocking and horrific events is mirrored by its preoccupation with the ways in which the terrifying has become uncannily

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[625]André Naffis-Sahely, "Death Is Hard Work: A Novel by Khaled Khalifa — the Body Politic," *Financial Times*, May 10, 2019, ft.com/content/f526e5aa-70ac-11e9-bf5c-6eeb837566c5; Kelly Hydrick, "Review: Death Is Hard Work by Khaled Khalifa," *Root and Press,* Oct. 23, 2019.
[626]Lina Mounzer, "Review: A trip into the dark heart of Syria," *Middle East Eye*, April 25, 2019.
[627]Khālid Khalīfa, *Al-Mawt 'Amal Shāqq* (Beirut: Hachette Antoine, 2016), 18; Khaled Khalifa, *Death is Hard Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 19. All translations are from Leri Pierce's translation, *Death is Hard Work* (London: Picador, 2016), unless otherwise noted. The pagination is given first in the Arabic edition then in the English edition. Here, I modified Leri Pierce's translation.

familiar in a wartime Syria in which "the specter of death hover[s] over every house."[628] The dead are everywhere, stacked in morgues "like lemon crates" and lying unclaimed in the streets.[629] The terrifying sight of bloodied corpses has become a routine feature of everyday life, leading the country's inhabitants to live in constant anxiety and suspense, suffering from insomnia, panic attacks, and nervous breakdowns; daily conversations consist of exchanging tips on sleep aids and how to protect their homes from explosions.[630] They become "a collection of walking lumps taking up space, spending their lives striving to negate death" and regard everyone they see "as not so much 'alive' as 'pre-dead' [*mawtā muqbilīn*]."[631] Death has become a constant and almost comforting possibility, a promise of an end to months of anxiety, "an escape much envied by the living."[632]

Because death has become a routine feature of everyday life, individual deaths have lost any significance and funeral rites have become perfunctory, if they take place at all. Bulbul reflects:

> القتلى في كلّ مكان، يُدفنون في مقابر جماعيّة، ودون تدقيق في هويّاتهم. مراسم العزاء حتّى بالنسبة للعائلات الغنيّة اختُصرت إلى ساعات قليلة… لم تعد المراسم تعني شيئاً…
>
> There were mass graves everywhere filled with casualties who'd never even been identified. No *ʿaza* lasted more than a few hours now…Rites and rituals meant nothing now.[633]

Having a corpse to bury at all has become a privilege in wartime, where families often buried only "a torn shirt or severed leg wrapped in a shroud."[634] This situation stands in stark contrast to the early days of the 2011 uprisings, when, as Bulbul notes, the regime organized elaborate funerals on television for its martyrs, complete with videos of the family:

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[628]Ibid, 126; 150.
[629]Ibid, 51; 60, 18;19.
[630]Ibid, 33; 38
[631]Ibid, 133; 158, 12; 12.
[632]Ibid, 6; 5.
[633]Ibid, 6; 4-5.
[634]Ibid, 82; 98

…يصرّحون بفخرهم واعتزازهم بشهادة ابنهم الّذي قدّم حياته فداءً للوطن والقائد.

…declaring how proud they were, how glorious it was, that their son had been martyred, faithfully laying down his life for the nation and the Leader.[635]

Bulbul's observation speaks to the extent to which the discourse of martyrdom, which was dominant in the early days of the uprisings, has collapsed under the weight of mass death. Although Bulbul speaks here about the ways in which the regime deployed a discourse of martyrdom in order to gain support for its cause, the opposition also drew on a discourse of martyrdom, subverting the regime's discourse by redefining the martyr as a person who died opposing the regime rather than fighting for it. In Syrian literature, this tendency is particularly prominent in early documentary or journalistic responses to the uprising, like Samar Yazbik's *Taqaṭu' Nīrān: min Yawmiyyāt al-Intifāḍa al-Suriyya* (2012; *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, 2012), which offers testimonials from various Syrian members of the opposition to the Asad regime as well as the author's own recollections of the early stages of the uprisings and war. These passages often offer detailed descriptions of those who have been martyred, for example:

أهالي بانياس يتظاهرون بالورود، والتلفزيون السوري يبثّ صورًا للمخرّبين في مدينة جبلة، وهؤلاء شباب بسطاء اسم الأول << ي. ح>> وهو شابّ يتيم يعيل أمّه وإخوته ويعمل في محلّ للموالح (محمصة) في شارع جركس. ويداوم من الصباح حتى الليل في المحمصة وكلّ الناس يعرفونه وليس إرهابيًّا ولا سلفيًّا. والآخر اسمه <<يا. حم>> بائع خضار على عربة متجوّلة، والثالث <<ع. أ>> بائع خضار أيضًا، وهم فقراء يسترزقون ليطعموا أولادهم.

The residents of Baniyas are demonstrating with flowers as Syrian television broadcasts images of saboteurs in Jableh. The al- Rastan martyrs are simple young men. The first, Y.H., supported his mother and his sisters by working in a roastery on Jirkis Street because his father was dead; he worked from morning until night and everybody knows him and knows he isn't a terrorist or a Salafi or anything like that. The second, Y.M., sold vegetables from a street cart; and the third I.K. was also a vegetable seller; they were poor and made just enough money to feed their children.[636]

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[635]Ibid, 13; 13.

[636]Samar Yazbik's *Taqaṭu' Nīrān: min Yawmiyyāt al-Intifāḍa al-Suriyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2012), 85-86. The translation is taken from the English edition *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* (London: Haus Publishing, 2012), translated by Max Weiss.

As the war dragged on, however, early representations which tended to foreground individual deaths and commemorate martyrs began to give way to literary works that drew on what Max Weiss has termed "necroaesthetics"; these works depicted the routinization of death and the often grotesque image of the corpse.[637] Khalīfa's novel, which features a corpse in a state of rotting and decay, is in line with trend and stands in marked contrast to early depictions of deceased martyrs, which tended not to linger over images of the maimed or decaying body. The corpse that the novel represents, furthermore, is not the corpse of a martyr at all; unlike the dozens of corpses that populate the novel, the victims of snipers, bombings, gunshot wounds, and other forms of violence, this corpse, that of the father, ʿAbd al-Laṭīif, has died peacefully in his bed of old age. ʿAbd al-Laṭīif's corpse stands out, then, not because it is that of a martyr but because its death of natural causes renders it an anomalous, even extraordinary figure. Bulbul comments:

> لا يُعقل أن يموت أحد بشكل طبيعي. حتى جارته أمّ الياس ماتت ذبحاً رغم بلوغها الثمانين…
>
> It wasn't credible that anyone could still die of natural causes in this day and age. Even his neighbor Um Elias had been murdered, though she was in her eighties.[638]

This corpse is extraordinary, furthermore, in that it is to receive an extraordinary burial; in a context in which any grave is a privilege, his children commit to transporting their father's corpse across Syria for burial in his hometown. In other words, although Khalīfa's text does depict the individual corpse in a manner that might appear reminiscent of early martyr-centered narratives, the narrative is in fact disruptive of not only these martyr narratives but also of later works which foreground the ways in which mourning has become impossible.

This extraordinary corpse, one who disrupts a wartime temporality in which mourning has become impossible and burials perfunctory, is an uncanny figure, one who shuttles uneasily

[637]Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic*, 272.
[638]Khalīfa, 34; 39.

between past and present as his children's memories of him contrast with his current state as an abject, rotting corpse. The father's body is repellant, disgusting, grotesque; as the journey goes on, it becomes less and less recognizable, transforming from a corpse (*juththa*) into a carcass (*jīfa*) (a term often used to refer to animal remains)[639] "no longer appropriate for a dignified farewell. It would be enough to recite a quick prayer over it and to throw a handful of earth into the grave and run."[640] The dominant image in the novel is that of the father's decaying corpse; its most evocative passages are lingering descriptions of the corpse of the father as it decomposes in the back of the siblings' van. This corpse is "disintegrating," "pestilential," "deplorable"; it emits a "putrid, lethal stench" that"billow[s] out and clog[s] every nose."[641] As it rots, its skin turns "blue and a shade of green that looked almost moldy," it is "covered with lacerations," "oozing puss," so bloated that it "looked as though it might burst at any moment," a mass upon which a "dense cluster of maggots were slithering."[642]

This grotesque corpse stands in stark and uncanny contrast to the siblings' memories of their father, revealed largely through flashbacks. ʿAbd al-Laṭīif was a man who had lived much of his life in the past, particularly the 1960s when he had been a political activist. The 1960s, as described above, were a decade of revolutionary possibility, a period of postcolonial nation building, rising socialism, and the continued struggle for Palestinian liberation. The 1960s, however, was also a decade that ended in decisive defeat; the 1967 war with Israel which dealt a serious blow to pan-Arab nationalist projects, particularly to Nasserism in Egypt and to Baathism in Syria, as well as to the struggle against Zionism.[643]

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[639]Ḥassān ʿAbbās, *Al-Jasad fī Riwāyat al-Ḥarb al-Sūriyya* (Damascus and Beirut: Presses de L'Ifpo, 2021), 72-73; 82; 131.
[640]Khalīfa, 138; 164.
[641]Ibid, 98; 116, 99; 117, 136; 162, 100; 119, 112; 133.
[642]Ibid, 51; 61, 112; 133, 138; 164, 142; 168.
[643]Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 10.

As a melancholy left-wing intellectual, ʿAbd al-Laṭīif refuses to accept defeat, remaining loyal to his principles and continuing to believe, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that "Palestine would one day be fully liberated…and that he would one day pray with his friends in al-Aqsa Mosque."[644] He continues to dress elegantly, shining his shoes and donning a necktie; "His vocabulary and habits dated back to a different world and would not conform to standards of the present day."[645] He calls the 60s an era of "the greatest values and elegance," and is determined to remain permanently in the spirit of that time.[646] None of his children have inherited his values; although his son, Bulbul, admires him, he also sees him as quixotic and naive. He dreams of telling his father that he is a "weak, emasculated man with barely a quarter of a dream to brag of" and that his generation had "left [Palestine] to rot."[647] His son Ḥusayn, meanwhile, sees his attachment to the past as a refusal to engage with the world as it is, rather than the world of his memories. Ḥusayn "dismissed his precious 1960s as just a mirage—announcing that everything people said about those days was a lie that should finally be put to rest, and that those years were in fact the era of all the Muslim world's defeats," leaving ʿAbd al-Laṭīif furious.[648]

Rather than inheriting ʿAbd al-Laṭīif's legacy, his children are children of dictatorship, beaten down and defeated by life in Asad's Syria. Unlike ʿAbd al-Laṭīif, who continues to express belief in a brighter future even from his deathbed, when he tells his son about "the great future waiting for the children who had been born in these past four years and those who were yet unborn,"[649] his children are trapped in the static "forever" time of dictatorship, convinced that no such future is coming. The oldest sibling, Ḥusayn, realized by high school that his father's values

[644]Khalīfa, 88-89; 105.
[645]Ibid, 39; 46.
[646]Ibid.
[647]Ibid, 101; 120-121
[648]Ibid, 39; 46
[649]Ibid 64; 77.

("honor and integrity and morality") would get him nowhere; his father, a renowned geography teacher, brings home an income so low that his wife must supplement it "shelling peas and peeling garlic for the grocery stores in the rich parts of town."[650] Ḥusayn tells his father that his idealism is useless in a Syria in which parents sell their daughters to wealthy Arab tourists and even civil servants are willing to go on dates in exchange for a pair of shoes.[651] He leaves school to work as a bodyguard for a woman who hires him to escort her on "mysterious errands," dreaming of "liv[ing] among the powerful," "shar[ing] their wealth, sleep[ing] with beautiful women, travel[ling] to different countries, and liv[ing] in a mansion in the richest part of town";[652] instead, he ends up doing time in prison for a drug-related offense. During the war, Ḥusayn surrenders entirely, taking comfort only in the idea that "they would all surely be dead in the not too-distant future."[653]

The sister, Fāṭima, too, has been brutally disillusioned; as a young girl, she had believed herself to be unusually beautiful and intelligent, dreaming of marrying a wealthy man and mixing with important people. She likes to talk about her first marriage to a "great businessman" who was, in reality, "nothing more than a small-time fixer who liked running with the big shots"; the marriage failed after less than a year.[654] Her second marriage also fails to bring her the wealth she dreams of. She is forced to transfer her dreams to her children and to confront the fact that, despite her youthful pride, "she was just an ordinary, unremarkable girl."[655]

Bulbul in particular is portrayed as passive, even stagnating. He entered university as an idealistic young man, determined to study philosophy in order to better understand the world; he

[650]Ibid, 85-86; 101-102.
[651]Ibid, 85-86; 101.
[652]Ibid, 85; 101.
[653]Ibid 12; 12.
[654]Ibid, 21; 23.
[655]Ibid, 22-23; 25.

is quickly disillusioned, however, by his professors, who fail to live up to any of the philosophical principles they espouse:

> يكرهون النقاش والسياسة والتفكير والبحث، ويرشدون الطلاب إلى مكاتب تبيع ملخّصات تجارية للمحاضرات ويقبضون عمولة من هذه المكاتب، والأساتذة الّذين حاولوا إعادة فرض الفلسفة كمحرّض على التفكير، إما فُصلوا أو اعتكفوا في منازلهم يائسين. يكتب الطلّاب المخبرون تقارير يتّهمونهم فيها بالمروق والتحريض على الإلحاد وشتم الحزب والقوميّة العربيّة. التفكير جريمة حقيقيّة تستوجب المساءلة.
>
> They despised debate, politics, reflection, and research; the faculty guided students to storefronts where hucksters sold extracts from lectures and where the professors took a commission from every sale. As for the lecturers who tried to reimpose the kind of philosophy that actually provoked reflection, they were either dismissed or finally shut themselves up at home in despair. Student informers wrote reports accusing them of sedition, inciting atheism, and cursing the party as well as Arab nationalism. Thought was a veritable crime, and it necessitated interrogation.[656]

Confronted with this reality, Bulbul soon "los[es] his enthusiasm" and begins to follow "the teachings of professors who vaunted the ideas and wisdom of the Leader."[657] Ashamed of his capitulation and his cowardice, he continues to speak in support of these ideals and of revolution to his friends, especially Lamyāʾ, with whom he is in love; years later, however, he and his friends recall that this was largely empty talk:

> لم يشاغبوا، لم يحتجّوا على قرار إداري، أو يوزّعوا مناشير أحزاب يساريّة أو يمينيّة...كانوا جميعاً مهذّبين وضعفاء جداً...
>
> …they hadn't made trouble, they hadn't protested the administration, hadn't distributed pamphlets for far-right or far-left parties…They'd been rather pathetically well behaved.[658]

As an adult, Bulbul has capitulated entirely; he obsessively performs support for the regime in his daily life out of fear, especially after the protests begin. His house has been searched many times; to avoid suspicion he hangs a big portrait of Bashar al-Asad in the living room and has "scoured his home of everything that might [cause] him harm," getting rid of "every suspicious belonging" and adding pro-regime channels to the "Favorites" list on his

[656]Ibid 102; 121.
[657]Ibid.
[658]Ibid, 45; 53.

television.[659] He avoids speaking with colleagues and even leaving his house, only traveling to and from work while "read[ing] state newspapers ostentatiously on the bus."[660] He knows that his identity card, which bears the name of an opposition stronghold, will bring him increased scrutiny and takes pains to avoid provoking any suspicion. On his days off, he lives in the past; not a past of revolutionary possibility like his father but a "golden bygone era."[661]

Bulbul's nostalgia is nostalgia without hope; in contrast, the father's melancholic attachment to the past is an attachment that allows him to maintain his convictions in spite of the heavy weight of dictatorship and to remain open to new opportunities for political activism. When protests begin in 2011, ʿAbd al-Laṭīif is quick to take action. He participates in the uprisings against the Asad regime, uprisings that he understands as an ongoing revolution that will likely overthrow the regime and usher in a brighter future for Syria. ʿAbd al-Laṭīif is "no longer an old man filled with bitterness and loss, just waiting to die; he was an active man whose telephone rang at all hours, who had high hopes of living to see the regime fall and breathing in the freedom for which he had waited for so long."[662] He participates in the struggle against the regime, coping with starvation in besieged areas and only stopping when he becomes too ill to continue. He establishes a martyrs' cemetery which he cares for himself, telling the corpses each night that their blood "hadn't been spilled in vain," that "the tyrant would soon depart, and children would go to school in clean clothes again, with heads held high and eyes filled with faith in their future."[663] His support for the revolution never wanes, even though the events of the novel largely take place after it had already become clear that the rapid fall of the Asad regime, as had been the case in Egypt and Tunisia, would not take place. ʿAbd al-Laṭīif refuses to

[659]Ibid, 38; 45.
[660]Ibid, 36; 42.
[661]Ibid, 36; 42.
[662]Ibid, 91; 108.
[663]Ibid, 66 ; 79.

acknowledge this or the rapid deterioration of the situation in Syria; Bulbul tells his father "that the revolution was over and had become a civil war" and that "the regime's superior army would win in the end," but ʿAbd al-Laṭīif ignores Bulbul, not wanting to participate in a conversation that "would only corrupt his dreams."[664]

As an uncanny figure who is both energetic political activist and decaying corpse, ʿAbd al-Laṭīif is a figure who allows the novel to explore what political possibilities might be conjured by taking up the "hard work" of caring for the dead. Caring for the dead is ʿAbd al-Laṭīif's final legacy; as revolution gives way to war, he spends the last months of his life building a martyrs' cemetery and "car[ing] for the plants and the flowers and the trees and listen[ing] to the raucous laughter of the departed martyrs every night."[665] He records the names of the dead so that families will be able to discover what became of their loved ones when the war is over, ensuring that their memory, and the memory of their political commitments, will live on. The image of a melancholy leftist caring for the corpses of his fellow activists is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's call to live with specters which belong to both the past and the future; the past because it represents the returned dead "be they victims of war or other violence," and the future because the specter is also the figure of those "who are not yet born,"and of that which "could come back," someday, in the future, at any time.[666] Derrida envisions the past as a potential future to come; to Derrida, living with the specter entails remaining true to moments of emancipatory possibility in the past that may be available for eventual resurrection in the present.

ʿAbd al-Laṭīif, a melancholy leftist from the 60s generation who nonetheless remains able to participate in the 2011 revolution, sets aside activism in the final months of his life in favor of

[664]Ibid, 66-67; 79-80.
[665]Ibid, 66; 79.
[666]Derrida, xviii; 48.

caring for the dead, adopting "an elegiac mood shot through with melancholy and loss."[667] ʿAbd al-Laṭīif dies of old age as the guardian of a cemetery, a caretaker of the dead who also remains loyal to their political commitments, continuing to believe that the revolution will succeed and repeating that "the children of the revolution are everywhere."[668] Although his continued belief in the promise of the revolution, just like his decades-long belief in the spirit of the 1960s despite ongoing dictatorship, appears unrealistic and naive, the attitude of a melancholic leftist who cannot accept the foreclosure of his dreams of liberation, this attitude also allows ʿAbd al-Laṭīif to remain politically committed and to refuse to submit to ongoing dictatorial domination, much like his children have done. ʿAbd al-Laṭīif's melancholy is what Enzo Traverso describes as a "future-oriented memory," that allows for attachment to the past to coexist with continued loyalty to the "potentialities of the past," rather than rejecting them in favor of a "disenchanted acceptation" of domination.[669]

By taking up the "hard work" of caring for their father's corpse, ʿAbd al-Laṭīif's children are introduced to an alternative to passivity and despair. Their journey raises a number of possibilities; it offers the chance of a family reunion, an an opportunity "to talk about whether they could possibly be a family again,"[670] and even propels Bulbul to briefly consider an exit from his stagnant life by fleeing to Turkey. These possibilities remain unrealized; after burying their father, the siblings return home having fulfilled their father's last request but having failed to take up his legacy. Bulbul, instead, surrenders entirely; he decides to abandon his nickname, Bulbul, which has always sounded "lighter and more human to him" in favor of his proper name,

[667]Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic*, 281.
[668]Khalīfa, 41; 48.
[669]Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xiv-xv; 52.
[670]Khalīfa, 20; 22.

Nabīl,[671] before undergoing a "Kafkaesque metamorphosis"[672] which transforms him into a "cadaver," "a large rat returning to its cold burrow, a superfluous being, easily discarded."[673]

Although ʿAbd al-Laṭīf's melancholic attachment to the dead and to the political commitments they embody is portrayed in the novel as out of touch with reality and even naive, it also emerges as the only alternative to defeat, despair, "the complete dissolution of self, family, and community," and to Bulbul's transformation at the end of the novel into a "living-dead hybrid."[674] Although the novel's ending may seem hopeless, it can also be read as an exploration of the consequences of passivity and despair and a call to care for the dead and to remain loyal to their political commitments; preserving the dead and their memories, Abd al-Laṭīf's story suggests, is a way to keep the promise of revolution alive despite ongoing dictatorship, and a way to ensure that its spirit is available for resurrection when new horizons of possibility open once more.

[671]Ibid, 80; 95.
[672]Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic*, 284.
[673]Khalīfa, 151; 180.
[674]Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic*, 284.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored the ways in which contemporary Arab authors in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, have sought to address protracted violence, namely the legacy of the 1975-1990 civil war in Lebanon, which continues to haunt the country with the threat that violence will resume, the civil war sparked by the US invasion of Iraq, which destabilized the country and played a major role in reshaping sectarian relations, and the civil war in Syria which broke out after the Asad regime cracked down on an opposition movement that arose as part of the 2011 "Arab Spring." Cultural production seeking to represent the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria has received significant scholarly attention, especially in Lebanon. As noted in the introduction, however, comparative work has been sparse. What this comparative effort reveals is the extent to which authors in different geographic contexts have drawn on an aesthetic of the uncanny, an aesthetic that, despite the marked differences in the ways in which it has been adopted by individual authors, is united in its attention to the resurgence of buried histories, unmourned losses, and unresolved pasts that disrupt wartime temporalities based upon their continued suppression. These wartime temporalities are the product of protracted violence; despite the distinctive features of each war, they are united in their lengthy duration. It is unclear when violence in Lebanon, Iraq, or Syria will cease to become a routine threat. This comparison explores how authors in each context have sought to represent protracted wars, to come to terms with losses that may never be mourned or redeemed, and to keep the memory of futures that may never be realized alive.

This comparison is a timely one in the "New Middle East," a historical moment marked by the end of the Cold War and consequent American efforts to develop a new regional strategy, the aftermath of the US invasion and destabilization of Iraq, and the Arab uprisings, which failed to bring about democratic transitions in Egypt and Bahrain and which led to violent conflict in

Syria, Libya, and Yemen.[675] These events "upset the regional order and unleashed mayhem-from state breakdown, inter-sectarian conflict, and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to proxy wars, humanitarian, crises, and appalling displays of brutality-that had either been held in check or had not existed before."[676] The "New Middle East" is one in which violent conflict is set to become more widespread and protracted, whether from the spillover of Syria's war into Lebanon and Iraq, the Yemeni war and Saudi intervention, or the continued instability in Libya in the aftermath of a six-year war.

An exploration of foreclosed futures in the Arab World could not be complete without referencing Palestine; the loss of hope engendered by the 1967 defeat described above has been followed by numerous other losses. The building of a massive wall between Israel and the West Bank and the rapid growth in settlements in occupied Palestinian territories have made it difficult to imagine an independent Palestinian state coming into being. Most recently, Israel's brutal assault on Gaza in retaliation for a Hamas-led attack on October 7th that killed roughly 1200 Israelis, has left more than 100,000 Gazans "either dead, injured or missing and presumed dead";[677] the current death toll of over 34,000 is likely low, given the inability of overwhelmed Palestinian health authorities to extract bodies from collapsed buildings and effectively count the dead.[678]

This marked increase in protracted states of outright war and precarious instability raises the question of whether and how writers, filmmakers, poets, and other cultural producers can intervene into these realities, especially when violence remains ongoing or likely to resume at any moment. The challenge that this poses to writers is reminiscent of the 1967 defeat, which

[675]Gelvin, *The New Middle East*, 22.
[676]Ibid, 23.
[677]"Rafah a 'pressure cooker of despair' in Gaza; US ambassador to UN stresses vital role of UNRWA," *United Nations*, Feb. 5, 2020.
[678]Margherita Stancati and Abeer Ayyoub, "In Gaza, Authorities Lose Count of the Dead," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 2024.

seemed to deal a devastating blow to pan-Arab nationalism, to Nasserism in Egypt and to Ba'thism in Syria and to the struggle against Zionism.[679] The defeat, consequently, posed a serious challenge to a major literary trend at the time aimed at producing committed literature (*adab multazim*) dedicated to advancing freedom and intervening in the particular reality in which the writer finds himself; at the time, authors who produced politically committed texts were often proponents of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism. The defeat had a profound psychological impact on (especially committed) Arab intellectuals, as described by Albert Hourani:

> The events of 1967, and the processes of change which followed them, made more intense that disturbance of spirits, that sense of a world gone wrong, which had already been expressed in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. The defeat of 1967 was widely regarded as being not only a military setback but a kind of moral judgement. If the Arabs had been defeated so quickly, completely and publicly, might it not be a sign that there was something rotten in their societies and in the moral system which they expressed? The heroic age of the struggle for independence was over; that struggle could no longer unite the Arab countries, or the people in any one of them, and failures and deficiencies could no longer be blamed so fully as in the past upon the power and intervention of the foreigner.[680]

If 1967 posed a challenge to the possibility of producing literature committed to pan-Arab nationalism and socialism, the wars this dissertation explores raise the question of whether it is possible for literature to intervene into a reality marked by violence that seems unlikely to cease in the foreseeable future at all.

This dissertation identifies a literary trend that arose, I argue, as part of an effort to represent protracted states of violence. This trend, characterized by an aesthetic of the uncanny, is explored here in the contexts of only three countries but should be understood as part of a

[679]Abu-Rabi', 10.
[680]Hourani, 442.

larger shift in Arabic cultural production towards thematizing defeat, despair, and the collapse of hoped-for visions of the future in the "New Middle East."

A number of observers have noted the impact of the Arab Spring, and the resulting state of despair that it engendered, on Arabic cultural production. Critics have noted, for example, a dystopian shift in contemporary Arabic cultural production, especially literature. These trend, according to Sarah Marusek, is particularly prevalent in Egypt and Palestine, where writers have produced dystopian works and works of speculative fiction that "[turn] away from the nightmares of the present towards the futuristic lands of science fiction and fantasy, imaginary places where they have the freedom to openly reflect upon their predicament."[681] In Tunisia, Zouhir Gabsi observes a rise in rap music that engages with the contemporary socio-political situation, particularly the state of despair engendered by the failure of the Arab Spring to bring about economic prosperity.[682] Abida Younas, furthermore, notes that a rise in literature that explores despair is prevalent also among the Arab diaspora; she studies Anglo-Arab migrant authors, including Karim Alrawi and Youssef Rakha, who produced novels that explore the aftermath of the Arab Spring. These novels, she argues, utilize postmodern literary techniques and magic realism in order to explore the "precarious" and "unstable" nature of reality in the post-2011 Arab World.[683]

The literary trend that this dissertation explores delves into not only the loss of future horizons; it delves into this loss in the context of protracted states of war and violence, or the protracted anticipation of the resumption of such violence. This dissertation therefore aims to contribute to the recent turn in trauma theory away from the individual and towards a

[681]Sarah Marusek, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow: social justice and the rise of dystopian art and literature post-Arab Uprisings," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 49, no. 5 (2020): 748.
[682]Zouhir Gabsi, "The language of hip hop and rap in Tunisia: socio-cultural mirror, authenticity tool, and herald of change," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 25, no. 4 (2020): 545-571.
[683]Abida Younas, "Magical realism and metafiction in Post-Arab spring literature: narratives of discontent or celebration?," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 47, no. 4 (2020): 544-559.

consideration of what Maria Root and Laura Brown term "insidious trauma,"[684] a form of trauma that, as Stef Craps and Gert Buelens have argued, accounts for long-lasting and collective forms of recurring traumatization, including those caused by long-standing political conditions like racism and colonialism.[685]

The long-standing states of violence that this dissertation explores raise the question of how it is possible to live through, or envision a way out of, temporalities in which it seems inevitable that violence will persist for the foreseeable future. An aesthetic of the uncanny, an aesthetic that both explores the ways in which protracted violence defamiliarizes the present, turning familiar spaces into haunted graveyards, and allows authors to excavate memories that demonstrate that this violence emerged historically and that explain what processes enable the continuation of violence. Most crucially, the memories that uncannily return in these works of fiction are memories of now once possible futures that may one day become possible again. An aesthetic of the uncanny explores how these hopeful visions of the future can remain alive as a spectral presence in a present marked by protracted violence and despair.

[684]L. Brown, 128.
[685]Craps and Buelens, 4.

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