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Mourning Bread:
Memory, Violence, and Touch Amongst Syrian Migrant Workers in Tripoli

by

Brent Eng

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Stefania Pandolfo, Co-Chair
Professor Charles Hirschkind, Co-Chair
Professor Xin Liu
Professor Niklaus Largier

Spring 2024

Abstract

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Brent Eng

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Stefania Pandolfo, Co-Chair

Professor Charles Hirschkind, Co-Chair

This dissertation argues that a particular kind of experience of memory, what I call an appeal to a non-secular justice, became available at a bakery in Tripoli, Lebanon by means of the work of bread. This bakery was a site where Syrian, but also Lebanese and Palestinian, migrant and refugee workers labored under conditions of modern capitalism amidst neoliberal collapse. Such experience, I argue, had its condition of possibility in the foreclosure of other kinds of politics due to violence, including the nation-state and revolutionary horizons. But it also had its condition of possibility in the iterative, embodied practices of bread-making, or what I call ‘the work of bread.’ Crucial to this approach is bread’s associations with ‘life,’ ‘rights,’ and ‘justice’ in the Arab world. Amidst cycles of what bakery workers call the “life and death of dough”—the temporalizing force of the work of bread—another experience of memory became possible, one that gestured to a justice other than that of secular politics. The bakery thus became a site of the activation of an Islamicate archive of theology, philosophy, and poetics—a space of religious and aesthetic experience and experimentation giving form to life.

My dissertation takes a two-fold approach, organized into six chapters. On the one hand, I argue that the specific political importance of subsidized bread as a modality of sovereign power mediating between the state and its citizens is a modern, post-colonial phenomenon in the Levant—part of the twentieth century formation of the nation-state and its discourse of political rights in the region. I argue that this relationship is actively being reworked amidst the post-2011 popular uprisings, neoliberal austerity measures, and global food shortages due to war and climate change. On the other hand, I argue that the bakery is a space of memory and, for its Syrian workers, of mourning. Such an approach is made possible by the symbolic polyvalence of dough and bread—a figural plasticity that transforms the bakery into the site of a dreamwork, often spoken of amongst the bakery workers in terms of the ethical-spiritual heart [*al-qalb*] and the imagination [*al-khayal*]. This vision reveals the bakery as a scene of struggle by which the practices organized around bread’s production—stories, pedagogical lessons, jokes—give shape to efforts to reconstruct a sociality born from a life in flight.

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لقد صارَ قلبي قابلاً كلَّ صورةٍ
فمرعى لغزلانٍ وديراً لرهبانٍ

My heart can take on
any form
For gazelles a meadow
A cloister for monks

- Ibn al-ʿArabi, *The Translator of Desires*

But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes
ineffaceable, wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people.

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

الحق هو الله

The Real is God

- A sign in al-Furn bakery

PREFACE: A TRIPTYCH

“Once I found some greens tucked away that we hadn’t seen before. I made sure that no one saw me and picked them. I cooked them in water and made a big deal out of it. I told my friends it was *mulukhiyyah* and they ate it. They were so happy.

‘It’s delicious!’ they said. ‘The flavor is so good!’

Then I started laughing and laughing. I couldn’t stop laughing. They didn’t understand. Finally, I told them it was just some weeds I found on the ground...”

“...I told you how some people went crazy? Another time, we were looking for food. There was a little corner, some people pulled something from there. They didn’t know what it was, and no one had eaten it before. Three people ate it. But it wasn’t good. At night they had problems.

The first one, we didn’t know what happened to him. Where was he? He was on the toilet playing games online. But we didn’t have internet, so how could he be playing games? We asked him and he said, I’m talking on [Facebook] Messenger. Who are you talking with? How can you be talking to them?

It turns out, he wasn’t talking to anyone, he was just typing. We tried to tell him, there’s no one responding! He said, no I’m talking to them now.

The second person, what did he do? He made a fire. He was putting in anything he saw, plastic, wood, etc. And he said to it, ‘*Hubiii.*’ He was talking to the fire. To the point that he was saying to himself, ‘*Lazim al-nar, lazim al-nar.*’”

Did you try to talk to him?

“We did. He just kept saying, ‘*Lazim al-nar, hulu al-nar.*’ No one understood him.

The third person was acting crazy in the hospital. He was dancing, running around the injured people, taking their blankets, laughing at them saying, ‘I want to dance.’ The doctor said that because they hadn’t been eating, whatever they ate affected them directly and more quickly.”

And what happened to them?

“They returned to normal after a couple of days. They didn’t remember what happened.

If you ask them what happened to them, they’ll say, ‘I don’t remember that.’ If you asked the guy who made the fire, why did you do that? He would say, ‘I didn’t do that!’ He would get angry, and say what are you talking about?

Well anyways, we all had difficult situations. We all had psychological crises [*azamat nafsiyya*]...”

“...Listen Brent. When we left, we didn’t travel from the main road but from an agricultural area. We didn’t know where we were at first, so we tried to figure that out. We walked for a little but saw the army far away.

We had to get to the main highway (the Damascus to Aleppo road). We arrived at an area of Kasab, where there was a lot of water. You have to remember, we had just

walked for twelve hours like a duck. Like this! [Squats on floor and waddles to demonstrate]. We were exhausted.

It's then that we started to feel a deep longing. We entered a nearby town with light. There were a few stores open with bread at that time. Some of them also had some old vegetables.

When we saw the town from afar, I remember there was an older man reading the Qur'an. He had bread and old tomatoes and cucumbers, terrible stuff. He saw us thirsty and hungry and dirty. He thought we were ghosts because we were so skinny and weak..."

"...I lost. I lost everything. So death is an expression of what? [Laughs]. There's a saying in Arabic, *ba'id 'an al-'ain, ba'id 'an al-qalb* ['distant from the eye, distant from the heart']. So what happens? You begin to feel like you're in another place, and that's death. And you're with others. So you're in the same place. They don't have anyone else but you, and you don't have anyone else but them. So you feel like they're your new family.

What's death? The thought begins to become easy. You've gotten a new life, it's like you've already died. Everything is new: new life, new family, new environment, new friends, everything is new. It was wonderful, Brent, how do I explain to you... There was laughter, we had each other! It was sweet..."

"...The siege did something to us [those in the city]. It made a special state [*hala*] for us. Anyone who was in the siege with me, I know we went through something together. That person is closer to me than my blood, closer to me than my brother..."

"...It was like a dream. Sometimes I'm not sure if it actually happened.

Do you know what that means? It was a dream: no water, no food, no electricity, it was a small space.

But there was laughter, there was humor! We made jokes, we played pranks, it was fun!

What I'm trying to say is that even though the situation was difficult, we were happy inside Homs."

He laughs.

"I know it sounds strange. But I swear, we were happy. I can't explain it.

It's true, that's all true. But I tell you even now, if I could go back to today to the siege I would."

Laughter.

The frame trembles. A face appears. The eyes look directly at the camera. They are tired. It is a young man. The morning sun is bright on his face, but the eyes are shaded by the rim of his forehead. Still, you can see that they are red. There is a sound off-frame. The face and camera quickly turn towards it.

An old man wearing a white striped shirt and a navy-blue vest is speaking agitatedly. He has a thick dark moustache and an unshaven chin speckled with grey hairs. The old man is holding a plastic bag full of large flat round bread. A boy in a bright blue shirt, maybe ten years old, stands beside him, expressionless. The boy stares directly into the camera. He pays little attention to the old man speaking next to him. Behind them is a pile of rubble and detritus. The wall is stained black from smoke.

The old man is speaking.

“This isn’t a battlefield! We don’t have a frontline that we are defending!” He lifts the bread in his hands. “This is what we eat!”

A sudden sound from above. Bodies duck and heads lift to the sky. The frame shakes. Debris drops from the ceiling. They retreat inside the building.

The young man’s face re-enters the frame. He’s wearing a navy-blue vest with the word “Press” in English printed in white on the chest. It’s a reporter. The reporter speaks rapidly to the old man. “What happened to you? What happened to you? Tell us where we are and what happened.”

I pause the video. It’s a news report from 2019 produced by a Syrian opposition media agency. A plane has bombed a restaurant in the town of Ariha, Idlib. I catch my breath and resume the video.

The old man at the restaurant is responding to the reporter slowly.

“*Ya akhi*, we are in Ariha.” The old man stops and looks beyond the camera. Something falls from the ceiling, but we can’t hear it. He pulls the reporter back away from the sound. The frame shakes. They resume talking.

“What’s this in front of you,” the reporter, now clearly visible in the frame, asks the old man. He indicates his head in the direction of the table in front of them.

“This,” the old man replies, holding up his arms expansively and rotating his hips side to side, “this is a restaurant. Open to whoever comes and wants to eat, thanks to God. It’s like any other place, we’re like any human that opens a restaurant in the Arab world.”

“What happened, what were you doing?”

“We were working. There was a disturbance, then an air strike!” The old man’s voice rises angrily with each word.

The camera pans across the table in front of the reporter and the old man. The table is covered with thin plastic bags full of large circular white and brown bread. The frame moves to the front of the restaurant, which is open to the street.

It’s bright out. There are people walking down the street, unbothered by the bombing. A few noisy motorcycles putter by, navigating the holes in the road. Inside the restaurant, there is concrete rubble on top of the oven. A refrigerator is toppled over next to it, glass door broken.

The frame moves back to the old man, who is still speaking.

“This is *ni ‘meh*, a blessing,” he says. The old man takes two loaves out of one of the bags. The two pieces of bread are in his left hand and a bag of bread is in his right.

“This is *ni ‘meh*!” he repeats rhetorically, as if gathering himself. He lifts both hands chest-height, displaying the bread to the world.

“Witness!” He raises the bread above his shoulders. He shakes the bread mightily.

“To the Arab pigs!” he declares. “To the children of the pigs, to each person that is an Arab president!” The camera steps back to capture his arms, now extended. The

bread is still in his hands. The reporter moves off frame. The scene has been set. The young boy pays no attention to the old man, but still looks directly into the camera.

“I say in my name, and in the name of anyone who says, *la ilaha illa-llah!*” The old man shifts the bread from his left hand to his right, raising the bread above his head.

“In the name of anyone who says, *la ilaha illa-llah!*” he repeats, shouting now. He shakes the bread above his head.

“Oh ruler!” he screams to the world. “You Arab pigs! Oh ruler, you people of the dollar!” The old man shifts the bread back from his right hand to his left. He lifts the bread above his head again. Every word is punctuated with a thrust of the bread.

“You people of the Euro, you people of America!”

He’s interrupted by a voice off frame.

“How many died here?” asks the reporter. The old man puts the bread down and looks incredulously in a direction off screen.

“Dozens, dozens died! The injured, they died! The children!” He gathers the bread back in both of his hands.

“Who is the pig, the son of the pig that kills them? By what blood, by what law do you do this, you Arab pigs?” He puts the bread down on the table and lifts both hands to the air.

“This is *rizq allah*, God’s sustenance!” He pauses.

“Oh Ariha! Ariha, Ariha!”

There is a wood sign in the middle of the bakery that says, *al-haqq huwa allah*—‘The Real is God.’ It is hand-written in black calligraphic letters, set against a dark brown background. The sign was made by one of the bakery workers.

The first two letters of the word *al-haqq*, *alif* and *lam*, form long vertical lines that begin on the right side of the sign. Moving from high to low, they establish the outer limits of a frame. The letter *haa* that follows is relatively muted, curving below the two parallel lines on the right before rising quickly to give shape to the letter *qaf*. The two diacritical marks over the *qaf* are vertical, sloping slightly left, rather than horizontal. This gives the letter an internal movement, an upwards thrust. Past the diacritical marks, the shape of the *qaf* continues in a wide sweeping stroke from right to left, traversing the length of most of the sign. Its black line elevates on the far-left side of the sign, curving up and back towards the center. The line ascends until about the height of the second diacritical mark of the *qaf* on the opposite side of the sign. The letter (and thus the word) ends with a simple, almost careless, supplementary turn upwards.

The entirety of the second word, *huwa*, is written inside of the long curve of the *qaf* of *al-haqq*. It is interior to the *qaf*, at once above and enveloped by the letter. The first letter of the *huwa*, the *ha*, starts in the middle of the sign, rising along a diagonal axis moving to the right, backwards so to speak. It then sharply descends and circles back to form the rest of the letter before morphing into a tightly coiled *waw*, the second letter.

Together these two words, *al-haqq* and *huwa* form the landscape and content of the sign. The wide, sweeping gesture of the writing of *al-haqq* starts high on the right before following the direction of Arabic script (moving from right to left) and curving around up on the far-left side of the sign. The long horizontal curve giving shape to the

second half of the letter *qaf* thus produces a kind of container that enframes the scene of the world. It establishes the coordinates of ‘the real’ or ‘the truth:’ two possible meanings of *al-haqq*. Looking at the writing not simply as semantic language but also as aesthetic form allows us to see that the figuration of the word *al-haqq* produces a shape somewhere between a semi-circle and an open rectangle, facing upwards. In looking at the scene, the eye of the viewer retraces the action of writing, both as something to be read syntactically and as a visual image condensed with distinct, opposing movements.

Viewed in this way, the word *al-haqq* appears like a vessel floating in the brown abyss of space. The location of *huwa* inside this figural construction of *al-haqq* speaks to this. The word *huwa* is located above the writing of *al-haqq* instead of to its left, as one might expect from the script of Arabic. The location of *huwa* above *al-haqq* not only introduces a vector of verticality and ascent to the image, but also displaces the organization of prose. We might call this a shift to the ‘prose of the world,’ understood in the double genitive: at once prose *in* the world and prose that *makes up* the world. Considered on its own terms, the writing of the word *huwa* begins with a reversal—moving first from left to right and down to up before descending and circling back right to left. The entirety of this movement takes places *inside* the word and figure of *al-haqq* qua ‘the real’—again, at once above and below the writing of the latter.

The last word of the sentence, *allah*, is peculiarly written, almost unrecognizable at first glance. It is located directly above the word *huwa* and in the open space at the top of the figure of *al-haqq*, seen as a vessel or a container. We might be tempted to say it is located in the sky. Looking at the sign again, however, it is clear that this is only one possible reading. The scene of writing is two-dimensional, lacking the ground of a vanishing point. The words and letters drift in space, suggesting a closer relation to traditions of iconography than the secularity of European Renaissance perspectivism. Following this line of thought, we might cryptically suggest that the scene is of another temporality. The flatness of the figures points to how they are orientated in relation to each other rather than the stability of a perspectival ground. More specifically, they are orientated in relation to the dynamic movement each figure enfold.

Noticeably, the writing of the word *allah* is self-contained. Unlike the other two words in the sentence, *al-haqq* and *huwa*, it is not clear where the writing of *allah* begins and finishes. The lines migrate into each other, closing off the word off from the rest of the scene of the world. The shape of the word thus resembles a kind of strange triangle with two jagged protruding points on the left. Oddly, it looks creaturely, like the head of a horse without eyes. But upon second glance, one might also discern a falcon’s beak or another kind of bird inside of the closed shape.

Al-haqq huwa allah. The Real is God. The calligraphic writing of speech transfigures letters and words into an image and discloses its participation in a different register. As an image, it provisionally crystalizes contrasting movements, producing an agitation. It presents an energy-bearing moment or dynamic interval, the becoming image of a montage of singular movements whose structure is born from writing and a figural reservoir. That which stands before the sign is thus confronted not only by the enunciation of speech but also by an image that is a *complex of time* with distinct spatial and symbolic coordinates. And yet its emergence is indeterminate and thus always in tension. A moment in a dramaturgy, so to speak. The time of the image is not the time of history, but the time of form, of gesture, of movement.

Three scenes, three images, three dramaturgies, of sorts. An interview, a news video, a hand-written sign at a bakery. A triptych. In each moment, scene, image, and dramaturgy take shape in structurally similar and yet distinct ways, stretching their limits to the point of fracture and transformation. What emerges is a formal attention to time, memory, bodies in space, gesture, rhetoric, and figuration that will be sustained throughout the dissertation. But there is also the appearance of thematic attention to the work [*Arbeit*] of dreams, jokes, violence, bread, mourning, justice, and the divine under the horizon of war and revolutionary collapse. Together, these three moments form the conceptual, temporal, and figural coordinates for the landscape of the dissertation.

The argument of this dissertation is simple: a particular kind of experience of memory, what I call an appeal to a non-secular justice, became available at a bakery in Tripoli, Lebanon by means of the work of bread. This bakery was a site where Syrian, but also Lebanese and Palestinian, workers labored under conditions of modern capitalism amidst neoliberal collapse. Such experience, I argue, found its condition of possibility in the foreclosure of other kinds of politics due to violence, including the nation-state and revolutionary horizons. But crucially, it also found its condition of possibility in the iterative, embodied practices of bread-making, or what I call ‘the work of bread.’ My contention is that such embodied work with bread and dough—and the temporalization it figures—not only catalyzed such experience but also guided the workers sensorially. This temporalizing force, in turn, produced the possibility of remembrance: the re-encounter with loss and the reshaping of perception.¹ The bakery thus became a site of the activation of an Islamicate archive of theology, philosophy, and poetics—a space of religious and aesthetic experience and experimentation giving form to life.

¹ “The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way.” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 264.

INTRODUCTION

“When I heard the news of Abdul Baset’s death, it was hard [*kan sa‘b*].”

We’re sitting on a balcony in the dark. It’s evening and the light above is off. The balcony overlooks a busy street (the apartment is on the fourth floor) and the cars motoring by provide just enough light to ease the loneliness of a night without the moon. The wind is strong and whips across in spurts. I hear the argileh bubble. I can’t see his face, but I know Mahmoud is looking outwards. He had asked me to turn off the recorder so we sit in silence, engulfed by the nightfall that has descended during the eager hours passed unnoticed in conversation.

We had been arguing about war, Islam, and the Syrian revolutionary hero Abdul Baset al-Sarout. The mood was heavy, recalcitrant. Neither of us wanted to say anything so we sat silently and let the wind cool us down.

I hear a sound coming from the darkness next to me. Mahmoud’s voice shakes. The bubbling continues.

“For me, Abdul Baset was sacred person [*shakhs muqaddas*]. My father is dead. My friends are dead. When Abdul Baset died, I didn’t know what to do.”

I had known Mahmoud since we began working together as journalists at a small news organization covering the Syrian war in Amman, Jordan.¹ He is from Homs, the third-largest city in Syria before 2011. Mahmoud is tall and has a lean figure. He wears a dark, unkempt beard that hides a youthful face. His left hand is mangled at the knuckles, overstuffed, the result of an explosion that nearly killed him while filming a battle.

Mahmoud talks quickly and swallows his words when he is excited, which can sometimes make him difficult to understand. I tease him about this, especially since his childhood dream was to be a news broadcaster.

“I went to journalism school because I wanted to cover sports, not war!” he reminds me cheekily.

If you know Mahmoud well he’s often laughing, a mischievous smile playfully flitting about his face. He attributes this to his Homs background. Amongst Syrians, the people of Homs have a reputation for joking and foolishness. It’s perhaps most benignly described as being good-natured but counterintuitive, the butt of all jokes. A popular story recounts how when the Mongol emperor Timur threatened to overrun Homs at the end of fourteenth century the city’s inhabitants pretended to be insane, acting as if the water had driven them mad. Timur was frightened and thus spared the city, no small feat considering the massacres his armies had committed in Aleppo and Damascus. Homs’ reputation extends throughout Syria. Jokes amongst Syrians often have the generic opening equivalent to, “A Homs says...” and end with a wry, knowing smile.

Mahmoud was the one who taught me about the revolutionary figure Abdul Baset al-Sarout, who was also from Homs. Al-Sarout was nineteen when the anti-government protests began in 2011. He played goalkeeper for the popular soccer club of Homs, *al-Karama*, as well as the Syrian national youth team, but quit to lead demonstrations against the Bashar al-Assad government in his city. Al-Sarout, who had a melodious if untrained voice, wrote about freedom and Homs, singing while standing on the top of cars in front of protestors in the city’s center and “offering his neck” to the government snipers that were known to be perched on the rooftops. Various called “The Keeper of

¹ All names of interlocutors in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

the Revolution” [*haris al-thawra*] or “The Voice of the Revolution” [*sawt al-thawra*], al-Sarout was beloved by the Syrians I met who supported the revolution. There was even a documentary made about him, which was released in 2013.² But the war went on after the documentary was finished, and al-Sarout kept fighting. He was killed in the summer of 2019, just before I saw Mahmoud. I had heard of the famous Homs goalkeeper-turned-revolutionary from others, but Mahmoud, perhaps because they were from the same city, had always spoken of him differently, almost reverentially.

Mahmoud himself was only twenty-two when I met him: gaunt, nearly skeletal, and very excitable. He, like al-Sarout, was nineteen when the protests in Syria. Only months before we met, he had arrived in Jordan after walking across Syria from Turkey with his brother. He had gone to Turkey to have surgery performed on his injured hand and to take his brother from Turkey to Jordan, where the rest of his family already was. It was the end of summer, so the weather was scorching. He tells me that heat was unbearable in the desert between Homs and Deir el-Zor.

From 2014-2016, I worked in Amman with Mahmoud and a team of Syrian journalists covering the Syrian revolution-turned-war, translating stories they wrote and working together to produce long-form pieces. I was closest to Mahmoud—precocious, touched by war. Mahmoud worked with an intensity that burned. Everything was urgent. He was most animated covering the military skirmishes that developed across Syria—at that time, in Hama around the city’s airport, Aleppo, the suburbs of Homs, the towns around Damascus. Because of his time reporting around the country during the war, Mahmoud had personal connections with local media activists and the coordination committees [*tansiqiyya*] that organized civil society across opposition-controlled Syria. It was easy for him interview activists who were on the ground or get a photograph for the stories we produced from outside the country. Conversely, Mahmoud struggled to write non-military pieces. He slogged through reports on reconstruction, humanitarian aid, agriculture—issues that didn’t carry the same force of the now—as if struck by ennui.

I remember thinking that Mahmoud was a savant of sorts as he kept tabs on the developments in Syria. I watched him carefully as he reached out to people from all over the country on Facebook, Whatsapp, and other internet-based messenger platforms at the very moment a battle was unfolding, only to see the names and images on the screen respond with detailed, photographed documentation. It all seemed a little unreal to me, like a theatre of images come to life. Who were these people, and what were they going through on the other end of this digital communication?

I had been to Syria before 2011, but not to the places about which we wrote. In fact, most of the Syrians with whom I worked had not been to those places either. Small towns and neighborhoods, obscure even amongst Syrians, became of vital importance during the war. Only Mahmoud knew the landscapes well because of his days reporting across the country. To me, the places seemed both near and far, and while I thought it was mad that these activists would respond to Mahmoud’s requests as live bombing and gunfire took place around them, perhaps it gave them a certain solace—that they were being heard, that someone was witnessing the violence obliterating their country and people. Perhaps this was the ground of a certain kind of sociality, a particular type of solidarity and purpose for which the revolution, *al-thawra*, and keeping its spirit alive meant something more.

² Talal Derki, *The Return to Homs*, directed by Talal Derki (2014: Proaction Film/Ventana Films).

An Ethnography of Religion and Revolution

This dissertation is an ethnography of memory, violence, and touch as they take shape under the horizon of war and revolutionary ruins. It takes place in Lebanon's second largest city, Tripoli, some twenty kilometers from the Syrian border. The interlocutors that I write about and think alongside were workers of a popular family-owned bakery called al-Furn in the heart of the city. The workers were mostly migrants and refugees fleeing the war in Syria, as well as Palestinians from the nearby refugee camp Baddawi and Lebanese from Tripoli. My interlocutors outside of the bakery included displaced Syrian media, civil, and revolutionary activists, and religious scholars, Sunni Muslim and Greek Orthodox, in Tripoli and the surrounding region.

I conducted fieldwork in Tripoli for fourteen months from 2019 to 2023. Over that period in Lebanon, there was a country-wide popular uprising (2019), financial collapse and hyperinflation that continues today (2019-present), the Covid-19 pandemic (2020), one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in human history that tore apart the country's capital Beirut (2020), and a 7.8 Richter scale earthquake that killed an estimated 60,000 people between Syria and Turkey (2023). Meanwhile, Israel murdered tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza, displaced well over a million others, and bombed Lebanon and Syria in acts of war (2023-present). My interlocutors migrated, married, became parents, and died.

In her introduction to *On Revolution*, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt connects revolution and history to a question of freedom and violence: "Even if we should succeed in changing the physiognomy of this century to the point where it would no longer be a century of wars," she writes, "it most certainly will remain a century of revolutions."³ Meanwhile, the anthropologist Talal Asad, in response to a comment that being part of the 2011 Egyptian revolution is "like being in love," instead links revolution to religion: "I don't think it's quite like that. You might say, actually, that it's more like a religious experience." He adds, on revolution: "In some cases, people discover they've got some power they didn't think they had—even a technique that they don't intentionally develop, but which they suddenly find themselves with and begin to understand. Maybe one needs to think of the uprising as...a mode of existence, almost."⁴

This dissertation takes up the problematic laid out by these two thinkers between revolution, history, and religion in the context of Syrian migrant labor at bakeries in Tripoli. Initially, the idea of bakeries as an ethnographic site to explore questions of

³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 18.

⁴ Nathan Schneider, "The Suspicious Revolution: An Interview with Talal Asad," *The Immanent Frame*, August 3, 2011, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2011/08/03/the-suspicious-revolution-interview-with-talal-asad/>. In a peculiar way, I find Susan Sontag gestures towards a similar dimension of revolution. Speaking of the 1968 demonstrations in Paris, she says: "The reason for their lack of 'realism,' I think, is that they're still possessed by the new feelings revealed to them during those weeks—those precious weeks in which vast numbers of ordinarily suspicious, cynical urban people, workers and students, behaved with an unprecedented generosity and warmth and spontaneity toward each other. In a way, then, the young veterans of the barricades are right in not altogether acknowledging their defeat, in being unable fully to believe that things have returned to pre-May normality, if not worse. Actually it is they who are being realistic. Someone who has enjoyed new feelings of that kind—a reprieve, however brief, from the inhibitions on love and trust this society enforces—is never the same again. In him, the 'revolution' has just started, and it continues." *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 274.

memory, loss, and violence emerged from my work as a journalist in Jordan before beginning my doctoral program. As part of my job, I interviewed Syrian local council members of cities and small towns, media activists, aid workers, and others who regularly moved between Syria and Jordan. One of the insights from this work was how displaced Syrians arriving in Jordan always first asked for bread. Importantly, bread was almost always spoken of in terms of an Islamic vocabulary and sensibility—discourses and embodied practices that make up a grammar of concepts. This helped me to understand bread as not only having material and political importance, but also religious significance that intensified in times of crisis and migration.

Crucial to this approach is bread's popular associations with 'life,' 'rights,' and 'justice' in the Middle East. These associations are especially clear in the Egyptian colloquial word for 'bread,' *aish*, which also means 'life.' In Lebanon and Syria specifically, as the dissertation explores, the association between state-subsidized bread and rights is a result of women's and labor struggles during the French Mandate in the region (1920-1946). Lebanese and Syrians agitated for the kind of welfare rights that were being fought for in Europe at that same time. This is also how subsidized bread became intimately linked to sovereignty at the level of the secular nation-state, a novel political form taking shape globally at the time.

More recently, bread's importance was invoked in the 2011 Tahrir Square demonstrations in Cairo (famously galvanized by calls for "bread, freedom, and social justice") and during Lebanon's own 2019 revolution, which took place during my fieldwork. During the 2019 Lebanese demonstrations, protestors in Tripoli used bread as a kind of canvas on which they wrote slogans and held in the air. But bread has also been clearly enmeshed in strategies of war. During the Syrian war (2011-present), bakeries were bombed, wheat fields were burned, and grain mills were fought over. As I write this in 2024, it is painfully clear that similar logics are playing out in Palestine and Gaza today. The Israeli military has repeatedly bombed civilian bakeries and murdered dozens of Palestinians waiting for flour distributed by humanitarian agencies amidst state-sponsored tactics of starvation. It is thus evident that bread is irreducible to a commodity or liberal collective good, even as it is also mobilized in those rationalities.

Although the themes, analytics, and concepts of the dissertation emerge immanently from ethnographic fieldwork in Tripoli, its guiding questions were also born from relationships with Syrian revolutionaries and activists with whom I have known since 2014, first in Jordan and later in Turkey and France. That is, the dissertation is also motivated by a lacuna in the friendships I developed with Syrians over this period. My inability to adequately grasp their ambivalent memories of the war, the revolutionary horizons that had given them life, and existential malaise that followed the rapid collapse of those horizons in many ways compelled me to pursue this project. Even though I do not conduct research with them in this dissertation, their companionship guides my thinking. I see my research in Tripoli as an extension of our dialogue by other means, something I often remark when I see them in person or update them on my writing.

Over the years, I have also come to realize that my engagement with the Syrian revolution is directly linked to my relationship with Mahmoud. In some ways, he was the Syrian revolution that I knew most intimately. Of course, I knew other Syrians affected by the war, including those involved with the opposition in various capacities. Mahmoud was distinctive for me, however, because he was a close friend, one with whom I was

also colleagues as a journalist as I came to learn more not only about Syria and its revolution, but also about myself in a period of youthful maturation. Before I began my doctorate program, Mahmoud and I pondered the possibility of writing a book together about his time in the early days of the Syrian revolution, when political and existential possibilities blossomed unseasonably. Mahmoud had expressed great enthusiasm for the idea, keenly aware of the fragility of his memories and their connection to his pain.

Years later, when I asked if I could record his stories, he responded yes, and then asked if I would help him. He told me that he was suffering, ailing from the collapse of the uprisings, his memories of war, and a condition of despair and bewilderment that he could not comprehend. Nor did he know what to do. He thought that I, with my eclectic studies in philosophy, social science, and theology, might be able to help.

I wasn't sure what I could do either. I told him what I was thinking about and working through, and he listened to me. We read texts together. We talked politics and argued. I listened to him struggle to find a vocabulary born from a condition of estrangement and stuckness that could give shape to a crisis of a suspended collectivity.

I came to see that Mahmoud embodied a condition exemplary of those affected by the protests of 2011—one that, released by an encounter with revolution and violence, is at once expressed through and yet surpasses him. This condition has an elusive, uncanny quality. On the one hand, Mahmoud can point to how the events beginning in 2011 educated him and raised his consciousness [*waʿi*], such that he considers himself a member of what he and other Syrian activists call *jil al-thawra*, or 'the generation of the revolution.' *Jil al-thawra*, Mahmoud explained to me, describes Syrians who came to political, social, and personal consciousness by means of the events that began in 2011.⁵ Most characteristic of this generation is the sense of rapid existential expansion and an opening up of possibilities, coupled by equally rapid, violent constriction.⁶ On the other hand, Mahmoud has also been struck by a certain intensity because of the experience of war, touched by a force that burns him, intimate and yet distant.

"What is this life?" Mahmoud told me he asked himself repeatedly, first upon fleeing Homs and later upon leaving Syria to Jordan. "And can I live it?" He would turn that question towards me during our recording sessions. "What are you doing with your life?" I realized later that these questions were not simply rhetorical but also didactic. It wasn't always clear to whom the teaching was directed, however. The revolution and the lessons Mahmoud embody have scarred him. He suffers from pain, "psychic crises" [*azamat nafsīyya*] as he calls them. Nightmares and dreams. But more distressing is how sleep eludes him entirely at times. He feels strange [*gharib*] to himself and to others. How to understand this side of the revolution? The revolution that afflicts one with experience that even the sleeping world cannot bear.

What does one make of this intensity anthropologically? How might it relate to the experience of other Syrians I encountered during fieldwork in Tripoli? This

⁵ David Scott's work on revolutionary temporality and memory in the context of the Grenada Revolution has been formative, especially regarding the question of intergenerational transmission and mourning. See *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁶ In this way, Mahmoud and other Syrian revolutionaries exhibit a condition similar to what Fadi Bardawil describes as a "dialectic of revolutionary hope and political disenchantment" in the context of 1960s Arab New Left in Lebanon. *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press), XI. But the language of 'opening' and 'constricting' also invokes the Qur'anic vocabulary of the opening and constricting of 'the chest' or 'the heart' to Islam.

dissertation is in part an attempt to write about this uncanny intensity ethnographically. Mahmoud, however, has already intimated the challenges in doing so. Such intensity marks an incommensurability that gestures to an outside as such, as the anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo has explored, untranslatable directly.⁷ It points to the insufficiency of the present—a condition often thematized in Islamic life, and a position of blindness to which the Qurʾan frequently returns. Such a lacuna is, as Pandolfo says in reference to the Qurʾanic story of the prophet Yusef, “one that eludes human understanding and posits a gaze outside and yet also inside, beyond or beneath the surface of events...an opacity and blindness that make manifest, as their obverse, the all-seeing and all-knowing reality of the divine.”⁸ It speaks to the overlaying of two scenes, that of the temporal world and the world of the soul [*al-naḥs*], where the former is understood as the unfolding of history marked by interruptions—lacunae—that interpolate worldly creatures to recognize the signs and forms bearing witness to divine disclosure.

This is realm of inner meaning [*al-batin*], of the invisible, of the unconscious, which, as the historian Omnia El Shakry has demonstrated, the early translators of Freud into Arabic called *al-la-shuʿur* [‘the non-conscious’], a term that they borrowed from the thirteenth century Muslim theologian and mystic Ibn Arabi.⁹ “People are asleep, and when they die they awaken,” writes Ibn Arabi, citing a prophetic tradition.¹⁰ The philosopher and Orientalist Henry Corbin calls this ‘the realm of the imaginal,’ where the manifestation of forms or semblances is fundamentally anchored in a relationship with truth, the reality of God and the cosmos, and the witnessing of the divine in the scene of the heart. He too borrows this vision from Ibn Arabi, who also says that “the world is God’s shadow,” where the shadow is “at once God and something other than God.”¹¹ It points to how the temporal world is at once the uncanny realm of charged and contradictory images, akin to what the philosopher Ernst Cassirer called “symbolic forms” and the art historian Aby Warburg identified as “pathos formula.”¹² These figures draw attention to the way history, affective intensity, and plastic activity are condensed in energetic, perceptual forms, giving shape to life.¹³ Such forms participate in overlapping temporalities, instantiating ontological pathways that flit by and disappear. Friedrich

⁷ Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 15.

⁸ Pandolfo, *Knot*, 15.

⁹ Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 121.

¹¹ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 191.

¹² See Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences,” in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) and Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), but especially Aby Warburg, *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

¹³ Images that Walter Benjamin called ‘dialectics at a standstill’ or ‘the crystallization of a monad.’ *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.

Nietzsche might have called them “the penetratingly vivid figures of [the ancient Greek] gods.”¹⁴

What it would mean to write an ethnography about the creativity and contradictions of the lacuna in these various articulations, the necessity of the limit—the scene of struggle, at once worldly and of the soul, and the forms disclosed within it—amidst the afterlives of revolution and war?¹⁵ I have chosen to try and do so indirectly—hence the site of the bakery and the work of bread in Tripoli.

Mahmoud laughs at me when I tell him about what I am writing, that I am conducting research at bakeries, of all places, and how I draw from social science and Islamic aesthetics and philosophy to explore what is happening in the work of bread. Sometimes he refuses the ideas and says they do not help him. Other times, however, he says he can hear me, and listens carefully.

An Ethnography of Syrians in Tripoli

It was Mahmoud and other comrades that put me in contact with Syrian former revolutionaries and activists in Tripoli through a network of journalists and opposition supporters that began my fieldwork in the city.

While I conducted most of my ethnographic research amongst Syrian migrant bakery workers in Tripoli, I also interviewed Syrian activists who were involved with what they called *mujtamaʿ madani*, or ‘civil society,’ in Tripoli. They were former participants in the 2011 Syrian demonstrations, self-described revolutionaries [*thuwwar*] who had been active in organizing opposition against the Syrian government, both inside and outside of Syria, at different times and in different capacities. Although diverse in their efforts and means, they also self-identified by having come to consciousness [*waʿi*] during the revolution and thus, in a certain way, been raised or educated by it—what they referred to, like Mahmoud, as being part of *jil al-thawra*.

My initial fieldwork attempted to think these two sets of interlocutors together, Syrian revolutionaries and Syrian bakery workers. I wanted to explore the social and phenomenological reconfiguration of life taking place in displacement and on the border with war. Bread and revolution, at once, organized around the analytic of life, explored from political, symbolic, and material perspectives.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14. One might hear echoes of Nietzsche’s early sentiment that “the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” 8.

¹⁵ With a different set of aims and in a different context, Xin Liu provides an anthropological example of how to do so in post-Maoist China. “After the failure of the Maoist revolution, a recoiling drama of theoretical rebound played itself out: the idea of the ‘negation of the negation’ as the dialectical movement of history/subject gave way almost completely to the neo-Kantian/Weberian analytical reason, which has become both the effect and the cause of the *re-formation* of the People’s Republic into a new leviathan. Contradiction is no longer taken as a precondition for societal or human development; identity is no longer conceived, inherently or necessarily, as a self-differentiation and self-elopement. Instead, the identity of self or *being* in the world in general has become a corporeal movement in and through the serialized individual, statistically measurable and calculated.” It is too early to definitively say what path post-revolutionary Syria and the greater Mashriq will take, but I share the idea that “by a dim light emanating from the Hegelian lamp, one would perhaps be able to see a distorted refraction of our time in a historical shadow.” *The Mirage of China: Anti-Humanism, Narcissism, and Corporeality of the Contemporary World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 196-197.

But by 2019 the landscape for such struggles in Lebanon was different. Many of the activists I knew were still working through the wounds of war, disfiguring traces of the latter's capricious violence and painful afterlives.¹⁶ With the Assad government still firmly in power in Syria, many of these activists were doing such reparative work elsewhere, scattered across Europe, Canada, Turkey, and other parts of the globe. Those that remained in Lebanon were already planning their departures, caught between a murderous Assad regime and cannibalistic Lebanese state.

In light of these conditions, the ethnographic research in bakeries began to take more of my attention. There, I encountered a kind of vital agitation amongst the bakery workers similar to what animated Mahmoud and other revolutionaries. It was a restless energy structured by the belatedness of violence and yet, at the same time, could not be contained by either a conceptual grammar of revolution or an overdetermined analytic of capitalist migrant and refugee labor.¹⁷ Instead, the bakery workers often used an Islamic vocabulary to describe their life conditions and the work with bread, one linked to a certain idea of justice. Crucially, when they described the violence that they had undergone and continued to live with in Lebanon, they did so in moral terms: *zulm* ['injustice'], *qahr* ['subjugation'], or '*unsuriyyeh* ['racism'], rarely '*unf*' or 'violence' in a general sense. Such language marked a kind of foreclosure, while also disclosing an opening of another kind. It made possible a critique of oppression [*qam*'] akin to what the anthropologist Saleem al-Bahloly, following Walter Benjamin and Iraqi modernist artists, describes as when the human form functions not to represent the human body but to record a non-human violence—one whereby the image of injustice has the rhetorical power of making an appeal to a justice of a higher order.¹⁸

It is in this way, through ethnography, that I came to understand what has become the kernel of the dissertation: to see bakeries as the site of the activation of an Islamicate archive of aesthetics, theology, and poetics through the work of bread—an opening to an impersonal real in times of war. Work with bread, I argue, is an ethico-political practice akin to what Sigmund Freud, in a different context, calls "the work of mourning."¹⁹ By 'work,' I am thinking of the German word *Arbeit*, which, as Freud uses in the concepts 'the work of mourning' [*Trauerarbeit*] and 'the dreamwork' [*Traumarbeit*], indexes not only a generative and poetic *activity* but also an *intensity*: a kind of differential plastic

¹⁶ Munira Khayyat writes about the ubiquity of war in the context of Lebanon and the Mashriq. She argues that decolonizing war means to think of it not necessarily as an exceptional event but also as a "habitable place," a "lived environment," and ultimately, a "landscape." *A Landscape of War: Ecologies of Resistance and Survival in South Lebanon* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 19. I find Etel Adnan speaks to this duration of war most powerfully in the prose poem, "To Be in a Time of War," in *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (San Francisco: City Light Publishers, 2005).

¹⁷ I take guidance from Veena Das' investigation into the weaving of violence and the ordinary as an anthropological object of inquiry in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Saleem Al-Bahloly, "The Freedom of Despair: Modern Art and Political Violence in Baghdad 1941-1979" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015); Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol. XIV* trans. James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 2001). But especially influential in anthropology is Nadia Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

energy that takes various shapes and aims, including reparative dimensions.²⁰ But *Arbeit* is also the concept Karl Marx famously uses in his ‘labor theory of value’ and the idea of ‘labor-power’ [*Arbeitskraft*]. Both Freud and Marx inform the dissertation, even as my interlocutors’ own vocabulary presses up against those approaches’ limits.

This dissertation attempts to think from the insights of Syrian revolutionary activists such as Mahmoud, locating them alongside an ethnography of Syrian bakery workers. The turn to bakeries as an ethnographic site, however, signals a shift away from revolution as the necessary organizing horizon by which loss and violence are lived and felt—an insight that was especially apparent during the Lebanese uprising of 2019, which was also called *al-thawra*.²¹ Instead, the turn to the bakery speaks of an ambivalent relation between the question of violence and justice, a link augmented in its proximity to the Syrian revolution-turned-war, as well as in the memory of Lebanon’s own civil war (1975-1990). It thematizes the analytic shift to an uncanny confrontation with a structural feature of life: mainly, finitude and heteronomous contingency, a feature that is, strangely, animated and given sensuous shape in the work of bread.

More than simply point to a fundamental exposure to the outside, however, such an ambivalent confrontation foregrounds the delicate hold of life on externality (the immanent potentiality of things falling apart) as the condition of possibility for its formation and re-formation—life’s always ongoing, perceptual taking shape. I do not mean to suggest that bakeries in Lebanon are a necessary site of such work. But for historical and ethico-political reasons, it is a rich location to ethnographically observe the temporalizing force of such bipolar work (the contradictory tension between its productive and destructive valences).

‘The work of bread’ understood as ‘the work of mourning,’ then, is not about overcoming loss or time, but about re-encountering its temporalizing force, again and again, in order to live with its formative and destructive power differently—turning and overturning it as a piece of dough in one’s hands. At the bakery, where bread is often understood as a ‘blessing,’ a *ni ‘meh*, and part of an ethics of remembering God, this is commonly articulated in an Islamic idiom and grammar. Religious life is thus not bound to textual studies or certain ‘religious’ spaces, such as the mosque or the church, but also takes shape at the bakery, including its opacities, deceptions, and failures. The bakery transforms into a scene of struggle. It becomes a site of philosophical and aesthetic activity that has felt dimensions, exhibited at the level of the body and the forms it discloses. By philosophy, I mean not so much in a Kantian sense (i.e. the construction of a critical transcendental project of reason) but in a Socratic sense—a journey of experiencing, of learning, of something that takes time. This is exemplified by my

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010). This is what the French-Algerian postcolonial artist Kader Attia calls the work of ‘repair,’ an idea he explained to me while we walked together around Tripoli in 2020, in the wake of the October 2019 protests. For Attia, ‘repair,’ with its mechanical and even domestic connotations of stitching and fixing, extends beyond visible strategies of reparation or restitution and indicates the movement at the heart of the dialectic of creation and destruction. See Kader Attia, *Repair* (Paris: Blackjack éditions, 2014).

²¹ What I am describing is similar to what the anthropologist Amira Mittermaier calls in the context of Sufi charities that distribute food in post-revolutionary Egypt, “giving to God.” However, the conceptual grammar of the non-revolutionary, non-statist form of life at the bakery is distinct. *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

interlocutors who, during the rhythm and pauses of work with bread, would ask questions such as: “How did I get here? Where I am I going? What should I do? What is justice?”

What is at stake in these moments of interruption, I argue, is not only questions of, say, the future—i.e. what will happen in the future—but the very concept and sense of the future itself. That is to say, questions of temporality and finitude—tropes that take a certain shape and have certain force in Islamic life. My interlocutors’ existential reckoning with their situations—the uncertainty of the future and how to inherit in the past—is given form by the way they inhabit and, at times, refuse Islam. It foregrounds the bakery as a site of contestation and exhaustion, of stasis and despair, of flow and its arrest, where the incompleteness of the present points to an immanent heteronomy, what the anthropologist Basit Iqbal calls a “confrontation with the unbearable—the eschatology of the coming Hour.”²² My argument is that embodied work with bread and dough not only *catalyzes* such questions, but also guides the workers sensorially, disclosing a vocabulary of agentive, energetic forms. The bakery becomes a space of religious and aesthetic experience and experimentation that gives shape to life. And this is something ethnography through its emphasis on lived relations and embodied practices and speech makes available.

An Ethnography of Touch and the Body

The dissertation is also an ethnography of touch as it discloses a form of life in flight. I excavate an archeology of the body and the senses operative amongst my interlocutors at the bakery, one drawn from ethnography as well as from philosophical and theological texts for which touch is central. The bakery workers, I learned, navigated their way around the bakery through sensuous engagement with flour, dough, and bread understood as a ‘blessed’ good, giving form to the energetics of the work of bread. This, in turn, emerged as the basis for a kind of intersubjective relation with bread and dough organized around touch. Crucially, such a grammar and sensorium of touch is organized around the ethico-spiritual figure of the heart, one akin to what the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind explores in his ethnography of listening amongst Muslims in Cairo.²³

By touch, I mean not only the material haptics of physical contact—as in, the commonplace register of the body and the five outer senses (sight, sound, feeling, taste, smell) and work with hands—but also a spiritual tangibility, one that takes place in the register of what the scholastic traditions, including Islamic, call the ‘inner senses.’ This includes affective or passionate states, such as when one is struck by wonder or confusion. Crucially, memory and the imagination operate at the level of the inner senses, what I also call ‘psychic’ in the Greek sense of *psyche*, or that somewhat antiquated notion, ‘the soul,’ *al-nafs*. According to Aristotle and post-Aristotelian traditions of thought (including the third century Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, generally seen as the principal thinker of the ‘spiritual senses’), memory and the imagination are the result of *an inner touch*, one that has a material structure and produces a trace.

²² Basit Iqbal, *The Dread Heights: Refuge and Tribulation after the Syrian Revolution* (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

²³ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Such an approach foregrounds touch and mediation as at the center of the psychic apparatus of the living being. This is a philosophic structure with ethical implications that has long flourished in the Islamicate world. Certain Greek-influenced Muslim thinkers, such as Ibn Sina and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, inherited an Aristotelian thematic in which the soul is organized around perception and sensation, rather than consciousness as such.²⁴ Central to this formation is the Aristotelian notion of the ‘common sense’ or *hiss mushtarak*—an elusive capacity that, while playing distinct roles for various thinkers, unites the five outer senses insofar as it is understood as the very perception of perceiving. Amongst the five outer senses, Aristotle thus suggests feeling—touch—has a privileged position. As the literary scholar Daniel Heller-Roazen puts it, “the tactical power seems to shelter within it the possibility of all the others that follow...to the extent that all five senses operate in a medium and so by means of contact, ‘they all,’ as Aristotle writes in the last chapter of *De anima*, ‘sense by touch.’”²⁵

For Islamic thought such as Ghazali’s that at once adopts this primacy of feeling within the structure of the soul and transforms it as part of a Qur’anic archive, truth itself is a kind of touching that can be understood in terms of ingestion and incorporation, hence the prominent trope of *dhawq* or ‘taste.’ This is because tasting involves touching with the tongue, ingesting the blessing [*ni ‘ma*] of words—words that hold the potentiality of revelation. But it also includes ingesting the blessings of food, such as bread, which as the bakery workers tell me, is of the highest blessing [*ni ‘ma* or *ni ‘meh*]—one that, by analogy with the sacrality of words in Islam, also holds the possibility of divine disclosure. It is in this sense that taste and touch are, in fact, forms of *experience* with complicated histories.

Following the scholar of religion Niklaus Largier’s work on the concept of *figura* and his emphasis on the deployment of images, the imagination, and rhetoric as part of this speculative theological and Neoplatonic inheritance, I want to suggest that these conceptual grammars be understood in terms of the always ongoing taking shape of both sense perception and world.²⁶ In fact, Stefania Pandolfo explores this very terrain from the perspective of Islamic and psychoanalytic traditions, where the term *ta ‘bir* meaning ‘expression’ but also ‘translation’ is akin to *figura* and conveys a sense of the ‘crossing over’ and ‘passage’ of energetic forms that disclose felt and imaginal capacities.²⁷ At al-Furn bakery, this process of sensuous formation and re-formation of life was organized around quotidian practices of rhetoric and figuration that took place amidst the work of bread under an ethical horizon.²⁸ At the same time, such an approach to sense and perception aligns with a certain underdeveloped line of anthropological thought regarding the body and language and their relation to what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a “form of life” [*Lebensform*] that I expand upon in the dissertation.

²⁴ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

²⁵ Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, 30.

²⁶ Niklaus Largier, *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetics Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 71.

²⁷ Stefania Pandolfo explores this terrain ethnographically in her dialogue with a Muslim sheikh and Qur’anic healer in Morocco, but also in her friendship with a visionary artist. See *Knot*, especially Chapters 5 and 7.

²⁸ Kirsten Scheid writes about how practices organized around of imaginal striving [*taswir*] and the image [*sura*] were integral in the development of a national sensibility in Mandate Lebanon. *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

In his canonical essay on the body, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss famously speaks of the body in terms of what he describes as “techniques of the body.”²⁹ That is to say, the body is understood in terms of *technics*, and thus understood as a kind of *technology*. Commentating on Mauss’ essay, Talal Asad helpfully explains, “the human body was not to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of ‘cultural imprints,’ still less as the active source of ‘natural expressions’ that are clothed in local history and culture’ ...[but] was to be viewed as a developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement (e.g., walking), through modes of emotional being (e.g., composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (e.g., mystical states).”³⁰ Asad’s reading, drawing on his engagement with Christian medieval monasticism and classical Islamic thought, points to the body as an energetic medium that is charged and given sensuous shape (shapes that are imprinted and ‘installed’ *with and by* images and language) to achieve a range of purposes.

All of this suggests the body’s capacity as a kind of *plastic artifice* that bears energetic tracings and affective intensification—an installation in the modern sense as that which exhibits or puts on display. From this perspective, the body can be seen as a kind of stage out of which subtle and difficult forces burst and are perceptually experienced or felt. Mauss says at the end of his essay, “I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied, but which were studied fully in China and India, even in very remote periods...I think there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communion with God.’”³¹ To which Asad adds: “Thus, the possibility is opened up of inquiring into the ways in which embodied practice (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies. ‘Consciousness’ becomes a dependent concept.”³²

Far from being extinct then, as the anthropologist Saba Mahmood argues in the context of secular hermeneutics, Aristotelian and Platonic relations and practices informing religious traditions in the Mashriq have been adjusted and reconfigured under conditions of new perceptual and tropic regimes and modes of governance—a reconfiguration that, as she says, “requires serious engagement with the subterranean character of these practices.”³³ Such an approach points to how words and things function in a non-hermeneutic manner. They do not simply represent or convey meaning, but also imprint and give shape. At stake are charged images that cross established thresholds and *participate* materially and psychically in the world, at once extending the sense of self and body outward, while also absorbing the outside. Such moments of possibility re-introduce the originary contingency and interrelatedness of things, breaking open stable identities, including one’s sense of self, and thus disclosing other kinds of potentialities.

Approached in this way, the bakery as a site of touch is not only a space of body and hands but also of images and figures that give form to life, where life is understood as not prior. “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life,” Wittgenstein

²⁹ Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1, (1973): 70-88.

³⁰ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 76.

³¹ Mauss, “Techniques,” 86-87.

³² Asad, *Genealogies*, 76-77.

³³ Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 845.

famously says.³⁴ Wittgenstein points to how imagining, as an act of presentation, is something that shows in its very activity its own possibility as form—the spontaneous and free play of the imagination.³⁵ He thus gestures towards a particular conception of life as a happening of a kind, not an essence or substance but closer to an activity disclosed by the social embodied use of language. But language is also inextricable from its bodily articulations and the material and social conditions that make them legible, all of which are continuously undergoing transformation. “You must bear in mind that the language-game is, so to speak, something unpredictable. I mean it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life.”³⁶

In the case of my interlocutors at the bakery, I argue that because of subjectivities forged by political violence, ambivalent memories, conditions of exploitative capitalist migrant labor, lived aporias, confrontation with the bipolar caprice of work, one can, at certain moments, *both touch and be touched by* (notice the passivity) dough and bread—bread’s figural polysemy and association with life, justice, and the corporeal organizing some but not all of the possible coordinates. It is the specific discourses and practices—the grammar of concepts—that both capacitate and generate such energetic forms in response to violence and the heteronomous contingency of things. How might this approach allow one to see the bakery as a site of *experiential* knowing for its workers, a type of knowledge that is *felt*—and what is, as I argue, a kind of an experimentation with possible imaginations of life in displacement?

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized into six chapters. In the first chapter, I describe the ethnographic center of the project—the popular, family-owned bakery al-Furn in Tripoli—as a site of migrant labor and pedagogy. I suggest that work at the bakery, despite being capitalist, attempts to reorganize the sensibilities and perceptions of workers in accordance with a *telos* of ethical norms. This is facilitated by the lived and embodied practices, techniques, and syncopation organized around the production of bread understood as a blessed good [*ni ’meh*]. At the same time, I demonstrate how this *telos* hangs in abeyance today, threatened by political violence, war, and economic collapse which put pressure on the bakery as a site of symbolic and material exchange. I argue that this scene of struggle—of ethics and its abeyance—exemplifies qualities of what is known theologically as the ‘spiritual heart,’ or *qalb*, including the possibility friendship and turning to the divine, but also self-deception, despair, and betrayal.

The second chapter shows how the articulation of bread alongside a novel discourse of ‘rights’ in the Mashriq was part of the postwar response to the Mount Lebanon famine of WWI (1915-1918) during the French Mandate and subsequent rise of the modern secular nation-state. Following the work of critical scholars of secularism, I describe how the circulation, mobilization, and transformation of rights, law, and state power during that period were part of a normative project involving shifting sensibilities,

³⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1958), 8.

³⁵ For more on *Lebensform* and how life discloses its own rule (or the inseparability of form and life, form-of-life), see Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

grammars, and material conditions that have had profound consequences on the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘politics’ in the region, including how they are embodied, felt, and lived. Such consequences extend into the present, forming the grounds for politics taking place today, whether in Syria and Lebanon. However, the chapter also suggests that bread might be thought productively at the level of images, memory, and language—a realm that operates, as we see in memoirs and tropes about the WWI famine in Lebanon, according to a temporality distinct from the historicism informing secular projects (political and academic) on the subject. Such an approach serves to displace not only ‘the political,’ conventionally understood, but also the forms of subjectivity and territorially bound sovereignty according to which secular politics operate.

In the third chapter, I elaborate upon my interlocutors’ comments at al-Furn about the creatureliness of dough—its breathing and speaking—to explore the bakery as a site of dreamwork and speculative imagination. Drawing from Syrian filmmakers (makers of the moving image) and the thirteenth century Islamic thinker Ibn Arabi, I highlight the manner in which the concrete physical and biological properties of dough not only have formative capacities that give shape (hence the power of *poiesis*) to worlding (hence the *cosmos*), but also enfold that very process into the making of dough and bread itself. This cosmo-poetic capacity, in turn, produces sensuous effects on the life of the soul (traces) by means of the speculative activity of images and the imagination—an activity that operates according to the temporality of memory and belatedness. The scene of struggle at al-Furn described in Chapter 1 is revealed to be, at once, celestial.

The fourth chapter explores an often-told story and series of jokes about a Kurdish town in northern Syria as narrated by the bakery workers through the lens of Arabic poetics. I suggest the rhetorical techniques and repetition animating the stories and jokes circulating amongst the bakery workers disclose the work of a kind of sublimation similar to contemporary Syrian cultural production. This work is given concrete shape by what the workers call “the life and death of dough” or “how dough lives and dies”—a dramaturgical force with pedagogical dimensions.

In the fifth chapter, I tease out dough’s figural plasticity through aesthetic associations workers make between dough and the body. These associations, in turn, evince resemblances between the bakery and prison—what scholars argue has become a structural feature of the formation of subjectivity in the Assad era due to political violence. More broadly, dough’s figural malleability allows it to function as a kind of imaginative canvass by which workers externalize and re-encounter difficult memories of war, as well as other moments of life. Theories of the image and iconography organized around staging, participation, and similitude rather than representation, I argue, better help us understand this work of imagination and figuration at the bakery. Such work serves as the condition of possibility for a kind of social therapeutics outside the clinic in the manner described by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon.

Finally, the sixth chapter returns to the trope of the spiritual heart, *al-qalb*, introduced in the first chapter, this time connecting the figure to the opacity of historical unfolding and spiritual transformation as described by the Syrian political philosopher and founder of the Ba‘th Party, Michel Aflaq. It links the kinetics of *al-qalb* to conversations with Syrian bakery workers and activists during the time of Lebanon’s 2019 uprising and popular protests, *al-thawra*. These conversations continue with a Sunni sheikh in Tripoli, the imam of a mosque near al-Furn, with an eye towards the conceptual

grammar of revolution, juxtaposing a theological response to the bakers' amidst the work of bread. Touch and taste, as modalities of experience, disclose themselves at the level of the body, both catalyzing such experience and giving shape to life perceptually.

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CHAPTER 1: THE BAKERY (HEART)

The Bakery and its Owner

“You see those doors? They haven’t been closed in years! I am open three hundred and sixty-five days a year!”

This is Tariq, the owner of al-Furn bakery.¹ A grizzled man in his fifties with a booming voice, he shouts this to me from his customary place behind a desk at the front of the bakery. Every day from seven am to three pm and then again from five to nine pm he sits behind what looks like a middle school teacher’s desk, a worn down metal cash register perched on top.

Tariq has long greying hair pulled back into a small ponytail. He sports a patchy goatee and other prickly facial hair that he cleans up infrequently. All of this gives him a rather scraggly, unkempt look that he accentuates with a booming voice. It is not uncommon to hear him bellowing about the bakery, sometimes at the workers, sometimes at scared unsuspecting customers, sometimes at no apparent person.

Occasionally, he prowls about to stretch his legs, barking orders left and right as he strolls, hands behind his back, checking on the work.

“*Harami al-waqt, mish harami al-mal* [‘thief of time, not thief of money’ i.e. the workers are lazy]!” he roars, a phrase he says so often the bakery workers mock it giggling behind his back as soon as he turns away.

Work with bread, Tariq insists, is not like any other occupation. Bread and flour are *ni‘meh*, a blessing, and work with them requires an ethical disposition [*akhlaq*] and cleanliness of character [*tahir*]. *Ni‘meh*, in this context, has a distinct religious register, if somewhat imprecise because of the word’s polysemous use in colloquial Arabic.² In fact, Tariq’s description of his bakery and his philosophy of bread explicitly draw from an Islamic vocabulary, something he attributes to his father and grandfather who were also bakers and to his cousin who is a Sunni sheikh in Tripoli. I ask Tariq if other religions in Lebanon, or the bakeries at which he’s worked in other countries (Canada, Germany, France) also treat bread like *ni‘meh*. He shakes his head to say no.

“It’s not that they don’t fear God. It’s just each religion, each place has their own way of worshipping God [*ibadeh*]. Here, bread and flour are part of this [worshipping God]. If you work at the bakery, you work with *ni‘meh*. How can you work with *ni‘meh* unless you are clean [*nazif*]? You have to wash your hands, but you also have to wash your heart. That is why I say you have to have a ‘pure heart’ [*qalb abyad*].”

So, a ‘pure heart’ is necessary to work at the bakery, I inquire? “Yes! It’s the most important thing. You work with *ni‘meh*, this is God’s blessing [*ni‘met allah*]. You have to be clean.” His speech has taken a didactic tenor. “The person that doesn’t fear God,

¹ Al-Furn is a pseudonym. The names of interlocutors that follow in the dissertation are also pseudonyms.

² The anthropologist Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins captures this non-instrumental quality of bread in her description of bread as an ‘abject’ object in her study of waste and infrastructure in the West Bank of Palestine. Bread must be discarded, but properly so, and thus has the capacity to shift from the exchange of use value to another kind of economy. Stamatopoulou-Robbins relies on Julia Kristeva’s account of the ‘abject’ from which I diverge in my approach to bread, but I note the similarity. *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 143.

you have to be scared of him. The person that fears God, okay, he may make some mistakes, but you don't have to be scared of him."

Spend enough time at the bakery and you will inevitably hear Tariq's boisterous laughter. Tariq loves to jest, gleefully cackling at his own jokes while his mouth hangs open, a toothy smile showing. It is the laugh of a sovereign, the kind of voracious enjoyment that comes from the confidence of control.

To the right of the cash register is a small screen displaying live footage from nearly a dozen security cameras strategically placed around the bakery. They look in, not out. He is the only one at the bakery who handles money, except for his university-aged sons who fill in for him occasionally, such as when Tariq goes to meetings in Beirut, and his sister, Hajjeh, who works in the afternoon when he takes his break. The bakery does not close, so at night, when Tariq leaves, his sister takes over again until it is so late no one buys bread anymore. Otherwise, every customer and worker must go through him.

When people pay, Tariq does not move from his reclined position as he doles out change, casually tossing the remainder back to customers on the desktop without turning his head. This gives an initial impression of disinterest, and I have seen buyers visibly put off by his nonchalant customer service. I learned over time, however, that it belies a keen awareness of the people around him.

The bakery of al-Furn is distinguished by its large, wood-fired oven. Walking into the bakery with its stained once-white walls and low-hanging ceilings, one is accosted by piles of fresh bread on the left and right: mounds of sliced loaves, baguettes, flat-breads, and rolls spread out on long weary wooden trays. All of this gives the feeling of being compressed or squeezed. The bright glare from the incandescent artificial light is harsh, like the mechanized illumination of a subterranean cave, but, as I was told, it helps keep the workers up in the dead of the night.

A little farther inside, deeper into the building, a crudely cut rectangular gap in the wall on the left belies a cavernous womb-like structure inside—a glimpse into another scene. This is the oven. Inside, wood burns fiercely along the left in a thinly cordoned section separated from the central baking space by a steel divider. The surface of central baking space is a flat, built from tiles.

Outside, the oven entrance wall is blank except for the rectangular opening and a small, circular golden icon above its center that says *allah* in black writing—a common decoration in Tripoli. The rest of the wall is adorned by filth and fractures, dirt lines and fissures that streak vertically along a surface worn away by years of heat radiating from the inside. Some of the largest cracks are filled with a resin-like substance that makes little pretense of disguising itself, like the sutures of an old wound that have not been removed and are now forgotten, written into the skin.

In 2019, when I began my fieldwork at al-Furn, Tariq tells me that there is only one other wood-burning bakery oven (maybe two) in the city. Al-Furn also has a large automated mechanical oven that produces white pita bread, or *khubz 'arabi*, to be sold at a fixed, state-subsidized price at the storefront next door. I ask Tariq why he persists with making hand-made bread in a wood-burning oven. Most of the bread consumed in the city is now made by the large, automated machines. The bread made by the automated

machines is bagged in clear plastic packets and sold either to small vendors that use them in cheap sandwiches or to grocery stores that resell the packets at a marked-up price (much to Tariq's chagrin). Even the other bakeries in the city that make bread by hand like al-Furn use gas-powered ovens. The added expense and labor necessary for fueling an oven with wood seem impractical.

"The people like it," he replies casually, shrugging. It doesn't seem like a question for him. "They like to eat *ful* and *hummus* with this thicker, smaller [hand-made] bread. My place is *sha' bi* ['popular;' literally, 'of the people']. The rich and the poor come here. I don't make as much money but it's important for me that everyone get to buy the bread."

It's true that the bread produced by the mechanical ovens is different than that produced by hand. The former is thinner and lighter, more suitable for sandwiches, than the denser, chewier bread good for scooping made by hand.

"My father opened this shop, in this neighborhood, sixty years ago," Tariq continues. "At first it was just a small shop and then slowly he bought the other stores on the block. His children, me and my sisters and brothers, we went abroad and studied and then we came back and now we run the business."

In addition to the main bakery, I learn that there are other branches of al-Furn in and around Tripoli, including in the city's port al-Mina, when I make a series of deliveries with an older Lebanese employee. He used to work at the Saudi Arabian Oil Group, the state-owned petroleum and gas company Aramco, in Saudi Arabia for many years before moving back to Tripoli. He had worked for Tariq's father at al-Furn before leaving Lebanon. Now he was back in Tripoli in the service of the son.

"You see those shutters?" Tariq asks me one day, gesturing to the front of the main bakery. We are sitting at the cash register. Tariq is pointing to the steel curtains above the glass doors, curled up in a tight spiral. The entire street-facing wall of the store is glass so that those passing can clearly see the bread inside. As if the smell of fresh bread is not tempting enough. The glass is sparkling clean, a contrast to the dust collecting on the steel curtains to which Tariq was now drawing my attention.

"They've only be closed twice in my lifetime," he says to me proudly, referring to the dusty shutters. "Once, when my uncle died, and once, when my mother died. Even during the [Lebanese] civil war, we never closed the store. Not a single day. Look, you see how dusty they are? We never use them."

I heard the same boast several times again, sometimes to curious foreigners when he called me to translate for him and sometimes to the many locals that stop by his shop to sit and chat. It was not always clear to me if Tariq actually meant the claim or if he was simply performing rhetorical hyperbole. If the claim was meant literally, then the bakery closed twice more just between 2019 and 2020. Once when the Bakery Syndicate of Lebanon, a unionized front for bakeries in the country, issued a strike to protest the lack of government support during the rapid devaluation of the Lebanese lira; and second, for three days of mourning, when Tariq's father died that winter. As it turns out, al-Furn would shut down many more times in the years to follow.

Tariq handles these and other problems at the front of the bakery. The front is, in many ways, the point of interface at the bakery—the mask, so to speak—between its interiority, including the lives of the workers, and bread's status as a public, which to say political, good to which all have right.

Tariq is the face. He is almost always talking with someone else. He has a working landline, which looks like it is from the 1990s, and two cell phones, including a new iPhone. The landline is used to call traders in Tripoli, most often to check the price of flour, fuel, sugar, sesame seeds, plastic bags, or any number of other goods used at the bakery. He uses one cellphone for business outside of Tripoli, either in Beirut or internationally, and his iPhone for personal affairs. Next to his desk are two plastic white chairs, the type that bend if you twist them with enough force. Tariq reserves these for the many guests that stop by to talk and perhaps have a coffee or a bite to eat.

Despite its humble furnishings, the space functions like a royal court of sorts, where Tariq hosts visitors from all types of backgrounds: police, army officers, internal security, professors, traders and businessmen, religious scholars, childhood friends, government officials, foreigners visiting the city. Sometimes people want advice. Often people ask for money. More often, people simply want to catch up, hear or share some gossip, and perhaps have a free piece of bread.

“Everyone is welcome at the bakery! The rich and the poor, everyone must eat bread!” Tariq would tell me again and again.

I spent many mornings and afternoons sitting next to him in those little white chairs, watching the world pass by through the limpid windows as I listened to the daily conversations and concerns of the neighborhood. It was in this way that I caught small glimpses of the lives of the customers and people of the neighborhood, most of whom Tariq had known for many years. He would tell me about those that passed by the front.

“See him there, walking by the store? He used to work for me, as a baker, a *khabbaz*, the one who bakes the dough in the oven with the wood paddle. He was good, better than what we have now! But then he took drugs [*hubub* lit. ‘pills’] and began fighting in the battle between al-Tabbaneh and Jabal al-Mohsin [two neighborhoods in Tripoli] in 2014.³ He went to prison for several years. Now he drives a taxi.”

Or: “That man there, the sheikh. The one who just bought bread. You see him? He says he used to send weapons and people to fight in Syria [during the war]. Do you believe him?” I shrug my shoulders. Tariq shrugs his shoulders too. “I don’t know either, you don’t know what’s in a man’s heart [*qalb*]. You can see the outside, but the inside is different. The heart, you don’t know about the heart.”

Another time, a fight between two men broke out outside the shop. They shouted loudly at each in the middle of the busy street, blocking the car traffic. I could not hear what they were saying above the cacophony of blaring honks screaming from the angry stopped cars trying to pass. I asked Tariq, who had wandered outside to observe, about the fight. He shook his head disapprovingly and said that one of the men was sleeping with the other man’s wife. Tariq made an exasperated face at me and went back to work.

Sometimes while I was working in the back making dough, Tariq would call me up front to introduce to me to a guest. “Tell them who you are!” he bellowed. “Tell them

³ The fighting between armed groups in al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsin in 2014 was part a series of deadly exchanges since 1976 between Syrian-backed militants and other armed groups in Tripoli. Motivations and actors have varied over the years, but the two neighborhoods remain the flashpoints. For more on the history of the fighting in Tripoli, particularly in relation to Syria’s political interventions in the city, see Mohammad Abi Samra, *sahat allah wa mina al-hadatha* (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2011). For a similar dynamic in another city in Lebanon, Beirut, specifically how urban planning transforms neighborhoods into sites structured by sectarian logics, see Hiba Bou Akar, *For the War Yet to Come: Planning Beirut’s Frontiers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

why you're working at al-Furn!" He was very proud that a 'doctor' was studying and conducting research at his bakery.

On one of these occasions, after the guest—a short man with whom Tariq had gone to primary school in Tripoli and was now a professor at a local university—had left, Tariq whispered loudly to me that he was a millionaire who had inherited a villa overlooking the coast.

"A professor doesn't make that much money!" he laughed.

I began fieldwork research at al-Furn because it is perhaps the most well-known bakery in the city. Whenever I told people in Tripoli about my interest in bread and its colloquial associations with 'life' and 'justice,' time and again they would direct me to the same place. While I also worked at other bakeries, al-Furn stood out, both because of its popular reputation and because of the way the kinship relations of its workers seemed to rhizomatically knot together with the social roots of the city the more I learned about it.

Today, Tripoli is a Sunni-majority city although it has a long multi-confessional history, including of Orthodox Christianity. It is also the poorest city in Lebanon, which is why bread is especially prominent, more so than the rest of the country.

"In Beirut, a family eats one bag of bread. In Jounieh, they eat two. In Jubayl, three," Tariq tells me, listing cities on the coast. "But here in Tripoli, we eat four bags of bread. The farther north you go the poorer the people, the more bags of bread they eat."

Located in one of Tripoli's oldest neighborhoods, Tariq's bakery is so well known that when people want to go to the area they simply tell taxi drivers to take them to al-Furn rather than the neighborhood name. This is at least partially because, as Tariq has already told us, the bakery has been family-owned for several generations, one familiar to the city's inhabitants. But it is also because al-Furn was one of only a handful of bakeries in Tripoli that stayed open during the Lebanese civil war. They stayed on good terms with the Syrian military during Syria's occupation of the city, which helped keep the bakery running even when other businesses in Tripoli were closed.⁴

Two generations ago, when Tariq's grandfather owned the bakery, al-Furn was located in the neighborhood of al-Tabbaneh on the other side of the Abu Ali River. The Abu Ali River, also known as the Qadisha River, flows from the Qadisha Valley in the nearby mountains to the east that have housed Christian monastics for centuries (Qadisha takes its name from the Aramaic word for 'sacred'). The river runs through Tripoli into the Mediterranean Sea to the west, cutting the city in half and forming what was once its bloodline, from the inland to port.⁵

Sixty years ago, after the Abu Ali River flooded and destroyed much of the city, Tariq's father moved the shop from al-Tabbaneh to its current neighborhood, a predominately Christian area at the time. He moved the bakery to another location in the

⁴ Syrian government intelligence was widely understood to be in control of Lebanon's policies and security during its occupation of Lebanon, including in Tripoli. For more on Hafez al-Assad's strategy in Lebanon during that period, see Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1986): 1-20.

⁵ Tripoli's port features extensively in accounts of the city's long and varied history. The most authoritative account is Omar Tadmore's three-part history of Tripoli. Omar Tadmore, *tarikh trablus: al-siyasi wa al-hadiri 'aber al-'asur* (Tripoli: Dar al-Bilad, 1978).

same neighborhood during the Lebanese civil war to avoid the snipers who perched atop the buildings around it. At the bakery's new location, he slowly acquired the surrounding shops until he owned most of the block. In 2019, al-Furn sold various baked-goods from different storefronts in that area: bread rolls, baguettes, brown grain bread, sweets, cookies, cakes, flatbreads covered in oregano, cheese, or red pepper paste called *manusheh*, a popular meat-filled bread dish called *safiha*, a flat sesame-covered bread unique to Tripoli known as *ka'k trabuloussi*, and lots and lots of fresh steaming hot white pita bread or *khubz 'arabi*.

Today, most of the employees at al-Furn are Syrian, although there are also Lebanese workers from the neighborhood and Palestinians from the nearby refugee camp Beddawi.⁶ While Syrians have long worked at al-Furn as migrant laborers even before the more recent revolution turned war, they've significantly increased in proportion since 2011.⁷ But the conditions of the Syrian laborers have also changed.

"You know Mustapha?" Tariq asks me one day. Mustapha is a worker at al-Furn, one of its longest employed laborers. He's from Syria. "For every ten words that come out of his mouth, only one is true."

"But," Tariq continues, "Mustapha fears God."

"A person may make mistakes," Tariq tells me, "but if he fears God, you can trust him. To work with bread, to work with this blessing, this *ni'meh*, you have to fear God."

"What does that mean? To work with bread you have to have ethics, *akhlaq*, you have to have a 'pure heart,' a *qalb abyad*. You have to a 'conscience,' a *damir*. A *damir*, a conscience, is the most important thing for work at a bakery."⁸

To illustrate his point, Tariq tells me a story: "Once Mustapha took some oil that was supposed to be for the bakery and used it to cook at home. But he couldn't sleep. His conscience, his *damir*, bothered him! So he told me and I forgave him."

"See! Mustapha is like this, he's straight." Tariq holds his arm horizontally in front of him from his body to demonstrate the point. "If a person fears God, it's okay. But if a person doesn't fear God, you fear them. If you work with bread, you have to fear God. *Fi bayna khubz wa milh*—'There is bread and salt between us.'"

Bread and the Heart

Tariq, like many others in Tripoli, often preferred to explain things by way of popular expressions, aphorisms, and stories.⁹ As we have already seen, Tariq especially liked to

⁶ For more on the specificity of Palestinian political life in northern Lebanon, see Perla Issa, *The Endurance of Palestinian Political Factions* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

⁷ Syrian migrant labor to Lebanon increased substantially during the 1990s during the post-Lebanese civil war reconstruction boom. Bassel Salloukh, "Syria and Lebanon: A Brotherhood Transformed," *Middle East Information and Report Project* 236 (Fall 2005). This period was dominated by Rafiq Hariri, whose neoliberal policies both attracted foreign currency for investment and migrant labor from Syria, in many ways setting the stage for the financial collapse of 2019. See Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon's Neoliberal Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁸ For more on the emergence of *damir* historically in Islamic and Christian forms of life, particularly regarding its contemporary interfaith dimensions, see Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Conscience in Arabic and the Semantic History of Damir," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 9 (2009).

⁹ For more on how narrative prowess is a gendered form of social authority in northern Lebanon, see Michael Gilson, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Chapter 4 of this dissertation explores this at al-Furn in greater detail.

reference ‘the heart’, or *al-qalb*. For Tariq, work with bread as a blessing, as a *ni‘meh*, is a kind of *‘ibadeh*, or a way of worshipping God, that helps cultivate a *damir*, a conscience. It is also intimately linked to a particular concept of *al-qalb*. In colloquial Lebanese and Syrian Arabic (like in colloquial English), ‘the heart’ is a common trope, most often expressing one’s character. A ‘good heart’ [*qalb tayyib*] or a ‘pure heart’ [*qalb abyad*] indexes someone who is trustworthy or lives in an ethical fashion, such as the character one needs to work with bread. In Tariq’s use of *akhlaq* or ‘ethics,’ we hear echoes of the latter’s Greek etymological root, *ethos*, referring to ‘habit’ and ‘habitation,’ thus pointing to way that expressions and language are linked to the ‘practices of inhabiting a world with others.’¹⁰

But the figure of ‘the heart’ is also part of a longer inheritance and network of speculative relations in both Islamic and Christian traditions. In its usage in the Qur’an and Islamic archives, for instance, the heart designates the center of consciousness, awareness, and intelligence.¹¹ It is intimately linked to faith, or *iman*. In a hadith, the Prophet Mohammad says: “Faith is to acknowledge with the heart, to voice with the tongue, and to act with the limbs.”¹² As part of this bodily and spiritual grammar, the heart is the human faculty that can embrace God in the fullness of His manifestation. It is thus both the seat of disclosure of and linkage with the divine.¹³ Along these lines, the twelfth century Islamic jurist and theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a popular reference in Tripoli, describes the heart as at once a “cone-shaped organ of flesh” and a “subtle tenuous substance of an ethereal spiritual sort...the real essence of man.”¹⁴

Similarly, the heart is described in the Sixth Beatitude of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in terms of the possibility of perceptual connection with the divine — ‘blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’¹⁵ Gregory Palamas, the influential fourteenth century Christian Orthodox saint, accordingly locates the heart as the site of the reception of God’s grace. Palamas, who is frequently invoked in the Eastern Orthodox community in Tripoli, calls the heart the “‘body’ most interior to the body”—the spiritual center of the human.¹⁶ As Aaron Eldridge glosses in his ethnography of hesychastic prayer in contemporary Orthodox monasteries of northern Lebanon: “If the soul is the array of God-given faculties, its center, the heart, is the site for an encounter with the divine.”¹⁷ Orthodox monastic practice might thus be said to be fundamentally orientated around ‘the heart’ that, in being purified, opens to God’s self-disclosure.

¹⁰ See Pheng Cheah, *What is a World: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

¹¹ William Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 8.

¹² As quoted in Chittick, *Sufism*, 8.

¹³ William Chittick, *Ibn Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 15.

¹⁴ Al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart: Book 21 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences* translated by Walter James Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 5-6.

¹⁵ In his commentary on the Song of Songs, the Church Father Gregory of Nyssa points to the heart’s role in a phenomenology of divine love: “For [the soul/Bride] has received within her God’s special dart, she has been wounded in the heart by the point of faith, she has been mortally wounded by the arrow of love. And God is love.” Quoted in Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

¹⁶ Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (Mawah: Paulist Press, 1983), 42.

¹⁷ Aaron Frederick Eldridge, “From the Margins of the Colophon: Arab Orthodox Monasticism in Ruins,” *Exchange* 49 (2020): 395.

This figure of the heart has also been appropriated and redeployed in modern secular and political movements in the region. For instance, the Arab nationalist and intellectual founder of the Syrian Arab Nationalist Ba‘th Party Michel Aflaq was keenly aware of the centrality of ‘the heart’ or *al-qalb* for “the Arabs.” For Aflaq, the heart was linked to a particular historicity of Arabness that crossed different religious traditions, including Islam and Christianity, as well as European philosophy, such as Hegel’s which he learned at the Sorbonne in Paris as a student. In a 1943 speech, which was given to commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad, Aflaq describes a spiritual, non-representative semiotics organized around the heart:

Arabs have historically been very attracted to words. Because the words they used had always been filled with facts pulsating with life, the words they listened to were meant to be heard by the heart and not just the ears. They were supposed to evoke a response of the whole person, not only the tongue. Therefore, it has always been that for Arabs, words had a certain sense of sacrality [*qudsiyya*]: to them they were similar to promises, linking life and actions, whether this life is that of the individual or group.¹⁸

Words ‘pulsate with life;’ they are ‘meant to be heard by the heart and not just the ears.’ Such an approach to language is distinct from a hermeneutic or Saussurean model of the sign. Rather, words and sound have a concrete, participatory relation to body and world, one that ‘links life and actions.’ As Aflaq emphasizes, the various conceptual grammars of *al-qalb* just glossed are embedded in distinct networks of relations between texts and things, body and language, self and world—alternative semiologies and cosmologies, each with their own embodied logics and lived syntax.

For these traditions, the heart serves as a corporeal and speculative interface between the finite and the infinite, the worldly and the divine (even if the divine is construed in secular terms such as the Hegelian ‘History’ or ‘Spirit’ like it is for Aflaq). The heart is understood not only as a physical organ, but also as a *subtle substance*—a kind of spiritual organ. As a spiritual organ, the heart plays various functions, including as the seat of perception, memory, the imagination, and the intellect. But it is consistently at the center of the human being and, crucially, the point of contact with the outside as such. This figure of ‘the heart’ is something the philosopher Ernst Cassirer might have called a “symbolic form,” or the art historian Aby Warburg identified as “pathos formula”¹⁹—terms that draw our attention the way temporality, affective energy, and formative activity are condensed in energetic, perceptual shape.

Al-qalb understood as a ‘subtle substance,’ however, is hardly a stable organ, as its semantic root *q-l-b* indicates. The Arabic root *q-l-b* has several related but distinct meanings: ‘to turn around;’ ‘to turn face up, or face down;’ ‘to turn outside in, or inside out;’ ‘to invert, reverse, overturn, upset, or topple;’ ‘to roll over;’ ‘to subvert, to

¹⁸ Michel Aflaq, “dhikra al-rasul al-‘arabi” in *fi sabil al-ba‘th*, 141.

<http://albaath.online.fr/Pocket%20PC%20Fi%20Sabil%20alBaath/Volume%20I-Chapters/index-Volume%20I-pocketpc.htm>.

¹⁹ See Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences,” in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) and Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), but especially Aby Warburg, *Aby Warburg: Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2020).

overthrow;’ ‘to change, alter, turn, transform, transmute;’ ‘to exchange.’²⁰ The root therefore indexes a variety of specific kinetic motions that refer to not only distinct spatio-temporal change but also socio-political action.²¹ A kind of vital agitation, characterized by turning, reversal, and transformation, is thus figured in the heart. For instance, we can see the capriciousness of *al-qalb* in the Islamic supplication, or *du‘a’* : “O Changer of the hearts, make my heart firm upon your religion” [*ya muqalliba al-qulub, thabbit qalbi ‘ala dinik*].²² This agitation is perhaps best captured by Ibn Arabi who says: “the heart [*qalb*] takes its name from its own perpetual transformation [*taqallub*].”²³ Crucially, what is translated as ‘perpetual transformation,’ *taqallub*, shares the same semantic root as *qalb*: *q-l-b*. The root *q-l-b* thus points to the heart’s volatility on a subjective level, including its destructive and productive capacities.

There is another way, however, that I find the agitation of *al-qalb* relates to the bakery, one linked to ambivalence and the work of tropes. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler locates ambivalence at the site where the subject emerges, an ambivalence that is generated by the figure of *turning*.²⁴ This ‘turning’ includes the motion of ‘turning on itself,’ a movement that produces a sense of two-foldedness or bi-valence, and hence ambivalence. One must say this provisionally, however, as if the ‘it’ of the ‘turning’ could be presumed when it is precisely *the movement itself* that serves as the condition of possibility of the ‘thingness’ of the ‘it.’ Butler links the figure of ‘turning’ in the formation of subjectivity to tropes, a concept derived from the Greek *tropos* meaning ‘turn’ or ‘reversal’ (we might also say a ‘torsion’), and thus to *tropology*.²⁵ Curiously, tropology, a discourse from classical rhetoric, is located at the site of the generation of the subject, part of the subjection of and subjugation to power. As Butler puts it, “the ‘turn’ appears to function as a tropological inauguration of the subject, a founding moment whose ontological status remains permanently uncertain.”²⁶ In a strange way, tropology thus gives shape to the specific spatiality of the subject—topographies.

As an example of this, Butler, through engagement with Freud, shows how melancholia participates in the very mechanisms it describes, producing psychic topographies that are tropological. By topography, I am referring to the Id-Ego-Superego apparatus that Freud develops in *The Ego and the Id*, itself already a move away from the Con.-Precon.-Uncon topography described earlier in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.²⁷

²⁰ I am culling definitions from Edward Lane’s *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Hans Wehr’s *Arabic-English Dictionary*, and Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-‘Arab*.

²¹ My thought here on etymology and the mutability of Arabic semantics is guided by Toshihiko Izutsu and Ghassan El Masri. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran* (Ithaca: McGill Queens Press, 2002); Ghassan El Masri, *The Semantics of Qur’anic Language: al-Akhira* (Boston: Brill, 2020).

²² And also, the hadith: *allahumma musarrifa al-qulub sarraf qulubana ‘ala ta’atika* (O Allah, Turner of hearts, turn our hearts to Thine obedience).

²³ As quoted in Michael Sells, “Ibn Arabi’s Garden among the Flames: A Reevaluation,” *History of Religions* 23, no. 4 (May 1984): 309.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3.

²⁵ Hayden White tells us that the word ‘tropic’ derives from *tropikos*, *tropos*, which in classical Greek meant ‘turn.’ *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

²⁶ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 4.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960). See especially Chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

While Butler's theory of subjectivation, particularly its topographical dimensions, takes shape in dialogue with Freudian concepts, the vocabulary and tropological archive of my interlocutors at al-Furn is different, even if I build from Butler's insight that the *subject is a modality of power that turns on itself*. Or, put differently, *the subject is the effect of power in recoil*—an ambivalence.²⁸

Does not *al-qalb*, thought in terms of the kinetics of 'turning' and 'transformation' figure this very tension of between ontological instability and the generativity of plasticity?²⁹ That is, the heart as invoked as part of these traditions and in daily life is not merely a bodily and spiritual organ, itself part of a conceptual and tropological topography giving shape to psychic and affective life ("the landscape of the soul," to use a medieval vocabulary),³⁰ but also figures the very agitation and contingency of *tropos* qua turning—its vital, unstable movement—animating the relation between language and life.

In this approach, I follow Friedrich Nietzsche who centers the work of rhetoric and tropes in his account of language.³¹ For Nietzsche, the recirculation and sedimentation of tropes is the very condition of possibility for the customary use of language.³² Rather than metaphorical in a bald sense—a method that takes the givenness of language as prior—Nietzsche argues that tropes are the very stuff out of which literal and conceptual language emerges: a kind of memory that is later forgotten.

Accordingly, my ethnographic approach is aimed at reanimating the tropes, figures, and concepts mobilized and deployed by Tariq and the workers at al-Furn. Rather than investing in everyday language for the sake of preservation or record, however, I investigate how these concepts and figures gain force as they are articulated, giving perceptual texture to life. Such an approach foregrounds the historicity (and thus temporality) of language, its capacity to disclose a kind of memory that leaps forth and bursts out, unexpectedly. It also highlights how Tariq and the bakery workers grapple with questions of loss, fragility, and displacement at the bakery, as well as how the tropological figures emerging from work with bread are articulated alongside social and religious archives. This will help us see how the workers of al-Furn deploy a similar tropic language as Tariq, but with sometimes contradictory or competing aims and questions that reflect their respective circumstances—a form of life in flight.

While conducting ethnographic research at al-Furn I would occasionally ask Tariq about what he meant by *qalb tayyib*, *qalb abyad*, and other uses of *al-qalb* that he mobilized in pedagogic fashion around the bakery. Sometimes they were directed at me, sometimes at his employees, sometimes at his customers as he withheld their change until he finished talking with them. It was difficult for him, I found, to explicate the

²⁸ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 6.

²⁹ By 'plasticity' I am thinking of the early work of Catherine Malabou who, in her reading of Hegel, argues that plasticity is the "capacity to both receive form and to give form its own content." Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12.

³⁰ See Niklaus Largier, *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetic Experience, Mysticism, and the Play of the Senses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 30.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche On Rhetoric and Language* ed. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³² See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*.

expressions and sayings in the abstract outside of the concrete situation that had caused him to invoke them in the first place.

One source of Tariq's teachings and sensibility, I learned, was his cousin, who is a Sunni sheikh in Tripoli. "You see this man here?" Tariq asked me one day when I arrived at the bakery early in the morning. He pointed to a small middle-aged man in a white robe sitting in the white plastic chair next to him.

"He taught me everything I know about treating bread as *ni 'meh*. You ask him, spend two hours a day with him and he will teach all that you need to know."

"But the most important thing," Tariq continues, "is to have a pure heart, *qalb abyed*. You work with *ni 'meh*, this is God's blessing. You must be clean [*nazif*]."

I turn to his cousin, the sheikh, who is happily tearing into a freshly baked thyme-covered flat bread, *za 'tar manusheh*. I ask him what *ni 'meh* means in the context of the bakery, why bread and flour are *ni 'meh*.

"Well, actually all food is a form of *ni 'meh*," he clarifies. "Fruits are *ni 'meh*, for example. But bread and flour are the highest *ni 'meh* from God. For a long time, all humans had was flour and wheat. And it was enough for us. Look around you." He turns around and gestures expansively to the baked goods surrounding us.

"All of this is from what? From flour. That's why it's such a big *ni 'meh*. It gives us life."

The Workers

"Look, this is the most important part of the process. You have to make a circle, make a wide circle. Use the palm of your hand but make a wide circle."

Tariq is explaining to me how to knead dough into a ball with my hand. Later, it will be rolled out, ready for baking in the oven. Each piece is molded into a solid, smooth sphere, internally homogenous. Too much handling, however, desiccates the dough, rendering it crumbly and ineffectual. One should use the base of the hand to press down on the unshaped dough, cupping it in the curvature of the palm as the hand rotates continuously in a loop. The motion is one, fluid. Fingerprints and other marks cause the dough to rise unevenly in the oven, either eventually collapsing or misshapenly rising with air pockets. Kneading requires acquired touch, a learned feeling in the hands.

"I've seen you working on the camera, you're not making a big enough circle." Tariq has someone fetch him some dough. "Take this dough home and practice. Do it a hundred times and then come back tomorrow."

The other workers give different advice: "Not so much force!" Faraj stressed to me, as he made a disapproving face at my efforts.

"Harder!" Mustapha tells me later on.

Walid laughs at me as he plucks evenly weighted pieces of dough from the mass sitting on the marble table next to us and tosses them over. Faraj, Mustapha, and Walid can knead the unformed dough into a ball with just two or three swift rotations, a piece of dough in each hand.

You have to work that quickly when the demand for bread high, such as it is on Friday before *al-jumu'a* prayer or Sunday morning when the Christians who live outside of Tripoli travel to the city to attend church service, and people impatiently clamor around the oven waiting for fresh loaves.

Tariq says to treat the dough like a woman.

“You don’t fuck a woman too hard, right? You have to be gentle. But you can’t be too soft either, otherwise it won’t work. Nothing will happen. You have to find the middle so that you can go for a long time.”

Tariq’s advice was the most explicit association of sex and bread-making I heard during my first days at the bakery, although there was no shortage of sexual jokes.

“*Ana mu‘allim* [I’m the boss]? *Mu‘allim min wara’* [The boss from behind!]!”

Walid says to me while we rolled dough, laughing as he poked Mustapha in the backside with a phallus shaped piece of dough. Mustapha, meanwhile, was not so secretly admiring a young woman with her mother whose backs were turned towards us as they picked through the selection of bread. Mustapha gestured to the other workers to look, and Faraj wryly told me that Mustapha, whose name refers to the perfection of the Prophet Mohammad, was *Mustapha* only in name.

Despite the crude, gendered jokes that often emerged amidst the playfulness of sociality at al-Furn, over time I came to see the bakery as a site of ethical training in the way Tariq envisioned work with bread as a form of worship, of *‘ibadeh*, one attuned to the peculiar force of flour, yeast, sugar, and heat. But before you could engage with such force, you first had to learn how to bake. Practically, this meant learning how to make, handle, and work with dough, something that required teaching, learning, and, most importantly, time—one had to develop a *qalb abyad*, as Tariq had put it.

Later that morning, exhausted by my feeble attempts to improve, I ask Walid what kind of bread we have been making. He takes a piece of the rolled and flattened dough out of a long wooden tray and tosses it into the fire-burning oven. The dough has sesame seeds sprinkled on it that stick to dough’s surface with a touch of pomegranate syrup, adding a hint of sweetness. Once baked, it will be *ka‘k trabuloussi*, a popular Tripoli treat usually eaten with sour purple sumac inside.

We watch the single piece in the oven together. Within twenty seconds it suddenly rises and inflates, as if an invisible force has swept through, animating the dough from the inside. There is something miraculous about the sight, like breathing life into still clay. I marvel at the phenomenon. Even Walid seems impressed.

Walid was my primary instructor at al-Furn. I later learned that Walid had trained hundreds of workers at the bakery over the years. A portly, good-natured man around fifty years old with a baldhead and a light smile, Walid began working at al-Furn during the Lebanese civil war when he was only thirteen.

“It was one of only four or five bakeries in Tripoli during the war,” he explains to me. “So everyone knew it. And they respected the bakery, it was clean [*nazif*]. People would come from around the city and even from outside Tripoli to get fresh bread.”

Walid, who the other workers called *asmar* [‘dark’] because of his complexion (his father was a Black man from Sudan but had Lebanese citizenship), worked at al-Furn through his adolescence before later serving in the Lebanese army. After his time in the military, he returned to al-Furn, working again for several years before he was recruited by someone opening a bakery in Dubai. He travelled to the United Arab Emirates and worked there for two years after which he returned to Tripoli and al-Furn, its longest-tenured employee.

Labor at the bakery, as Walid’s story suggests, is fleeting. It often starts at a young age. Many of the workers at the bakery have their first experience working with

bread at al-Furn. In fact, Walid swears to me that most of the people working at the dozens of bakeries scattered in the different neighborhoods of Tripoli worked at al-Furn at some point in their lives. Tariq tells me the same thing. Some train at al-Furn only to leave soon afterwards, working for one or two years before moving onto better paying, less demanding (but more dangerous) jobs, such as in construction.³³ Others are recruited (or stolen away, depending on the perspective) by other bakeries, lured by the promise of higher pay and more responsibility. The more entrepreneurial open their own bakeries in other parts of the city where there is less competition. Several years after this portion of the ethnography, Walid will do the same.

In 2019, there were about forty people working at al-Furn filling a combination of shifts that covered the temporal day. At the time, the bakery was open twenty-four hours. Almost all those workers were male, except for a handful of women who sold bread at the front of the store.³⁴ The majority of the bakery's workers were Syrian, from all over Syria but especially from the nearby provinces of Idlib and Homs. Several lived in the floor upstairs or in makeshift apartments on the block, where they were given free room by Tariq, especially those who worked the overnight shift. The ages of the workers ranged from barely teenager to mid-sixties. Some came to the bakery escaping violence in their home, others had been working in Tripoli for years, moving back and forth even before the war, while others still were simply looking for higher pay, following the labor pathways already walked by friends and family from their villages in Syria.

Tariq told me that while he employs Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians (“and an American now too!”) and has done so as long as he can remember, most of the workers were now Syrian.³⁵ This was consistent with rough estimates of the labor force in the Lebanon at that moment, which suggested that about seventy percent of bakery workers in Lebanon were Syrian. Almost all of them worked informally.

The proportion of Syrians working in the bread industry was the subject of much domestic attention in 2019 when the Lebanese Ministry of Labor Camille Bou Sleiman attempted to tighten formal restrictions on labor.³⁶ After demanding that bakeries employ only Lebanese workers—a response to the rapidly rising domestic unemployment rate and growing anti-Syrian political rhetoric—bakery owners pushed back, saying it would be impossible to maintain their operations with only Lebanese workers who demanded higher salaries and paid days off. The margins simply did not make sense, argued the bakery owners, whose revenue was confined by the government-mandated and subsidized price of Arabic bread. Eventually, the Minister of Labor relented, declaring

³³ See, for example, Ziad Kalthoum, *Taste of Cement*, directed by Ziad Kalthoum (2017: Biddayyat).

³⁴ For an account of how migrant labor and relations of debt reproduce gendered divisions of work and family in the context of Syrian refugee agricultural labor in Lebanon, see China Sajadian, “Reproductive Binds: The Gendered Economy of Debt in a Syrian Refugee Farmworker Camp,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* (Special Issue 2024).

³⁵ For more on Syrian migrant labor in Lebanon, see John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³⁶ Sunniva Rose, “After Strike Threat, Lebanese Bakers are Allowed to Hire More Syrians,” *The National News*, August 3, 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/after-strike-threat-lebanese-bakers-are-allowed-to-hire-more-syrians-1.894042>.

that bakeries could employ one Syrian worker for every Lebanese in the same shop—a standard officially applied to only the construction and agriculture industries.³⁷

From the bakery owner's perspective, most of the jobs at the bakery are interchangeable and can be filled by any worker with basic training. This keeps the cost of laborers down and allows the former to pay the latter informally on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps the most skilled position is the person who works the oven, the *khabbaz*. Operating the oven requires someone who can adroitly insert a long wooden paddle-like tool into the oven, depositing and retrieving the flat circle-shaped pieces of dough that transform into bread. First, the baker puts five to seven pieces of dough onto the paddle, depending on his skill. He then inserts the paddle completely into the oven. As he slowly withdraws the tool, he deposits the dough pieces in a straight line, one by one, onto the tile surface with a flick of his wrist, starting in the back of the oven.

The dough takes less than half a minute to rise, depending on the quality of the dough and the temperature of the oven. Once the dough has risen, the baker swiftly flips the newly baked bread with the paddle so that it cooks evenly on both sides. A talented baker, like the one at al-Furn, can easily bake four parallel rows of dough at once, rotating the pieces closer and further away from the fire according to their texture, before dumping them into a large wooden tray to be taken away and displayed up front.

Faraj is the primary *khabbaz* during the day. In his thirties, he has a tall, lean frame and a kind demeanor. Faraj grew up in Syria and his family lives in Syria, but, because his father was Lebanese, has Lebanese nationality. He is Alawi, a fact that hardly ever comes up explicitly in conversation but can be inferred from where he lives in Tripoli—Jabal Mohsin, the only Alawite area in the city—and his occasional comment that might be interpreted as supportive of the Syrian government.³⁸

Faraj used to work at a bakery near the American University of Beirut, next to the McDonalds and popular coffee shop Abu Najib across from the university's main entrance on Bliss St., but the bakery closed in 2017 and he moved to Tripoli. Faraj speaks of his time working in Beirut as if it were a different country. During conversations with the other workers, he tells stories of what people did in Beirut—the cars they drove on Bliss St., the celebrities he saw, the tips they gave him, the women he slept with—as if to demonstrate that another life was possible, and he had tasted it.

Once, early in our relationship, he asked me if I knew of Haverford.

"It's in the US, near a city named Philadelphia," he described, struggling to pronounce the names. Surprised, I asked him why he was curious about the small Pennsylvania town.

³⁷ Other labor sectors have a mandatory one-to-three foreigner-to-Lebanese employment ratio. The Lebanese Ministry of Labor was widely understood to be aligned with the Syrian government, and, during the 1990s, did not enforce Syrian migrant workers in Lebanon to register their services to avoid paying registration fees and taxes. This was part of the redistribution of wealth from Lebanon to Syria that took place in the post-Lebanese civil war reconstruction era. See Samir Kassir, "A Polity in an Uncertain Regional Environment," in Theodor Hanf and Nawaf Salam, eds. *Lebanon in Limbo: Post-War Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment* (Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003). For more on Syrian refugees working in the agrarian economy in Lebanon post-2011, see China Sajadian, "Rethinking Climate Refugees and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: An Agrarian Perspective of Displacement," *Arab Studies Journal* 2 (2022).

³⁸ For more on the formation of an Alawite community in Jabal Mohsin with Syria's support, see Raphael Lefebvre, *Jihad and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

“I had a Syrian girlfriend, we were going to get married. She immigrated to the US and worked in Haverford and I was supposed to move there so we could get married. But then things didn’t work out and I moved to Lebanon instead.”

Over the years, Faraj would repeat that same story to me—each time, as if it were for the first time—in the quiet moments while I watched him bake bread in the oven and we listened to Fairuz in the morning. Faraj played Fairuz from his phone every morning, the same songs, in the same order. (“Fairuz for the morning, Mahmoud Darwish for the night,” my Syrian roommate told me knowingly when I told him about the consistency of Faraj’s routine. He understood immediately and was not surprised.) Every time Faraj mentioned Haverford he would come up with a different reason for not having gone to the US, a futures past.

“It’s too far, I would have to sit in the plane for what, fifteen hours? That’s too far from my family.” Another time, “Her mother was Christian, and she didn’t like me. It’s not good when your mother-in-law doesn’t like you.” Or, “I didn’t want to lose my language. To learn English? That’s hard, too hard.” His separation from his former girlfriend had happened over ten years ago, but he never seemed to stop thinking about it. Perhaps it was an association initiated by my presence, as a reminder of the US. When I asked him about the repetition, he shrugged nonchalantly and told me that when he’s working alone, baking, sometimes it just happens—memories sprang forth, unexpected, as if brand new.

A flame that hardly ever stops burning needs lots of fuel. Faraj loads firewood onto the paddle and tosses it into the fire whenever it begins to weaken. Sometimes while we are talking, Faraj instructs me to retrieve wood. “Get the lemon tree wood, that’s better,” he tells me. In the back of the bakery, past the piles of bread and the oven, through a small corridor and behind a large kitchen with a high ceiling and equipped with bulky mixers, mechanized ovens, and dozens of heavy sacks of flour, there is a courtyard almost a block long filled with heaping mountains of firewood.

The firewood, cut from a mixture of Lebanese and imported trees, comes from the local timber warehouses in the Mina municipality at the city’s port, a trade fueled by a robust domestic furniture industry.³⁹ Before wood became too expensive, once a year, during the summer, trucks would rumble to the neighborhood and dump enough wood behind the bakery to build several large ships. Faraj explains to me that only the Tripoli municipality allows for the ovens to operate on firewood.

One of my early tasks at al-Furn was to help three young Syrian workers move the wood from an exposed part of the courtyard to a covered section. It is the end of the summer, and the bakery has to prepare for the Mediterranean rains. Mixed in with the piles of wood are copious amounts of trash: brightly colored plastic chip bags, loose metal nails, broken glass from soda and cheap whisky bottles, the occasional dead animal (mostly rats). The cheap rubber slippers the workers wear are hardly adequate protection from the hazardous material that threatens every step, but there is a job to be done.

It is grueling, hard labor, especially when swamped in the groaning heat of the end of summer, and the workers complained to me of pains in their backs, legs, and arms—the way many of them had the same problems with their wrists, such that they clicked loudly when they rotated them in front of me.

³⁹ This was the case in the 1950s, as well. See John Gulick, *Tripoli: A Modern City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

The three young workers moving firewood with me laughed when I asked them about the ongoing national conversation around Syrian bakery laborers.

“Can you imagine a Lebanese doing this?” said one of them, a short adolescent male of sixteen years old. Let’s call him Abou Zeid. Abou Zeid gestured to his hands, which were puffy, dirty, and full of splinters from carrying the wood.

“A Lebanese person would ask for gloves!” The other two youths with us laugh again churlishly and nod their heads in agreement.

“The Lebanese don’t want to work the long hours, not for this little money.”

The shifts of Abou Zeid and other two Syrians *are* long—at a minimum, twelve-hour days, every day, with no vacations or regular time off. Workers are paid in cash at the end of their shifts. Most days, the shifts extend to thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen hours, depending on what the boss wants.

That morning, Abou Zeid is on the end of a sixteen-hour shift, which has passed through the night. The night schedule is the most difficult. Starting at ten p.m. and ending at ten a.m. the next morning but almost always continuing well after, four to six lonely employees make *khubz ‘arabi* through the dead of the night. To incentivize it, Tariq offers free housing in the dilapidated apartments above the bakery. Only Syrians take up this offer, most of whom are younger men with few or no other relations in the city.

Abou Zeid tells me he prefers the night shift because he doesn’t like to work near the automated mechanical oven during the day. The sounds of the machine are loud and they remind him of the explosions in Syria.

Abou Zeid is from the town of Khan Sheikhan in the province of Idlib in northwest Syria. Surprising to me, although perhaps naively so, I learned that many of the Syrian workers at al-Furn were from Khan Sheikhan. They spoke with a rural dialect, one that was at times difficult for me to understand, especially when they talked to each other. Most noticeably, they enunciated the *qaf* of Classical Arabic rather than use the more typical guttural stop, a relative rarity amongst Levantine dialects. There were Syrian employees from other parts of the country as well, including from Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, but most were from Khan Sheikhan.

When I asked them how it came to be that so many from the same rural town worked at al-Furn, they shrugged and relayed a similar story: work was impossible in Khan Sheikhan because of the war and they had had a cousin, or an uncle, or some male relative who worked at al-Furn. So they followed them to the bakery. Abou Zeid himself worked along with two relatives, one a shy doughy pale teenager and the other a heavyset older man with a thick brown handlebar mustache who carried full trays of piping hot bread high above his head with one hand.

Khan Sheikhan was an active battlefield at the time. Located on the strategic main international highway between Aleppo and Damascus, north of Hama but south of Idlib city, the town had changed hands several times since 2011 between the Syrian army and a collection of rebel military fighters.

Shortly after my conversation with Abou Zeid, the Syrian government would win control of Khan Sheikhan with the help of Russian warplanes and fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah. This was an important step of the regime’s years-long plan of subduing Idlib, the last major rebel-controlled region in the country. The government victory prompted the flight of hundreds of thousands of Syrians in Idlib, mostly women and children who had already been displaced to the province from elsewhere in the

country, north to the Turkish border where they were met with closed doors and makeshift encampments.

One day, I ask Abou Zeid about the fighting in Khan Sheikhun while we sit on uneven logs taking a break from stacking firewood. It is about eleven in the morning and he is at the end of another overnight shift. The sun is strong and sweat falls from Abou Zeid's still boyish face.

"Fuck Bashar al-Assad [*kes ukht bashar al-assad*]," he says repeatedly between pants, trying to catch his breath. He pulls out his phone and begins scrolling. He finds what he is looking for—it is a picture of a charred baby lying on blackened dirt from a week ago.

"The regime planes burned her." He shows me another picture: an older man, also on the ground, covered in blood, his face mutilated to the point of being unrecognizable.

I ask him if he participated in the early protests in Idlib during 2011.

"I did, but I was really young," he tells me. He shows me another photograph from his phone, this time of him at a protest. He's a child, barely recognizable.

"The regime burned my family's house. They took my father. He was gone for a year and then he returned. They did terrible things to him, torture, etc [*ta'zib wa kitha*]. Now he and my brothers and aunts live in Gaziantep."

Why did you come to Tripoli, I ask.

"I came looking for work. There wasn't work in Idlib in 2013. There were just planes in the sky. They burned everything. I had a cousin that worked in this bakery [al-Furn]. So I come to Tripoli in 2013...or was in 2014? Anyways, I came to work at the bakery. It was my first job. But fuck this bakery, I'm tired."

I ask him if Tariq is good with him.

"He's okay [*mishey al-hal*]."

I ask him about the future.

"There is no future. Just work and eating, that's all is left," he says in a matter of fact manner.

One morning a few weeks later—shortly after the US President Donald Trump announces the withdrawal from Syria of US troops supporting Syrian Kurdish fighters, a move that directly leads to the Turkish army invading northern Syria—Abou Zeid concernedly shows me another photograph on his phone.

Three soldiers wearing green uniforms are smiling triumphantly at the camera. In the background are the verdant trees of northern Syria, an agriculturally rich region famous before the war for its pistachios, olives, and livestock. The view of the trees is blocked by something in the foreground: a severed head, cut low at the neck. The soldiers hold it by its long flowing hair. The eyes of the head are closed. Next to the soldiers appears to be the body from which the head was taken, patiently waiting on the ground. Abou Zeid tells me that the soldiers are Turkish and the head is of a Kurdish fighter.

I ask him his opinion on the invasion. He does not respond but returns to work, rolling and turning the dough.

Bread and its Vicissitudes

Meanwhile, at the front of the bakery, Tariq is more concerned with the Lebanese economy than with what is happening just a few hours drive away in Syria (the two are

not unrelated). The situation in Lebanon is bad and Tariq knows it. It's still 2019 and the economy has not fallen apart yet, but signs are showing. On the day of the bakery syndicate-organized strike against the Lebanese government's lack of support for bakeries, I sit with him inside al-Furn at his desk in the dark.

The Lebanese uprising of October 17 has not happened, but Tariq knows that something is not right. We stare at the dusty, now extended, steel curtains covering the glass windows and blocking the view of the street. The morning light sneaks through the cracks but the inside of the bakery is still dim.

Tariq is smoking a cigarette and drinking the coffee I brought him from the street vendor on the corner of the block.

"Man, even during the civil war, we never had problems like this," he tells me. I stutter some condolences, but he waves them off dismissively. Tariq is talking about the lack of US dollars in Lebanon. In 2019, the Lebanese lira is officially valued at a fixed rate of 1507.5 lira to one US dollar. During the past twenty-five years, the two currencies have been practically interchangeable in the country.⁴⁰ It was common to pay in Lebanese lira at, say, the neighborhood corner store, and receive a mix of physical US dollars and lira in change (and vice versa).

In 2019, however, the flow of US dollars and other foreign currency into Lebanon stopped. This presented an unprecedented problem for an economy that faces a massive trade deficit, an infrastructural imbalance with no easy remedy.⁴¹ The lack of hard cash left the Lebanese government and private traders unable to find the dollars necessary to purchase essential goods from abroad, including wheat.⁴²

The ongoing shortage of US dollars meant that the traders and wheat millers with whom Tariq normally does business demanded that he pay in US dollars (US dollars Tariq did not have), or the equivalent to its black-market price, which was increasing beyond its subsidized rate. Meanwhile, Tariq and other bakeries were forced to continue to sell bread at its government-mandated price, cutting their margins. As a private owner, Tariq was caught in the awkward position of pursuing a private profit while also selling a public good, one tied to the government's perceived responsibility to care for its people. Bread's status as a political good was becoming more visible.

One might rightfully point out that such status was already latent in the figure of bread insofar as it is colloquially associated with *'aish*, 'life,' and *huquq*, 'rights.' What is crucial to note, however, is that these associations—and the kind of political subjectivity and structure of authority they presume—have taken shape according to the historically distinct socio-political coordinates by which bread has been produced, distributed, and eaten.⁴³ This is something into which the lives of the workers at al-Furn have already given us some insight—a glimpse in which revolution, war, and economic collapse are intimately intertwined.

⁴⁰ Pegging the Lebanese lira to the US dollar was part of Rafik Hariri's neoliberal post-war reconstruction of the country and economy. Bauman, *Citizen Hariri*, 70-81.

⁴¹ For more on the history of banking and finance in the country and its centrality to the formation of post-independence Lebanon, see Hicham Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁴² Marwan Mikhael, "The Lebanese Wheat Market: A Lay of the Land," *BlomInvest Bank*, May 13, 2016.

⁴³ José Ciro Martínez makes a similar argument regarding state-subsidized bread in Jordan. *States of Subsistence: The Politics of Bread in Contemporary Jordan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

“People were killed, people were shooting but there was never a problem with the money!” Tariq says to me. He pulls out a key from his pocket and unlocks a tall beige cabinet next to the register. He retrieves a small pistol.

“This is what we used to keep with us always! The worry was the shooting, never the money!” He sighs again and returns the pistol, locking the cabinet. “Now we ask God for support.” He looks to the ceiling and gestures upwards with two hands histrionically.

“Do you know what I think of in these moments, when we are worried?” Tariq asks me. I shake my head, unsure of how to respond. Tariq often assumes a pedagogic mode, something he has acquired from the years of training employees, he tells me. I have learned that it is sometimes best just to listen.

“If you don’t have a good heart [*qalb tayyib*] towards the people, if you don’t have God, you lose everything. Do you understand?”

I respond with a questioning look. Tariq sees my confusion and explains.

“You are with God,” he repeats, “You love God!” He nearly shouts this, emphasizing the middle word of each sentence.

“You work with love [*mahabbah*], with ethics [*akhlaq*].” He grabs a plastic bag full of bread lying on the desk and shakes it in front of me.

“Look, we’re working with what? With bread [*khubz*], with flour [*tahin*]!” He pronounces the words *khubz* and *tahin* with great exertion. “You know what that is?”

Tariq is shouting at this point, having nearly worked himself into a frenzy. His voice echoes in the empty bakery.

“It’s *ni ‘meh*, it’s a blessing, a blessing from God! We’re not working with clothes!” He thrusts his hand in the air.

“For this *ni ‘meh*, you have to clean your hands, you have to be clean! You have to be clean.” Tariq raises his voice again as he says ‘clean,’ and looks at me expectantly.

Tariq’s energy is gathering, his voice rising and movements sharpening.

“Do you understand?” he says to me excitedly. “Do you understand? This [pointing to the flour], this is *muqaddas*, this is sacred! Now, people don’t care that they work with *ni ‘meh*. They don’t care! They just care about money money money!” Tariq bangs his fist on the desk.

He slumps back into his chair as if the lesson were a force from the outside that, having expressed itself, has left, leaving him exhausted.

“The people now, they change completely, they only care about the money. Before they had something in their heart for their work.” He sighs one last time and looks blankly out of the glass doors blocked by steel shutters.

It’s clear that Tariq is referring to the kind of ethical life forged from work with flour, dough, and bread that we heard him explain earlier, described in terms of a lived grammar of the heart. But now he laments the loss of that very ethical orientation at the bakery. The *telos* of an ethics of bread—a good moral character, a ‘pure heart’ or *qalb abyad* as both the means and ends of work at the bakery—is occluded by political and economic conditions that incapacitate the ability to live according to shared values. ‘They just care about money, money, money!’ The *telos* of ethical practice hangs in abeyance. People are no longer ‘clean’ when they work at the bakery, Tariq claims. They have been misdirected by monetary values, rather than be guided by ethical ones.

“Tariq eats money and saves it in his stomach, he doesn’t want to shit out the rest,” Mustapha says to me when I tell him about Tariq’s complaints.

“If it weren’t for me,” Mustapha continues, “that bakery would fall apart. If I take one day off, it would stop. That’s why I’ve only taken five days off in the last five years here. I swear! I have to fix everything! What, they think I’m an octopus? I have eight arms? The bakery tortures me.”

Mustapha is around fifty years old. He’s Syrian, also from Khan Sheikhun, and is one of the longest tenured employees at al-Furn. Over time conducting research at al-Furn, I have come to realize that Mustapha is the point of contact for most of those that arrive to the bakery from Khan Sheikhun. Workers come and go, especially the younger ones, but he has remained and new people from the town continue to arrive. That is perhaps why Tariq lets Mustapha live in a full apartment (not just a shared room, like the other workers) above the bakery for free, complete with electricity provided by the generator used to power the bakery. This was no small thing, especially after state subsidies for fuel were cut in 2021 amidst Lebanon’s collapsing economy. Mustapha often boasted, when fuel prices were soaring and power difficult to get, that he had the best electricity in the neighborhood. Its stability, of course, was linked to the fuel needed to keep the bakery running. Meanwhile, the other workers would fight over the electrical outlets at the bakery to charge their phones while they worked. These fights would sometimes escalate to physical violence that had to be broken up.

Mustapha does everything at the bakery: he makes dough from flour, water, salt, sugar, and yeast, bakes bread, fixes the automated bread machine, hauls large flour sacks into the bakery, stacks firewood for the oven, repairs the mechanized dough mixer, sweeps the floor, and cleans the marble tops on which the dough is rolled. Anytime Tariq has a problem with something in the bakery he consults Mustapha first.

This doesn’t mean Tariq’s relationship with Mustapha is always affable, however. Sometimes, especially during the groaning heat of summer, when everyone is sweating from working near the blazing oven and customers are agitated and impatient, Tariq and Mustapha would get into arguments and hurl booming insults at each other from across the room. They nearly came to blows several times, even in just the time I was there. Privately, Tariq often complained to me that Mustapha was lazy, while Mustapha would tell me that Tariq doesn’t appreciate how much he did for the bakery.

Mustapha has a long history of working with bread. When he was twenty, he studied to repair bread machines in Syria. After this, he worked for two years in bakeries in Idlib, repairing ovens. But Mustapha grew tired of the work because of the long hours and became an international truck driver instead, which included frequent trips to Iraq. He had opportunity to go to Britain, but didn’t, something he says he regrets. It was around this time that he began working on and off in Tripoli and at al-Furn.

In 2014, Mustapha opened a bakery in Idlib but it was later bombed by Russian warplanes after Russia entered the Syrian war in 2015. (You can tell the difference between Russian and Syrian planes by the sound in the sky, he tells me). Plus, there was no flour then! He says this to me laughing. Afterwards, Mustapha went to Turkey to open a bakery there. He spent seven months in Istanbul but didn’t speak Turkish so it was difficult. He went home to Idlib but his house was bombed, and he eventually came back to Tripoli where’s he’s been since then.

“What Tariq is talking about, that’s not the problem. Of course there’s a problem of money. But Tariq has money. He’s just greedy. There’s something else. Look Brent, if someone comes to me, I don’t know if he is an enemy [*‘adu*] or friend [*sahib*].”

“That’s what I always ask myself: is this person an enemy or a friend?” Mustapha stops rolling dough and turns to address me directly.

“Look who’s been in Syria—the Russians, the Chinese, the Turks, the Americans, Hezbollah, the Iranians. You don’t know who you can trust.”

“You, okay, we’ve known each other for years. I know you’re my friend.”

“But that guy there?” Mustapha looks around the corner and points to someone entering the bakery. “I don’t know about him—is he an enemy or friend?”

‘Enemy or friend.’ Mustapha’s sensibility is instructive. According to Mustapha, the question at stake is not simply a struggle over values (i.e. *which* values to strive towards and the conditions that capacitate that striving), as Tariq suggests, but also one of political violence (i.e. harm that forecloses very the possibility of striving). How can you develop ethical relations with others when you cannot trust the stranger? When the stranger is a threat? Mustapha reminds us that any attempt to think ethics at the bakery in Tripoli must also contend with the fact that it is replete with doubt, confusion, and threat, especially for Syrians fleeing war. Doing so requires a concept of ethics, indeed a concept of ‘the heart,’ that not only thematizes its generative, productive capacity but also thinks from its violence and destructive force—ethics’ fundamental ambivalence.

In other words, we must tarry with the violence embedded in the instability of *al-qalb*, the unpredictability of its kinetics, its turnings and reversals, and the immanent possibility it may turn again. This vital agitation is exhibited ethnographically by the bakery workers, not only in the biological struggle to live or the structural exploitation of capitalist migrant labor, but also in their relation to loss, its material and psychic manifestations at the bakery, and the possibility of despair. But as the figure of the heart also suggests, the sense of alterity, of opacity, is also the estrangement from oneself.

I am reminded of another *khabbaz* at al-Furn, Abu Ali, who sometimes works the night shift. While Faraj is elegant and measured in his movement while baking, there is something desperate in Abu Ali’s jerking back and forth as he inserts tray after tray of dough into the oven. Abu Ali tells me he doesn’t like to make the dough because it requires him to work with flour. The flour reminds him of the clouds of dust that saturate the atmosphere when cement buildings are bombed in Syria. Instead, he prefers handling the already-made dough.

The other workers tell me that Abu Ali takes cheap drugs—synthetic amphetamine *captagon* pills produced in Syria and smuggled out to the rest of the globe—to stay up at night and work. I saw him one morning after a long evening shift, the sweat dripping down his face, and remembered how a few weeks earlier he described to Mustapha how Assad regime affiliated thugs called *shabiha* [literally, ‘ghosts’ or ‘specters’] had ransacked his family home in Khan Sheikhun. Even the tiles on the floor were ripped out, he said, taken away to be sold. “Even the tiles!”

Abu Ali expressed his desire to return to Syria, saying that the work at the bakery in Tripoli was killing him. If he were killed in Khan Sheikhun, in Syria, at least he would die at home. He left to work at another bakery in the city the following year, lured by a higher salary. But when I saw him again several years later, he was back at al-Furn still working at bakeries, picking up a couple of extra shifts to make more money.

Suspicion, distrust, and violence thus pervade al-Furn and its workers. Suspicion of each other and their stories; suspicion of the rapidly changing price of goods; suspicion of hoarding and price speculation; suspicion of politicians, religious figures; suspicion of the UN and other international organizations. We might characterize this as a moment in which customary political and social forms of authority have been dismantled and workers like Walid, Mustapha, Abou Zeid, and Abu Ali must cautiously navigate in their ruin. And yet, this chapter has pursued the question of how the conditions of capitalist migrant labor, including the 2019 financial collapse of Lebanon's speculative economy, might also serve as the condition of possibility for the emergence of a certain kind of subject of ethics. How might these very conditions of subjection and subjugation also capacitate the potentiality for confrontation with loss, an encounter with the violence of alterity? They are conditions that gesture to the volatility of the shape of subjectivity in flight and the need to attend to the historicity of the latter's concrete formations.

My thinking here is again informed by Judith Butler. Rather than presume the terms of agency, a move that naturalizes both the subject of agency and the conditions that capacitate it, Butler draws attention to its instability. In doing so, Butler displaces the question of individual agency, which still dominates the social science literature on not only migration and refugeehood, but also humanitarianism and citizenship:

If, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserver in the beings that we are...Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.⁴⁴

This, to be clear, is not to suggest that agency is unimportant but instead shows how agency can also be understood as an effect powered by other processes that draw our attention elsewhere to understand the capacity for action in displacement—what Butler describes as a ‘fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose.’ Martin Heidegger might have called this condition ‘thrownness’—not so much a biological but an *ontological vulnerability* that takes shape in the gap between life and forms of life.⁴⁵

How might this kind of discourse be accounted for ethnographically in terms of the embodied grammar of a form of life—the figures, norms, and symbols that animate and motivate social life? That is, in the context of al-Furn, rather than understand ‘agency’ simply in terms of the agency of migrants and refugees or capitalist workers—categories that are undoubtedly relevant but I worry at times overdetermine the framework of analysis—how might we saturate Butler's insight with concrete ethnographic content from the bakery? Where might that lead us in the context of pursuing questions of ethical, social, and political formation amidst labor and loss?

⁴⁴ Butler, *Psychic Life*, 2.

⁴⁵ I take the phrase ‘ontological vulnerability’ from Eric Santner in his theorization of ‘the flesh.’ *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 84.

My thought here is also shaped by the anthropologist Saba Mahmood's engagement with Butler's work. Mahmood argues that feminist theory is marked by a tension that stems from feminism's dual character as both an analytical and politically prescriptive project.⁴⁶ As a prescriptive project, freedom is a normative aim, whereby freedom is understood as the capacity to realize an 'autonomous will.' Mahmood and others link the coupling of 'freedom' and 'individual autonomy' in liberalism to the reorganization of life under the political project of 'secularism.'⁴⁷ For instance, Talal Asad notes that when the idea of 'will' shifts from being an *orientation* in relation to a transcendental power, to being an *origin*, which is to say the *agent's causal energy*, one might say a move is made to secularity.⁴⁸

In her commentary on Butler's work, Mahmood argues that the agency of the normative subject of feminist theory is often conceptualized in the binary model of subordination and subversion. Agency is thus articulated in terms of the resignification of social norms, located within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power.⁴⁹ In other words, the concept of agency in Butler's work is developed primarily in contexts where *norms are thrown into question*. Against this, Mahmood articulates a theory that argues for the capacitating force of norms—one in which norms, rather than simply subjugating, *potentiate* certain possibilities and actions within a given form of life. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms, but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms, even as those norms may be doubted, contested, and are failed to be achieved.

With this in mind, what came to interest me ethnographically at al-Furn is how confusion, suspicion, and violence seemed to not only characterize the sensibility of my interlocutors, but also have a normative dimension for life in displacement, when authority itself was put into question. This sensibility was reflected most clearly in Mustapha's question of 'enemy or friend,' a disposition shared by the other workers, especially the Syrians. Rather than turn to Carl Schmitt's distinction between 'friend or enemy' as that which founds the 'political,'⁵⁰ however, this sensibility might be understood as a moment in a form of life for which a normative aim is to *cede autonomy over earthly events*—to 'fear God,' to have a 'pure heart' [*qalb abyad*] or a 'conscience' [*damir*] as Tariq puts it. These are expressions and concepts organized around an Islamic ethics of a kind of non-sovereignty.

But, it is also a moment when the authority grounding such ethical life is disrupted and doubted, and that *telos* is in abeyance. In other words, the ambivalence at al-Furn was *intensified* by the collapse of the speculative economy in Lebanon, whereby already alienated capitalist migrant labor was further severed from the financialized market, augmenting the sense of instability and loss for bakery workers.

To link the sense of ambivalence just outlined with the ambivalence discussed earlier as that which is inaugurated by the movement of 'turning' figured in tropes, I want

⁴⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Mahmood, *Politics*, 13.

⁴⁸ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 72.

⁴⁹ Mahmood, *Politics*, 14.

⁵⁰ Carl Schmitt's famous formulation is his claim that "the specific political distinction...is that between friend and enemy." *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

to suggest that these very conditions also give force to a particular figural archive—a tropology—organized around not only an ethics of bread, but also an acknowledgement of the fragility of things. This vocabulary includes Mustapha’s sensibility of ‘enemy and ‘friend,’ as well as Tariq’s ethically inflected vocabulary, one necessary for work with bread as *ni ‘meh*, as figured in the expression, *fi bayna khubz wa milh* (‘there is bread and salt between us’) and *qalb abyad* [‘a pure heart’] or *qalb tayyib* [‘a good heart’]. But to be clear, such fragility is irreducible to the fragility of our mortal, finite lives—although the latter may draw our attention to the former. Instead, an acknowledgement of the former speaks to an ontological vulnerability that permeates life as the always-present possibility that things may fall apart—it is, in an uncanny way, impersonal.

Following Butler, I want to gesture to the possibility that this vocabulary, this tropology, produces its own distinct topographies—psychic landscapes animated by religious, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions of Syria and Lebanon, including those that invoke the figures of the ethico-spiritual heart and bread as a blessed good. The bakery is one place where such figurative topographies emerge, which for socio-political and historical reasons, is an especially prominent one in the contemporary.⁵¹ My contention is that *al-qalb*, or the concept of the heart, is at once part of this tropology and topography, and in its agitation, its turnings and reversals, figures the ambivalence between the violence of things and the plastic enfleshing of the world—hence, the salience of an Islamic ethics of finitude and non-sovereignty that will be given shape ethnographically in the following chapters.

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate how workers at al-Furn disclose a condition of confusion, suspicion, and violence—a condition onset by the destructiveness of war, economic collapse, and life in flight. This condition, which both indexes and is inaugurated by a kind of ambivalence, points to a groundlessness that we might hesitatingly call *hayra* or ‘perplexity.’ In Arabic medieval philosophy, *hayra* was used as a translation of the Greek *aporia*, what translates literally as ‘no-path,’ and indexes a state of questioning. In Sufi thought, *hayra* is a kind of breaking of the world and self that serves as a condition of possibility for moving closer to God. Such shattering even takes place on a sensorial level—perception itself must be plastically reworked in order to attune oneself to the divine in liturgical and everyday life. But such confusion also presents a risk, including the possibility that one’s spiritual and ethical life will be choked into nothingness: despair, hopelessness, and disorientation.

The *telos* of a ‘pure heart’ that Tariq described—work with bread qua *ni ‘meh* as the ground on which one can ethically remake oneself in relation to others and to God—might thus be thought of as in abeyance. Rather than an opening up, there is a breaking of the heart that it occludes sight of the divine in the temporal world: physical violence, poverty, drugs, addiction, and spiritual and religious loss. Crucially, such abeyance is *already part of the grammar of the heart*. Olga Sedakova tells us that, in a different context, the Orthodox tradition studies the varieties of self-deceptions, blind spots and

⁵¹ The most powerful and persuasive ethnographic theorization of a similar kind of topography is Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Chapter 7.

illusions, fantasies in the human heart—the realm of *lukavstvo*, the slyness, the customary name for the Satan.⁵² What guidance is there to navigate the ambivalence of loss and memory, when customary forms of authority and its capacitating force have collapsed? How might work with flour and dough figure the agitation animating the trope of the heart, such that it provides its own way to ethically navigate loss? Put differently, might we see the ethico-spiritual grammar of *al-qalb*, its agitation and restlessness, at play in the labor of the bakery itself? Described in this way, the bakery emerges as a scene of struggle for both Tariq and the workers, a place of possibility but also malaise, stuckness, and wasting away. *Al-qalb*, understood in terms of the kinetics of ‘turning,’ ‘reversal,’ and ‘transformation’ lends itself to the kind of ontological instability and figural plasticity at stake in the work of tropes—itsself a kind of ‘turning’ releasing temporalities and spatialities. How might the ethico-spiritual grammar of the heart figured in work with flour and dough also produce psychic topographies that allow for the workers to relate to loss and each other differently? The following chapters will explore these insights.

⁵² Olga Sedakova, “The Light of Life: Some Remarks on the Russian Orthodox Perception,” July-August 2005, https://www.olgasedakova.com/ecclesia/2162?fbclid=IwAR21L4yN1HMfX2GcA2BHPYTovyZW54tccthqkcF3Ed4emF67zxdqCjEaf_Y.

CHAPTER 2: COUNTER-HISTORY (MEMORY)

“This is what civilization means. (The necessary character of human social organization or civilization) is explained by the fact that God created and fashioned man in a form that can live and subsist only with the help of food. He guided man to a natural desire for food and instilled in him the power that enables him to obtain it.”

Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*¹

Panic, Food Security, Political Economy

“We’re going to die from hunger!” someone from the crowd shouts.

“We’re all going die!” Tariq shouts back.

“But bread is our right!”

Afterwards, Tariq whispers in my ear. “Watch their faces—sometimes they come back for more!”

I look at him, questioningly, asking him what I should do. There is a crowd in front of me, bodies being pushed and shoved in space. The crowd and I are separated by an old wooden table. I can’t make out the color of the table in the dimly lit room, even though it’s the middle of the day.

As Tariq leaves me to continue selling bread, he looks back and shrugs, as if acknowledging the futility of confronting someone for trying to purchase an extra bag of cheap subsidized bread.

“Just so you see!” He taps the side of his head, pointing to his eyes demonstrably.

“What can we do?”

I watch their faces.

It is the summer of 2022 and it is hot in Tripoli. The government-supplied electricity barely works—all the talk around the city is of trying to get enough money to purchase generators, and then trying to get enough money to pay for the heavy diesel, *mazut*, to power the generators—so there’s little chance of running even a fan to cool off. It’s worse in the bakery where there *is* generator power (that cuts off frequently), but also the automatic and wood-burning ovens, which heat the tight confines of the den-like insides to unbearable temperatures.

“Flour, sugar, water, yeast, and sweat.” Those are the ingredients of bread during the summer, the bakery workers joke. I taste the bread. Is it a little saltier, or is that just my imagination?

For the past several weeks there have been rumors of a bread crisis in Lebanon. Like most rumors, it’s not clear how they began. It’s also not clear if there actually is a ‘bread crisis.’ It’s clear, however, that there is a problem with the wheat supply to the country. Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine has slowed down, perhaps even stopped, the trade of wheat to Lebanon. Prior to Russia’s invasion, Ukraine supplied well over eighty percent of Lebanon’s wheat supplies (Russia supplied fifteen percent), all of which was

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 45.

transported to Lebanon by ship.² The war has affected not only Lebanon but also other Middle Eastern and African countries that rely on the import of grain from the Black Sea region.

Some weeks ago, the news of a possible wheat, and thus bread, shortage reached the public. People rushed to the bakeries. This was especially the case in poorer cities around the country, such as Tripoli. At al-Furn, people flooded inside the bakery while a misshapen line outside snaked its way around the corner of the block. Al-Furn wasn't the only bakery overwhelmed by the demand. A cursory walk in the morning revealed the location of all the bakeries in the city, marked by crowds of people outside.

It's true that there was a wheat shortage, to certain degree. Tariq told me that the government-subsidized flour that he normally received on a weekly basis at below-market prices had stopped delivering. He told me that instead he had to buy flour on the black-market at increased prices, bake it at al-Furn, and then sell it as bread at the government-subsidized price at a loss. In response, he had cut the hours of the bakery and the amount of bread the bakery made daily. But the point was that there was wheat available, if for a price.

I watched this unfold from al-Furn every day for several weeks. At times, it wasn't clear to me how Tariq had decided the amount of bread to sell on a given day, or even at what price, which fluctuated every couple of days. I knew that he was on his multiple phones frequently, talking with traders and other bakeries about the situation, arguing over prices of goods and their availability. I asked him about his rationale but he offered only platitudes about balancing caring for the people and making a profit. He blamed the Lebanese government for its corruption, but also, sometimes, the United States and Iran for battling for control of Lebanese politics, and the Syrians for eating all the bread. Outside the bakery, people often lingered around its entrance, even after its doors were shut for the day in the afternoon, hoping to get the last bread of the day.

In the last several years, discussions about contemporary politics in Lebanon and Syria have increasingly thematized how people feed themselves. Such attention follows the growing levels of food insecurity in the region, a result of hyperinflation, war, and years of political and economic mismanagement. These factors have had a certain visibility outside of the region insofar as they contribute to the anxieties of other nations—mainly the migration of peoples from unlivable conditions to Europe. Similar fears have also brought increased awareness of the effects of climate change, ecological devastation, and violence against sustainable agricultural production and other means to feed populations. But the attention to food also speaks to ongoing efforts by people on the ground in Lebanon and Syria to understand and transform the pathways by which they have historically received food and will feed themselves amidst uncertain futures.³

This has not escaped the attention of policy analysts and scholars alike. A United Nations report to the UN Security Council in 2023 warned that 12 million people in Syria, over half of the population, was food insecure. Another 2.9 million, the same

² Sunniva Rose, "Lebanon Seeks US Help to Import Wheat from Ukraine Market," *The National*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/03/01/lebanon-seeks-us-help-to-import-wheat-in-move-away-from-ukraine-market/>.

³ The work of the Beirut-based organizations *The Public Source*, a journalist collective, and *Synaps* are exemplary in this regard. See for instance, Yara El Murr, "Warm Winter Woes: How Global Warming is Affecting Local Agriculture and Food," *The Public Source*, May 12, 2023, <https://thepublicsource.org/climate-change-agriculture>.

report details, was at risk of becoming hungry.⁴ In Lebanon, a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Programme (WFP) sponsored food security study cautioned that 2.26 million people were expected to be in food crisis by mid-2023—just over forty percent of Lebanon’s population.⁵ These evaluations were intensified by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which, as we have just seen, slowed trade from one of the world’s most significant exporters of grain and the largest supplier to the Middle East and other parts of the globe.

The effects of the war in Ukraine on food supply to Lebanon and Syria point to the international nature of the issue, a dimension to which the UN has more recently turned its attention. This includes the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, which was meant to “set the stage for global food systems transformation to achieve Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.”⁶ The UN’s attempt to link development, sustainability, and rights to what it calls “food systems” and “food security” speaks to its efforts to embrace a more comprehensive approach to food—an approach that requires a wider, perhaps even alternate, vision of the interconnectedness of people, land, and nations. But even the UN’s own Special Rapporteur on the right to food has pointed to the challenges that existing large-scale, industrial agricultural corporations, war, and climate change pose to such efforts.⁷

The claim of bread as a ‘right’ in the exchange between Tariq and a customer was one I heard often in those days. It was also one that was common at protests in Tripoli. In the 2019 October protests in Tripoli’s Sahat al-Nur, bread was invoked in chants and physically distributed amongst participants as a way of demonstrating national, cross-sectarian solidarity.⁸ Later, as the economic crisis deepened and the value of the lira plummeted, bread as a right was invoked as a metonym for the worsening living conditions. During the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, which disproportionately hurt Tripolites many of whom relied on day-to-day wage labor, protesters against the curfew wrote slogans on bread itself, claiming their right and protest against hunger. Sometimes they simply held a piece of bread up by itself, as if that was sufficient to communicate what they wanted to say.

Back at al-Furn. I am still watching the faces of the people waiting in line for bread to be made. There are two lines, one for women on my right and one for men on my left. They spill into each other. The line with men is almost always longer. Depending on the length of both at a given moment, Tariq tells me to serve three men and one woman, or two men and one woman, or two women and one man, and so on. Some

⁴ Ghada Eltahir Mudawi, “Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian situation in Syria,” *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, May 30, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ms-ghada-eltahir-mudawi-deputy-director-operations-advocacy-division-ocha-behalf-mr-martin-griffiths-usg-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-briefing-security-council-humanitarian-situation-syria>.

⁵ “Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Acute Food Insecurity Analysis,” United Nations, January 19, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132642>.

⁶ “About the Summit,” Food System Summit 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/about>.

⁷ Michael Fakhri, “Seeds, right to life and farmers,” UN General Assembly: Human Rights Council, December 30, 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/397/86/PDF/G2139786.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁸ For one list of some of the slogans chanted, including the mentioning of bread, see Nay el Rahi, “Clashing with the Patriarchy: The Promise of Potential as Politics,” in *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 161.

customers, men and women, protest the arbitrariness of this system, while others wait, expressionless, without saying a word.

As I'm looking at the customers' faces, loaves of steaming white bread drop dutifully onto the table from the rotating conveyer belt above our heads. As if from the dark sky. This bread—flat, circular, hot—is made by the automatic oven, industrial-like. The automatic oven is in the large room just inside, a machinic beast belching thunderous noises. The bread floats in overhead on metal belts from the large room, clouds carried by mechanical winds. Two young boys (both are from countryside of Aleppo) stuff the bread into plastic bags which, on that day, are sold for 15,000 lira a bag [*rabteh*]. The price will change regularly and be the subject of much debate. There is a two-bag limit per person. One of the boys casually grabs the thin pieces as they slide down from above and unceremoniously smashes them onto one another, flattening and counting out the pieces (thirteen per bag that day) before swiftly passing the bundle over to the other youth who opens a plastic bag and puts them inside in one smooth, agile movement.

Often, people want more than the two-bag limit per person, asking for three, four, or as many as six before I tell them there is a maximum. Tariq instated the limit the week before when rumors of the bread crisis caused people to swarm the bakery, demanding more bread than the bakery could make. Even with its tremendous capacity for production, the automatic machine is only able to make bread so quickly, and the limit helps to keep the line moving. Plus, there is only so much flour now.

Tariq knows everyone who buys from him, or at least it seems that way. Sometimes, when a person asks for more bread, he tells me it's his relative, or his childhood friend. Neither alone is a guarantee he will grant them the extra bread, which sometimes seems to depend more on the size of the line and Tariq's mood. Or, sometimes there is an army soldier and Tariq lets them skip the line. "For the service!" Later, Tariq will explain to me how this person, whose request for more bread he refused earlier, has a cousin in Australia who sends them one hundred US dollars a week so they don't need the extra bag, or that that person buys more bread to sell at a higher prices (over double the state-subsidized price) to those who can't be bothered to wait in line. Occasionally, a customer will ask for a bag of broken bread (only 10,000 lira), waiting to the side until enough misshapen pieces of bread collect. Sometimes, someone will simply ask for a single loaf [*raghif*], which Tariq gives for free before shooing them away.

Sometimes customers beg for more. They tell me of someone who is sick at home, who can't work, or of a child who is hungry. It's an awkward and difficult feeling, to hear people explain their lives and intimate problems in front of not only me but also everyone else in line, all in pursuit of an extra bag of bread or two. I wasn't the only person whom people would ask. The stories were directed at whoever was selling bread at that moment. When it happened, I would look to Tariq, standing behind me, and he either nodded yes or shook his head no. Sometimes would he speak directly to them himself, refusing them, as he did at the beginning of this chapter.

The bread crisis of 2022 is the effect—we might call it an event—of a confluence of conditions that have been shifting since 2019 when the Lebanese lira began to lose its value. The bread crisis stands out amongst the myriad of other 'crises' Lebanon has gone through in the last decade but especially since 2019—the electricity crisis, the garbage crisis, the fuel crisis, the cholera crisis, the presidential crisis, and so on—precisely because it is juxtaposed against what the Lebanese political scientist Samer Frangie calls

the “central role that Lebanese cuisine plays in the master narrative of the country.”⁹ According to Frangie, Lebanese cuisine, or “the historical narrative about food and its meanings, came to embody ‘Lebanese personality,’ in its openness and renowned sense of hospitality and attachment to the family.”¹⁰ The economic and social transformations that have taken place since 2019, however, have made the national discourse and what Frangie calls the “national mythology” of its cuisine untenable.

Everything changed in 2019. That year, the flow of US dollars into Lebanon—usually via remittances from the substantial Lebanese ex-patriot diaspora or from foreign deposits into local banks offering unsustainably high interest rates—dried up, leaving the Lebanese government and private traders unable to find the money necessary to purchase wheat from abroad.¹¹ While the Lebanese government held sole right to import wheat prior to 1991, after the civil war it relinquished control over the wheat market. This opened trade to private actors. Traders buying wheat internationally with the help of government subsidies, in turn, sell wheat to private millers, who grind the wheat and sell flour to bakeries, which then sell bread locally at the aforementioned fixed price. There were thirteen private mills in Lebanon prior to 2019.¹² Although Lebanese farmers grow wheat domestically and are also subsidized by the government, they cultivate durum wheat, which is not suitable for Arabic bread. Instead, most of the wheat needed to fulfill the country’s bread needs is imported by private traders and millers.

The ongoing shortage of US dollars in Lebanon, however, and rapidly shifting value of the Lebanese lira meant that the private traders and millers with whom Tariq normally does business demanded that he also pay in dollars (dollars Tariq did not have), or the equivalent to its black-market price. At the same time, Tariq and other bakeries were forced to sell bread at its government-mandated price, cutting their profit margins. Some chose not to and simply closed while they waited the situation out.

Meanwhile, the massive devaluation of the Lebanese lira has meant that the government subsidy program has had to pay Lebanese importers in dollars in order to compete for wheat on the international market, something the Lebanese Central Bank has been, at times, slow to do. In 2022, the shortage of wheat internationally due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the re-routing traders had to perform to get the wheat out of the Black Sea and onto the global markets meant not only that prices were more expensive, but also that traders wanted money up front (the price of wheat depends not on just quality or kind but also the cost of transportation). This was something Lebanese importers said they struggled to do, especially without the Central Bank’s support. Making matters worse was the fact that the Beirut port explosion of 2020 destroyed one of the major wheat stockpiles in the country. Much of the nation’s wheat was now stored in Tripoli’s port, but it was unclear how much the country has on reserve. One month? Two? Three? Rumors abound, however.

⁹ Samer Frangie, “On Food as an Analytic of the System,” *e-flex Journal Issue 138* (September 2023), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/138/553398/on-food-as-an-analytic-of-the-system/>.

¹⁰ Frangie, “On Food.”

¹¹ These policies were inaugurated by Rafik Hariri’s neoliberal reconstruction of postwar Lebanon. See Hannes Baumann, *Citizen Hariri: Lebanon’s Neoliberal Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a longer history of the banking system in Lebanon, particularly in relation to the formation of the nation-state, see Hicham Safieddine, *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹² Marwan Mikhael, “The Lebanese Wheat Market: A Lay of the Land, *BlomInvest Bank*, May 13, 2016.

The Lebanese Economic Minister Amin Salam appealed to other countries for help in securing wheat for the country. According to Salam, the Central Bank considered stepping in and purchasing wheat on its own during 2022, something it had been reticent to do in the past.¹³ But there was also talk of ending the wheat and bread subsidy all together. This is what happened the previous summer when the Lebanese government ended the government subsidy for fuel in 2021, which caused shortages and massive lines at gas stations until the price eventually stabilized at a substantially increased price. People have been struggling to pay for fuel ever since. Privately, Tariq has expressed to me his support for ending the bread subsidy altogether.

Agitation in the bakery. My thoughts break. A team from the Lebanese General Security [*amin al-‘am*] has unexpectedly arrived at al-Furn: there are two young women with official-looking notebooks leading the team, two men wearing bright blue jeans and black vests that say “*ma‘lumat*,” and two armed soldiers in green military uniforms.

The tension is palpable amongst some of al-Furn’s workers, especially the Syrian. Others, however, are unfazed.

“Are they still here,” asks one older Syrian worker with a handlebar mustache, timidly, approaching us from around the corner. Faraj nods and says they are inside. The mustached man scurries away. Faraj isn’t sure what they want at first. No one is, but each is pursued by their own fears.

The General Security team tours the entire bakery but spends an especially long time inspecting the flour sacks piled up against the walls. They go upstairs, downstairs, around the back, in the front. The women scribble down notes. Later I ask one of Tariq’s sons who is working at the bakery that day what they wanted.

“The flour!” he tells me excitedly. “But there’s nothing here, there’s nothing wrong.”

Faraj explains to me later, word also having reached him.

“People take the subsidized flour and sell it on the black market or to Syria via smuggling [*tahrib*]. Or, they take it and make other kinds of things with it, like cakes and cookies that make more money. So I guess they were checking the subsidized flour here.”¹⁴ I ask him how the inspection went. He shrugs his shoulders, indicating he doesn’t know (or isn’t willing to disclose to me) and continues to shovel dough into the oven.

History, French Mandate, Welfare

I heard about the ‘right’ to bread often that summer when bread’s availability was put under pressure. It was clear that by ‘bread,’ people meant cheap, state-subsidized Arabic bread. This was the kind of bread people spoke of in terms of legal entitlement, which is to say, in terms of the law and the state. Despite the common sentiment in Lebanon, “there is no state [*ma fi dawleh*],” such claims to right seemed to invoke the state’s responsibility to its people. The state was clearly still the site of politics, even when people recognized its incapacity. But the invocation of bread as a ‘right’ was also a

¹³ Rose, “Lebanon Seeks,” 2022.

¹⁴ For an ethnographic account of similar bakery inspections in Jordan from the perspective of state inspectors, see Chapter 3 of José Ciro Martinez, *States of Subsistence: The Politics of Bread in Contemporary Jordan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

matter of justice and ethics that invoked a sensibility that extended beyond the conceptual grammar of state policies.

It has been argued that the association between bread and rights in Lebanon is a relatively recent phenomenon, a result of the period during the colonial French Mandate (1920-1946). This is not to suggest that bread was not an important political good in earlier historical moments. Rather, it is to point to the fact that the particular entwinement of state-supported bread and rights was articulated as part of the concrete formation of modern political, economic, and social arrangements in the Mashriq.¹⁵ Most notable was the increasing presence of state power in people's daily lives, especially via interventionist policies directed towards growing the population and economy.¹⁶ In addition to food, these policies often included education and medicine.¹⁷ This was not simply a top-down process. During the French Mandate, Lebanese and Syrians fought to secure the kind of labor and welfare rights at stake in popular struggles in European countries at that same time.¹⁸ Foremost amongst the demands for welfare was access to affordable bread.¹⁹ This can be seen in the numerous protests and demonstrations in both Lebanon and Syria under the banner of bread, especially during World War II.

In fact, World War II marked a crucial turning point for food-related provisions and social policy in the region. To manage the wartime shipping and the distribution of key subsistence goods in the Levant, British authorities established the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC) in 1941.²⁰ This new body organized agricultural production and regulated food distribution, undertaking censuses and surveys to guarantee food provision throughout the region.

Regarding bread specifically, an agency first known as the Wheat Office (later renamed the Cereal Office) working under the auspices of the Spears Mission (a British program designed to cooperate with French Mandate areas in the Middle East), created an integrated system of grain collection, transportation, processing, and distribution in the region.²¹ At the time, Lebanon was still heavily dependent on Syria for its wheat needs. Through the program, General Georges Catroux, leader of the Free French forces in the Levant, attempted to bypass paternalistic intermediaries—employers and landowners—to secure greater direct state contact with poorer citizens, especially peasants. His efforts were undermined by the British minister Edward Spears, who jostled with the French for

¹⁵ To see parallel accounts of this shift in Jordan and Egypt respectively, see Martinez, *States of Subsistence* and Jessica Barnes, *Stable Security: Bread and Wheat in Egypt* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

¹⁶ Broadly speaking, this follows Michel Foucault's account of the rise of biopolitics described in *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1 and his lectures at the Collège de France. For the most sustained work on this approach in Lebanon through the lens of law, property, and religion, see Nada Moumtaz, *God's Property: Islam, Charity, and the Modern State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

¹⁷ For post-WWI Lebanon, see Melanie S. Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017). To see this dynamic at play in Egypt, an adjacent but different context, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Anne Gough and Rami Zurayk, "Bread and Olive Oil: The Agrarian Roots of the Arab Uprising," in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*, ed. Fawaz Gerges (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 107-134.

²⁰ Martin W. Wilmington, *The Middle East Supply Centre* (New York: SUNY Press, 1971).

²¹ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 235.

influence in the area, despite their ostensible alliance. Spears supported several popular Syrian leaders, such as Shakykh Taj and Husni al-Barazi, who argued for national sovereignty over the distribution and price of wheat. What this meant practically, however, was that MESC struck deals with Syrian and Lebanese landowners to collect grain from peasants. The landowners emerged from WWII greatly enriched.²²

The British-backed Syrian leaders played important roles in this process. Shaykh Taj introduced a system of subsidies in the cities. Supporting the subsidies for the poor, al-Barazi explicitly linked bread to rights: “The poorest class will now have the *right* to bread at 10 piasters, sold at all bakeries.”²³ While financing the bread subsidy program and other populist politics eventually ran into problems with landowners and the MESC, a new political landscape had been established. Subsidized bread was a ‘right,’ guaranteed by a new vision of the state. The articulation of this novel discourse had repercussions in Lebanon as well, where hunger marchers demanded bread subsidies like those instituted by Shakykh Taj. Similar protests for bread and other labor and welfare rights took place throughout WWII and its aftermath. Political contestation was now taking place on the ground established by the Mandate era.²⁴

This account follows the historian Elizabeth Thompson’s influential reading of the period. She argues that demands on an emergent political form taking shape globally, the nation-state, became intertwined with a novel discourse of rights in the Mashriq. The introduction of the language of ‘rights’ in the region was also linked with the peculiar mandate nature of France’s colonial rule. The French Mandate was legally under the auspices of the United League of Nations, a crucial tenant of which, following Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, was national self-determination. What ‘national self-determination’ entailed practically, however, was infamously indeterminate, and its actualization took concrete political shape differently across the globe.²⁵

Crucially, Thompson links the calls for bread as a right during WWII with the earlier labor and women’s movements in the Mashriq during the 1920s and 1930s. Both of the latter demanded social rights to education, health, and work, which were governed by civil law under the mandate and thus open to challenge. In doing so, they followed the lead of contemporary developments in 1930s France and Britain, where the terms “welfare state” and “l’état providence” grounded claims for new state intervention in the economy and society.²⁶ Or, as Thompson puts it, “social rights were claimed by these

²² Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 236.

²³ Quoted in Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 236, emphasis in original.

²⁴ Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Steven Heydemann and Robert Vitalis, “War, Keynesianism, and Colonialism: Explaining State-Market Relations in the Postwar Middle East,” in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²⁵ Samuel Moyn has argued that self-determination was the guiding principle for anti-colonial liberation and nationalist struggles of the period. Notably, human rights were not. Moyn argues that human rights, as articulated by the UN Declaration for Human Rights of 1948, were instead mobilized as a part of a politically conservative discourse in the moment. Human rights only became prominent in the second half of the 20th century, when the emancipatory dimension of nationalist self-determination collapsed. This is not to say that a discourse of rights was not prominent at the time, however. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁶ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 167.

groups not as an act of French generosity but as a right that the state was obliged to fulfill for its citizens.”²⁷

Of course, Lebanon and Syria were still under mandate, and thus colonial, rule. State power, in other words, was French. As such, the nature of welfare, particularly the way social services were funded and delivered, was profoundly differently than the way it took shape in Europe. In contrast to metropolitan France where welfare was financed by taxes and contributions from industrialized middle and upper classes, welfare in Lebanon and Syria was paid for by the French High Commission through customs revenues and subsidies from Paris.²⁸ In other words, the fiscal and political arrangement that emerged stemmed from the confrontation between colonial rulers and a population seeking liberation. Welfare itself thus served a different purpose in the Mashriq than in Europe. The colonial welfare state was merely a “stopgap measure designed to forestall demands for independence, not the product of an evolutionary social contract binding state and society and involving a commitment to higher taxes.”²⁹ Importantly, bread was not enshrined as a formal right when the Lebanese constitution was written in 1926.

However, the emergence of political arrangements linking food and social rights was also a response to the famine that took place during World War I in Lebanon and Syria. From 1915-1918, there was what is known locally in Lebanon and Syria as the “war of famine” [*harb al-maja'a*].³⁰ Continuous with the wartime conditions in other parts of the globe, the famine set the stage for the entwinement of rights, welfare, and modern humanitarianism that continues to be relevant in the present.³¹

The factors leading to the famine of WWI in the Mashriq and the death of thousands are many. They include the Allied naval blockade of the coast, locusts that devastated wheat crops in 1915, typhoid, the introduction of paper currency, war-profiteering and financial speculation, the Ottoman military’s conscription of men, food, and other resources, as well as simple mismanagement and corruption.³² Although a series of ‘natural disasters’ precipitated the famine—locusts, drought, plague—historians have been keen to demonstrate that the WWI famine, like other famines historically, was human-made. Grain, wheat, and bread, or the lack thereof, feature prominently in many of these accounts. Lebanon, which was heavily trade dependent at the time, relied on wheat from Syria, especially from the southern Houran region. But the lack of fuel and the redirection of transportation, including trains and mules, to military purposes by Ottoman leadership also meant that the coast and mountains quickly became isolated. Historians dispute the number of the deaths that took place during the famine. Estimates from the time range from 180,000 to 500,000.³³ But the result is that a staggering number of the pre-war population either died or immigrated from the coastal areas.

²⁷ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 155.

²⁸ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 167.

²⁹ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 167. I quote this setting aside Thompson’s commitment, whether philosophical or merely rhetorical, to an evolutionary model of the development of the social contract.

³⁰ Tylor Brand, *Famine Worlds: Life at the Edge of Suffering in Lebanon’s Great War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

³¹ Keith David Watenpugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

³² See Tanielian, *Charity* for an account of the economic and social transformations leading up to WWI precipitating the famine.

³³ Brand, *Famine Worlds*, 42.

Recent academic studies of the famine in the Mashriq and the Eastern Mediterranean during WWI have located it as a catalyst of political and social transformation. Or, as the historian Melanie Tanielian puts it, “this man-made wartime famine opened a space for local, national, and international actors to reshape the wartime and postwar political landscape as they responded to starvation and disease.”³⁴ This included the increase of state intervention in daily life, especially at the level of the body, and the appearance of a certain kind of secular humanitarianism organized around the relief of corporeal suffering. The space of provisioning, whether of bread, education, or medicine, became the space of politics, wherein authority could be gained or lost.³⁵ Indeed, when the British and French entered Beirut at the end of WWI in 1918, their first actions were to lower the Arab nationalist flag of King Faisal and to ask the French war ministry for food to “alleviate the ‘horrors’ of the famine.”³⁶ This recognition of state-supported welfare as a ground of political contestation is consistent with what we have already seen regarding Mandate Lebanon and Syria, its legacy extending into the early formation of their respective independent nation-states.

The historian Keith David Watenpaugh has argued that the Eastern Mediterranean, and the famine in the Mashriq in particular, played a central role in the concrete emergence ‘secular humanitarianism.’ WWI refocused the impulse that motivated Christian missionaries, particularly in Lebanon, from religious conversion to addressing the bodily and social causes of the suffering that they had witnessed during the war.³⁷ In Watenpaugh’s account, the international missionary and governmental responses to famine, population transfers, and mass death in the Eastern Mediterranean discloses the concrete historical emergence of not only a “problem of humanity” (what Didier Fassin elsewhere calls “humanitarian reason”),³⁸ but also the idea of “problems for humanity.”³⁹ In other words, the very idea of ‘humanity’ was both being conceptualized in new ways, including its place and powers in the world, and motivating novel forms of action. This includes humanitarianism’s complex imbrication with the later emergence of the notion of ‘human rights,’ as articulated both legally, such as in the United Nation’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁴⁰ and philosophically, such as Hannah Arendt’s formulations in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.⁴¹

More critical accounts of humanitarianism and human rights have put such narratives under pressure. So even as the anthropologists Miriam Ticktin and Ilana Feldman observe that “while people may disagree on the source of its power, almost everyone agrees that humanity should be considered sacred,”⁴² Talal Asad suggests that

³⁴ Tanielian, *Charity*, 5.

³⁵ Tanielian, *Charity*, 139.

³⁶ As quoted in Tanielian, *Charity*, 238.

³⁷ Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*, 18.

³⁸ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011).

³⁹ Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*, 97.

⁴⁰ Charles Malik, a Lebanese national from northern Lebanon and educated at missionary school in Tripoli, famously helped draft the UN Declaration of Human Rights. He became chair of the Commission of Human Rights in 1951 after Eleanor Roosevelt’s retirement. Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 71.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1976).

⁴² Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin, *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

the historicist narrative progressively linking humanism (born in the European Renaissance) to humanity (a result of the secularization of Christian humanism that is extended to all) to humanitarianism (humanity's links to positive law in the twentieth century) may not be as it natural as it first appears. In his words:

The story of humanism is not about how the first steps were taken in the creation of a universal humanity—the object of humanitarian law. It is about how medieval literature was viewed from the perspective of the European nineteenth century, how the medieval concept of natural law as divinely inscribed morality was translated into a secular device for relating the plurality of the world's customs to the universality of transcendent law—the accidental to the essential. It is also about how the humanist commitment to skepticism and self-preservation facilitated not only the emergence of the idea of the modern autonomous individual but also of the modern sovereign state confronting and subjugating others within and without.⁴³

Asad points to how this nexus of concepts might be better viewed as an immanent field of potentialities in which existing ideas and the temporalities they enfold were translated and embodied according to morphing power and material arrangements, activating some possibilities while foreclosing others. Put concretely in the context of the Mashriq, welfare, humanitarianism, and rights were part of the shifting economic, political, and discursive landscape during the WWI famine of Lebanon and Syria and its postwar aftermath, a political geography facilitated by the emergence of secularism as a political project and accompanying ideas about the modern autonomous self and the sovereign state.⁴⁴ These conceptual issues continue to structure the conversations about bread, rights, and politics in the present.

Rights, Politics, Secularism and Religious Difference

I have tried to show how the grounds of contestation regarding rights and politics in Lebanon and Syria today are part of an inheritance of a matrix of shifting problematics and sensibilities that took shape during WWI and the French Mandate and were intimately bound up with concurrent transformations of secularity, the autonomous self, and the sovereign state.⁴⁵ This was a process happening globally at the time, one for which analytically, as Saba Mahmood puts it, “the critical issue is not so much to pluralize secularism as to conceptualize its variations in relation to a universalizing project, which, in the postcolonial context, also involves the ongoing subjugation of non-

⁴³ Talal Asad, “Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 397.

⁴⁴ This history is inseparable from the nineteenth century spread of capitalism to the region, including the transformation of life into terms of property, commodities, and debt as part and parcel of the means and mode of production. For an interesting account of this transformation and its articulation alongside the history of the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance, see Elizabeth Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁴⁵ Moumtaz, *God's Property*, provides strong evidence for these transformations, especially in a legal grammar. See also Maya Mikdashi, *Sextarianism: Sovereignty, Secularism, and the State in Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

Western societies to various forms of Western domination.”⁴⁶ Bread, as we have seen, features as a concrete object within this normative field of contestation and transformation in the Mashriq. We can hear the afterlives of those disputations circulating and mobilized in contemporary political conversations, even as they are modified and redeployed to address current problems. This includes what we might describe as the reactivation of a certain kind of political discourse under authoritarian regimes in Syria and other parts of the region during the 2011 popular protests, as well as similar debates initiated by the 2019 uprising and economic collapse in Lebanon. Rights, including its concrete appearance in bread, condense competing histories, sensibilities, and politics whose powers can be released depending on its conditions of articulation.

It has been noted, however, that slogans in the early 2011 protests in Syria did not reference bread or economic deprivation like they were invoked in Egypt’s demonstrations at the same time or later in Lebanon in 2019. This is the case even though bread clearly became part of the political calculus in Syria during subsequent years as the protests morphed into war.⁴⁷ Instead, the first protests often took place under the banner of *karama*. *Karama* or *karamah*, as it is sometimes pronounced colloquially, is a concept that can be translated as ‘dignity.’ It thus invokes the idea of ‘human dignity’ grounding the UN Declaration of Human Rights (“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”), but also has theological and racial valences.⁴⁸

Let us turn to the account of one self-described Syrian revolutionary, Reem, who was active during Syria’s protests and war against the government before fleeing to Tripoli. I met Reem through a network of refugee Syrian activists in Tripoli. These activists were from all over Syria and at the time were in Lebanon. Many later found refuge Europe through resettlement programs. Like Reem, they described themselves as revolutionaries [*thuwwar*] and had been involved in the political mobilization against the Syrian government in various capacities, including as journalists, media activists, and armed militants. In Lebanon, they helped organize and run workshops in support of Syrians in Tripoli and elsewhere in the country. I spoke to Reem about her experience with the Syrian revolution while the popular protests in Tripoli of 2019 were taking place only minutes away from where we were sitting in an outdoor cafe.

Reem describes ‘right’ [*haqq*] as part of a nexus of corresponding political and philosophic terms, including ‘being,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘voice.’ Reem, a woman in her thirties, tells me she knew little of politics before 2011. In fact, she says that Syrians in general did not know what politics were prior to the 2011 revolution. Politics [*siyaseh*], was foreclosed by political violence. This is a point she makes several times.⁴⁹

“We only knew the president [Bashar al-Assad] and the regime—we knew nothing about constitutions, about laws, rights, etc. We never discussed politics, never followed it.”

⁴⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in the Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10.

⁴⁷ José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, “Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War,” *International Political Sociology* 11 (2017): 130-147.

⁴⁸ Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 194; Asad, “Reflections on Violence,” 399.

⁴⁹ For more on this point, see Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory, and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially Chapter 1 and 4.

During the first protest she attended in her home city of Homs in 2011, Reem says she felt strangely at ease. “I felt as if something inside of me was released. It’s as if someone is in chains and they lose them.”

So it was a type of freedom?

“Yes, exactly. This is what I mean by freedom [*hurriyya*]. I felt like I finally existed [*hassayt innu kuntu mawjud akhirin*]. What kind of life is it if all you do is work and go home? It’s the life of an animal, not a human. That’s exactly the type of life we Syrians were living—we just ate and went to work. We did not exist.”

I inquire about Reem’s use of the word *mawjud*. It’s a word that she has said with emphasis several times. The term *mawjud* means ‘existing’ or ‘being present.’ It and its semantic family relation, *wujud*, meaning ‘existence’ or ‘presence,’ are also philosophic concepts, and have been used in a variety of theoretical and theological systems. Ibn Arabi, for instance, wrote extensively about what he called *wahdat al-wujud*, or the ‘oneness of being,’ to describe the radical singularity of divine truth in Islam. Some scholars of Islam, such as Toshihiko Izutsu who read Ibn Arabi closely, have argued for *wujud*’s centrality in Islamic philosophy.⁵⁰ But Reem means something specific.

“*Mawjud* means being human. We weren’t human, we were animals. That’s why I refuse the language of those who say they wish they could return to Syria and live the way it was before the war. My sister, who’s in Germany with her children now, just posted pictures [on Facebook] of children in school in Syria before the revolution out of nostalgia.” It is the first week of classes for school in Tripoli and in Syria.

Reem makes a face. “I told her what are you nostalgic for? You want your children to go to school where they cannot speak, where they do not have a voice [*sawt*]? I am against these words.”

She says this forcefully with a conviction that is striking. She takes a long drag of her cigarette while I write in my notebook.

In her narrative of coming into existence [*wujud*] by means of her voice [*sawt*], Reem’s account resembles what Hannah Arendt calls the ‘second birth’ into the ‘meaningfulness of humanity.’ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes a specifically human world woven together by what she calls ‘speech’ and ‘action’—a world peopled by human life in distinction from animals and other non-human life.⁵¹ This ‘web’ of human relationships is an intersubjective realm—a ‘subjective in-between’—characterized by equality and plurality in which humans disclose themselves in their particularity and achieve a kind of spiritual permanence over the finitude of biological life.

Crucially, this human world, what Arendt also calls the ‘*polis*’ or the ‘public realm’ following the ancient Greeks, is not bound by the necessity of the body. The *polis* transcends biological need. A life compelled by biological necessity in contrast—one characterized by her account of ‘labor’ in contradistinction to ‘work’ and ‘action’ (the polemic against Marx is clear)—is fleeting, evanescent. As such, it is more akin to animal life, or what she calls, again following the ancient Greeks, the ‘bareness of life’ [*zoe*].

One possible way of understanding Reem’s account of the discovery of her voice [*sawt*], then, would be as the transition from a merely biological life—what Reem

⁵⁰ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

described as ‘the life of an animal’ [*hayat al-hayawan*]⁵²—to what Arendt calls the ‘worldliness of human life,’ or the transition from *zoe* to *bios*. For Arendt, this specifically human life is “life in a non-biological sense,” that is to say, life unmoored from the necessities of the body.⁵² Instead, it is “the span of time man has between birth and death, manifest[ed] in action and speech,” a period that, through its plurality and distinction, retains the possibility of overcoming biological needs and thus finitude. Put differently, one is not necessarily born human—one *becomes human*, hence the idea of a “second birth.”⁵³

In Reem’s own words, her voice [*sawt*] led to her insertion into the world of the human and politics, a ‘second birth’ or what she called “being present” [*mawjud*]. Indeed, this kind of natal or vitalist language is also what other Syrian activists have used to describe the feeling of participating in the early protests in Syria for first time: “I felt I was alive for the first time in my life.”⁵⁴ It is perhaps because of this that *karama*, or dignity, was at stake in those early protests, and not bread, which, from a certain approach, is aligned with biological need and thus merely animal life.

From a historicist perspective, it is perhaps unsurprising that Arendt’s philosophy resonates with what I heard from Syrian activists in Tripoli and elsewhere. Arrested along with her mother in the waning days of the Weimar Republic and amidst the rise of the Nazi party and anti-Semitism, Arendt’s writing has been noted for its acuity and sensitivity to the pathos of living under an authoritarian regime. That the Ba‘th Party has a socialist legacy, including a hollowed-out welfare state, of which Arendt was also deeply suspicious, makes the echoes between the comparisons even more incisive. Perhaps we can understand Reem’s investment in telling her story, a narration she insists upon repeating to others (including me, the foreign anthropologist) as that which keeps her woven into the intersubjective world of speech and action. It is that which maintains her humanity and sustains the presence of her beingness. It is, as she says, her ‘duty’ [*wajib*].

“When I organize meetings [in Lebanon],” she says to me, “I tell other Syrians, especially women, that *their voice is their right*.”

In considering this linkage of ‘right’ and ‘voice,’ it is useful to think again with Arendt. In the chapter “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt famously critiques the paradigm of human rights by scrutinizing the concept of the ‘human’ subtending its basis as the legitimating source of natural rights. Why, Arendt asks, does the human have rights, simply on account of its being human? What kind of rights are these?

Arendt notes a historical novelty about the plight of refugees, the ostensible bearers of human rights, in the mid-twentieth century: “We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights...and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global situation.” At that moment, it was discovered that a human who loses its political status, one who, according to the natural rights of man, should come under exactly the situation for which the declaration of human rights

⁵² Arendt, *Human Condition*, 173.

⁵³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176.

⁵⁴ See also the accounts given in Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2017), especially the section “Revolution.”

provided, in fact, “loses the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man.”⁵⁵ Thus, Arendt concludes, “only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with the expulsion from humanity altogether.”⁵⁶

Put differently, it is only once ‘humanity’ is conceivable as a subject, a kind of collective agent and object of care, that the right to rights becomes thinkable. We might, in turn, link the historical condition that Arendt addresses to Watenpaugh’s and Tanelian’s respective arguments about the centrality of former Ottoman territories to the concrete appearance of this political philosophy. That is, the emergence of humanitarianism, and thus ‘humanitarian reason,’ as part of the international response to the famine in the Mashriq and other catastrophes during WWI is linked to the very thinkability of human rights. But it might be more productively thought in terms of the normative project of secularism that Saba Mahmood described earlier, as we’ll soon see.

Arendt’s admittedly idiosyncratic assessment of human rights thus provides analysis for one possible way of thinking about Reem’s usage of the concept ‘right.’ Arendt points to how the loss of one’s world, which in the historical context meant the expulsion from a national community and transformation into a refugee, exposes that the right to rights is not grounded in the bareness of human life—animal life, or life characterized by biological necessity (*zoe*)—but in belonging to a *polis*. The destruction of the world and one’s standing as part of the *polis* means the loss of rights as such, including the capacity to be recognized as human by others. Reem’s insistence on maintaining her voice and her attempts to cultivate and unveil the voice of others, then, could be understood as the part of what Arendt calls ‘action’—the activity necessarily to maintain a fragile world always on the brink of destruction.

Another way of understanding Reem’s appeal to ‘rights,’ however, is as a biopolitical subject of rights. Under such a framework, rights are *technologies* that capacitate the subject on the basis of a cosmopolitan order, one that, in this instance, is not limited to either the Syrian or Lebanese government. This would help account for bread’s role in the discourse of international development and humanitarianism, one that interpolates humanity itself as an already governed subject. Bread is given to Syrian refugees by international organizations as a kind of technology that manages and develops the population—a discourse that attempts to make refugees economically useful (i.e. increases their human capital by making them effective workers) to their host country. But also, thinking along with Reem, right [*haqq*] qua voice [*sawt*] would also be at kind of technology, one that increases one’s power to exist. Right, understood in this approach, augments life and productive activity.

In the context of Lebanon’s October protests of 2019, which had a distinctly nationalist dimension, such international aid and networks had different associations, however. Rather than function as part of a cosmopolitan project of increasing one’s rights and activity as a member of humanity, aid had the effect of making the protests “political”—“political” here understood as sectarian. In Tripoli, the early demonstrations were lauded across the country because they understood as non-sectarian, even though Tripoli is widely understood in the country to be socially and politically conservative and pro-Sunni. The city was nicknamed ‘*arus al-thawra* [“the bride of the revolution”], and

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Origins*, 300.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *Origins*, 297.

protestors in Tripoli raised banners saying “O Hussein” to indicate their solidarity with Shiite protestors elsewhere in the country.⁵⁷ However, there were also accusations that outside funding entered the protests, shifting the choruses and redirecting the protests to new aims. This included support from international organizations that provided training in “leadership” and “organizing,” and funding for water, food, and tents. In other words, the political organizations were similar to those that supported Reem, but, in the context of the Lebanese protests, reinforced a system of mutual distrust and political stagnation—a legacy of foreign intervention and Western hegemony. They effectively, in the words of one Tripolite activist, “politicized the revolution,” shifting the grammar from one kind of politics to another. This contrasts with how food at the protests was, for some activists in Tripoli, a site of political activism. It was, in the words of one activist who set up tents to cook for protesters at Sahat al-Nur, a “political act...to create a sense of solidarity.”⁵⁸

Regardless of how one understands the political philosophy of rights, we see how it has become the basis of political contestation in a variety of projects (constitutional, protests, revolution, activist organizing). This is to say that even while rights, and correspondingly, the word for ‘right’ in Arabic, *al-haqq* [singular] and *al-huquq* [plural], might be contested with an eye towards achieving certain ends, they still constitute the very ground of politics. This is the case even when, genealogically, the concept condenses other histories, temporalities, and possibilities.⁵⁹

Scholars of secularism have shown this prioritization of rights and the law to be the result of a historical process that has altered the very sense and conceptualization of politics—transformations that operate at the level of a form of life.⁶⁰ Just as importantly, it focalizes the subject of rights; subjectivity is morphed into an autonomous, active self-grounded by her will, one characterized by an interiorized self-willed agency.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Khalil Fadl Osman, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in the Tripoli Protests in Lebanon,” *Protest* 2, (2022): 29-54.

⁵⁸ Tamim Abdo, “Reconstructing the Uprising in Tripoli: The Revolution that Never Left the Square,” in *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*, ed. Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 287.

⁵⁹ Samera Esmeir has shown how legal writings in late 19th century Egypt demonstrate the ambiguous historicity of the word *al-haqq*. In the Egyptian journal *al-Huquq* from 1886, the author Amin Shmayyil describes a kind of right not articulated in accordance with positive jurisprudence—as in the colonial, European tradition—but rather in terms of natural law. Right, according to Shmayyil’s analysis, belongs to the order of creation and the Creator. Human beings are not its author. Instead, it works according to eternal *nomoi* [laws] that function as a unity, immanently pointing to a divine outside. These eternal laws are natural and have a cosmological dimension. As Esmeir puts it, “the fixity of law, then, mirrors the fixity of *nomos* and of the cosmos as authored by the Creator.” From this follows the cyclical movement of time that repeats, with variations, past imprints according to these natural laws. Right, as subject to this kind of law, points to a different philosophy of history and cosmology. Esmeir notes that when the same legal journal published about rights in subsequent years, however, it did so as part of a discourse of positive law—a tradition of legal code that grounds its authority in the present, without reference to an outside. This is part of a shift in discourse and sensibility to secularism, one that presumes an autonomous self as grounded by the will as the subject to right. *Juridical Humanity: A Colonial History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 25-31.

⁶⁰ “In a modern state, laws are enacted not simply to commend obedience and to maintain justice, but to enable or disable its population...It is more than merely an instrument...In the modern state, law is an element in political strategies—especially for destroying old options and creating new ones.” Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 335.

⁶¹ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 72. For an account of the transformations of subjectivity on a juridical

Secularization, in other words, doesn't simply alter the understanding of religion; "it also—and more significantly—transforms the idea of politics that is framed by the sovereign state's claim to be based on territorial exclusivity and equally distributed rights."⁶² This chapter has tried thus far to demonstrate how this includes the history of right's concrete linkages with bread in the Mashriq.

Such an approach has profound implications for a polity like Lebanon whose politics are structured by religious difference, most notably sectarianism. Secularism, understood in this way, has an inescapable character that emanates, in part, from the structure of the modern state, which promises to diminish religious hierarchies in order to create a body politic in which all members are equal before the law. As Mahmood has argued, the modern state and its political rationality have played a decisive role in transforming preexisting religious differences, producing new forms of polarization, and making religion more rather than less salient.⁶³ In other words, both the cross-sectarian expressions of the early protests in Tripoli and the "politicized" aftermath in which sectarian difference intensified operate in a field of possibilities structured by the secular state and the kinds of religious difference it make possible. This, in turn, is intimately related to the modern secular state's power to regulate sexual difference, a formation in Lebanon Maya Mikdashi, thinking critically about sectarianism, calls "sextarianism."⁶⁴ Claims to right as that which produces equality and augments life, whether in Tripoli's protests or at the bakery as in the opening of this chapter, operate within this field.⁶⁵

In fact, the word in Arabic for 'right'—*haqq*—is a difficult word to translate, partly because it already capaciously spans several registers. As a noun, the word can mean 'truth,' 'reality,' 'rightness,' 'appropriateness,' 'worthiness,' 'right,' 'responsibility;' the choice of an equivalent in translation often has more to do with its English usage than the Arabic meaning. As the scholar of Islam William Chittick tells us,

level in the context of changing ideas of property and state power in Lebanon, see Nada Moumtaz, *God's Property*, particularly Chapter 3.

⁶² Asad, *Secular Translations*, 18.

⁶³ "I suggest that secularism entails a form of natural-political structuration organized around the problem of religious difference, a problem whose resolution takes strikingly similar forms across geographic contexts." Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 10.

⁶⁴ See Mikdashi, *Sextarianism*. We might think of Mikdashi's argument of about secularism, sectarianism, and sexual difference in the context of the Lebanese state as an addendum to Saba Mahmood's argument about sovereignty and religious difference in the context of Egypt, where, as Ussama Makdisi points out in his review of Mahmood's book, religious difference is not so easily parsed in terms of majority and minority identities. See Ussama Makdisi, "The Limits of Anti-Secularist Critique," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 17 (2016): 77-79.

⁶⁵ Notably, Ussama Makdisi has critiqued this narrative, particularly the accounts of secularism given by Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood. He argues in favor what he calls an "ecumenical frame" to describe "the shared sense of the universal, transcendent ideal of a modern political community in which explicit religious differentiation was transformed from being a marker of imperial culture to being a crucial aspect of national culture" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Mashriq. Scholarly disputations aside, I find his efforts to shed light on this period and normative aims of such an ecumenical project helpful, if also organized by a different disciplinary trajectory, conceptual assumptions, and set of purposes. I also find Makdisi's use of the concept "ecumenical," which derives from the Greek *oikoumene* meaning "the whole of the inhabited earth," insightful insofar as it foregrounds the links to a series of etymologically and semantically related concepts including 'economy,' 'home,' 'habit,' and 'ethics.' *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 7.

“it is difficult to say in any given case that the word does not have all these senses.”⁶⁶

In the context of Islamic theology, the word is especially charged. Chittick adds: “One can also say that the central issue in Islamic learning is *huquq*—the plural of *haqq*. Thus we have *huquq allah* and *huquq al-insan*, often translated (especially in modern political discourse) as ‘divine rights’ and ‘human rights.’”⁶⁷ In this way, the word is often used in everyday language. To refer to someone’s right colloquially or, ‘*haqqk*,’ for instance, is a common expression indicating what is owed to that person. But it also speaks to a register of the real (an outside) that is difficult to understand and in which destruction, violence, and finitude play opaque and ambivalent roles. When and how the valences of the latter burst forth is not always clear. But, as Talal Asad has noted, the efficacy of that very capaciousness at a given moment is a question of authority and power and the material arrangements that capacitate it.

Famine, “When Mother’s Ate Their Children,” Nightmares

On this note, I want to return to the recent research on the Lebanese and Syrian famine of WWI, the moment understood as catalyzing the subsequent association between bread and rights (among other transformations, as we have noted) in the Mashriq. Notably, these historical studies begin by observing the silence of the archives, or the relative absence of institutional accounts of the period. This archival silence, in turn, suggests to the historians the period’s very importance for both the French Mandate and the Lebanese national independence that followed.⁶⁸ In the recent studies, the famine is described as “traumatic”—a lingering memory haunting the emergent discourse of rights and the secular state. Because of the silence of the traditional historicist archive, such studies instead turn to forms of social memory, such as memoirs, novels, plays, poetry, and *zajal* (vernacular poetry) for sources.⁶⁹

The use of the language of trauma indicates a kind of sensitivity to the famine and its representations. For instance, the ‘traumatic’ nature of these representations has led some scholars to say that they did not publish certain images because of their status as “disaster porno” or being “canned.”⁷⁰ At the time, images—photographs, mostly—of suffering were used by the Lebanese diaspora to marshal sympathy and aid to the region. Later, the French would use similar images to justify their mandate rule.⁷¹ While there are many justifiable reasons for the reticence to reproduce such images today, I also hear a hesitation to locate Arabs in an Orientalist ‘suffering slot,’ an apprehension that includes the fetishization of violence. However, I would suggest that such hesitation is also a tacit acknowledgement of the images’ rhetorical and transgressive force, even in the present—a disavowal not unlike the archival silence.

⁶⁶ William Chittick, *Ibn Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (New York: One World Publications, 2005), 79.

⁶⁷ Chittick, *Ibn Arabi*, 83.

⁶⁸ Tanielian, for instance, bookends her book with a story of the transformation of the national monument originally commissioned in 1952 commemorating the Lebanese experience of WWI from a statue of two women mourning the loss of those perished in the war to one of male martyrdom in 1960 upon public and political demand. Elizabeth Thompson also notes this change, especially from a gendered perspective.

⁶⁹ Najwa al-Qattan, “When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon,” *Int. J. Middle East Stud* 46 (2014): 719-736.

⁷⁰ Brand, *Famine Worlds*, 115; Frangie, “On Food.”

⁷¹ Tanielian, *Charity*, 245-48.

My interest in these studies is not to re-describe or narrate the famine differently, what the recent historical studies have already done from a variety of analytic frameworks. Instead, what intrigues me is not only that the famine is colloquially referred to as a time when the world was turned upside down and social relations disorientated, but also how those very tropes and images are mobilized to achieve a certain rhetorical and psychic effect. Thus, when the period is described as a nightmare, recorded not in official records but exemplified vernacularly by the description, “It was a time when mothers ate their children...”⁷², there is a kind of wounding force attributed to the image, even as one attempts to ward it off apotropaically by refusing to reproduce it.

The images of the famine that emerge from the diverse materials collected by historians are striking. Antun Yamin’s eyewitness account *lubnan fi al-harb* [Lebanon during the War], published just after the war in 1919, provides a representative close-up. In a section entitled “Stories That Would Shake Rocks,” he presents a series of captivating (horrifying) images that intensify in their augmenting power:

By the Sanayi’ School, two children picked sesame seeds from piles of excrement; in Harat Huraïq, men, women, and children competed to rob an anthill of grain; in the village of Bait Shabab, a child by the name of Nasri Sa’id Murad Ghibril stole seeds from ants near the church; in Hadath, a young man died after gorging himself on lemon peels; in Riyaq, after the Germans had disposed of a horse which had died of some disease—so foul that even the wolves were repulsed—a group of forty people ate the carcass from head to hoof and died from that disease; in Damur, Kattar Shahdan al-Salafani ate three human corpses; in Mitn, Helena bint Salibi ‘Abd ate the corpse of her nephew, Najib Salibi ‘Abd. And she was not the only one who ate a corpse. In Tripoli, four women cannibalized four children.⁷³

The rhetorical display of these diverse images, without explicit connection in space or time, is revealing. Every independent clause summons a concrete scene, as if, like its syntactical structure, it is sufficient in itself. And yet they are linked, grammatically and thematically in a series. Each section contains an image of a world distorted but, importantly, without need of explanation. Excrement turns into sustenance; men, women, and children, atomized and bestialized, compete with ants; and, not merely cannibalism, but maternal care itself metamorphosed in a deadly, ingestive reversal. The concatenation of images, the sense of both variety and endlessness, produces for the reader a sense of ubiquity and being overwhelmed. But the writing also presupposes a normalcy from which such deviations occur. In other words, the transgressive quality, which is to say the violence of the images (violence not only *in* the image but also violence the image does *to* the reader), is crucial to its force.

One wonders if this rhetorical style is mobilized because the writer—witness to disaster—senses that language might fail its mimetic function. In other words, the world from which Yamin writes has already been overturned, threatening his trust in language’s mimetic powers. In fact, reports from the famine suggest that language itself was already infected. One writer from the time says, “People become superstitious about words that begin with the letter “J”: *al-jarad* (locusts); *al-ju’* (hunger); *al-jaysh* (the army); Jamal

⁷² Al-Qattan, “When Mothers,” 719.

⁷³ As quoted in al-Qattan, “When Mothers,” 720.

Pasha; *al-jur* (oppression); *al-jarab* (scabies); *jinayat* (tribunal); even *jardon* (rat), although rats went hungry as well.”⁷⁴ The very relations between letters and their semantic associations were reorganized by the force of violence.

Notably, bread features prominently as part of the tropic configuration. In his biography, the Syrian ‘Abd al-Ghani al-‘Itri writes that “they call this period...when people dreamed of bread.”⁷⁵ The famine transformed neighborhood bakeries from sites of exchange for the living into an economy of the dead. It was said, “infants, having slipped unnoticed from their mothers’ bread-battling—and at times murderous—arms, were trampled to death and where women often suffered miscarriages, or worse, traded with the corpses of their own children.”⁷⁶ The logic of convertibility is clear: dreams are of bread, not people, while one eats people, not bread.

In his postwar story, “The Tale of the Coin,” Bishara al-Khuri captures a salient theme from these memories and stories. Al-Khuri alters the prostitution-for-bread trope—clearly already a feature of the social archive by then—when he writes an imaginary account of a young mother (whose husband had been conscripted) selling her body for a coin in order to save her sickly infant daughter. The coin turns out to be counterfeit, and thus *is not what it appears*. Al-Khuri’s story plays on a trope used by non-fictional memoirs (‘women sell themselves and others to eat’) to convey what the memoirs attempted to communicate when they grounded their authorial voice in the veracity of witnessing: that the famine was a time when nothing was as it seemed, when reality became fake, and when relations between objects, meanings, and people were disfigured and reversed, producing a kind of vertigo. The gendered elements of this metamorphic scheme are blatant. One poem describes a woman, “whose exposed thighs/ between them hold a loaf of bread.” Here, there is an inverted image of the theme “when mothers ate their children,” but one that still operates under the generativity of its structural logic.

The question of whether such events actually took place thus misses the point. Instead, we see the emergence of a kind of collective mythology in which specific tropic patterns and logics of figuration take concrete shape in various genres. The famine was a time of rupture, of dreams and nightmares, of shadows and unreality—we might even say, somewhat tendentially, it was a time of images.

Curiously, the historian Najwa al-Qattan notes that many of the memoirs present themselves as containing “a lesson and a memory” [*ibra wa dhikra*]. The Arabic word for ‘lesson’, *ibra*, is a suggestive one. Semantically, it is close to the verb ‘abara, which means ‘to pass,’ ‘to cross a bridge,’ ‘to get over river, a ford.’ The lesson, the *ibra*, crosses over from the giver to the recipient, from teacher to student. This analogy has many permutations. For instance, at the start of a story, the narrator and the listener are on two different banks of a river—when there is a crossing over “their meeting is marked by incomprehension, even hostility, and then a reconciliation, a junction gradually comes to pass”—this is an *ibra*.⁷⁷ Something is transmitted or carried across that touches the

⁷⁴ Quoted in Najwa al-Qattan, “Fragments of Wartime Memories from Syria and Lebanon,” in *Syria in World War I: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. M. Talha Çiçek (New York: Routledge, 2016): 113.

⁷⁵ Quoted in al-Qattan, “When Mothers,” 726.

⁷⁶ Al-Qattan, “When Mothers,” 728.

⁷⁷ Abdelfattah Kilito, “The Eye and the Needle,” in *The Arabian Nights: Norton Critical Editions*, trans. Husain Haddawy and ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 500.

listener and the speaker; a kind of bridge is made. But it can also mean that listener herself crosses over, displaced from one's ordinary position and thrust into a new one.

The literary critic AbdelFattah Kilito writes that such edificatory lessons, '*ibra*', play a significant role in the tradition of Arabic poetics, particularly with regard to the trope of ruin. In this poetic tradition, '*ibra*' points to the world as made up of a trace-structure, a recursive site of destruction that must be observed and learned.⁷⁸ '*Ibra*', understood in this sense, displaces the coordinates of the real, including the status of life and death, by pulling the listener outside of themselves, immanently gesturing towards the difficulty of another reality.⁷⁹ '*Ibra*' is thus the effect produced, one that can open the path to reflection. But it is not a path traversed, as Kilito cautions in his reading of the use of '*ibra*' in *The Thousand and One Nights*, without blindness and pain.

What I find revealing about the invocation of lesson ['*ibra*'] and memory [*dhikra*] in memoirs about the famine is how it locates the writings of historical events on the limit of another genre: no longer simply history, as the historians attempt to grasp them, but also storytelling and myth. The memoirs suggest that they are not designed to simply convey mimesis, but also to produce a transformational effect on the listener (an '*ibra*'), one that points to a different kind of outside. It does so by using a rhetorical style and figurative logic—one akin to a dreamwork—that pulls the reader outside of herself by making the reader cross over, thus transforming the very terms of engagement.

By carefully following the work of the historians, we see how we have left the temporality of historicism and entered that of memory, stories, and dreams. The famine, according to these historians, was of another time—the psychic temporality of trauma, fracture, and memory, in all their opacity. What if the association between bread and rights with which we began this chapter were also seen as part of this latter regime of thought? That is, what if we stayed with the logic emerging from the historians' sources of the famine—one that operates at the level of images and '*ibra wa dhikra*', 'a lesson and a memory'—to think about bread and rights? Rather than suppress this logic entirely in favor of the historicist account of the link between bread and right—that is, as solely the result of willing, agentive historical subjects, colonial and colonized, emerging progressively from the famine to the French Mandate to national independence—what if we also understood bread qua right as charged by the unconscious force of something like a dreamwork?

Bread as Symbol, Dreamwork, Nachleben

Let us summarize. First, we have seen how it has been argued by historians that the articulation of bread alongside right in the Mashriq was part of the postwar response to the famine of WWI during the French Mandate and rise of the modern nation state. We have also seen how the circulation, mobilization, and transformation of rights, law, and state power during that same period were part of a normative project involving shifting sensibilities, grammars, and material conditions that have had profound consequences on the very concepts of self and politics, including how they are embodied, felt, and lived

⁷⁸ Maha AbdelMageed, *Literary Optics: Staging the Collective in the Nahda* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2024).

⁷⁹ I take the expression "the difficulty of reality" from the philosopher Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1 (2003): 1-26.

(indeed, the body was a key site for such transformations). Such consequences of what scholars call secularism extend into the present, forming the grounds for politics that take place today, whether in Syria and Lebanon. We have seen how such a process of secularization also entailed the transformation of right itself, foreclosing other modalities of right (such as natural right) and the forms of life they enable. These modalities of right presume alternative subjectivities and horizons of expectation, including the grounding in a heteronomous relation to the outside, such as the divine.

Second, and rather curiously, we have looked at how the recent historical work on the famine of WWI points us to the idea that the association of bread and right might also be charged by a relation to a kind of outside, insofar as ‘the famine’ operates at the level of memories, images, and lessons. That is, the famine itself served as an event of ruin or exposure, hence its appearance as part of the non-historicist temporality of memory and image. Put differently, the famine’s non-historicist dimensions suggest that the right to which bread is linked might also be non-secular. This points to other modalities of right and the law present in the contemporary invocation of bread as right, *al-haqq*. It also suggests that bread might be thought productively at the level of images, memory, and form—a realm that operates, as we have seen with the famine, according to a temporality distinct from historicism and secularism. Such an approach might serve to displace not only politics, conventionally understood, but also the forms of subjectivity and territorially bound sovereign state according to which politics operate.

Here we might follow the lead of Georges Didi-Huberman, who in his study of the German art historian Aby Warburg, describes such a temporality, one adjacent to historicist time and that operates at the level of form and memory.⁸⁰ We can call this alternative temporality a kind of ‘counter-history.’ Or, as Didi-Huberman puts it:

Warburg substituted what might be termed a phantasmal model of history in which temporal periods are no longer fashioned according to the academic transmission of knowledge, but are expressed, rather, by hauntings, survivals, residues, and the persistent return of forms—that is to say, by notions that do not constitute knowledge, that are unthought, and by unconscious aspects of time.⁸¹

This counter-history is characterized by what Freud calls in German *Nachleben*, “after-life,” or what Didi-Huberman calls above “hauntings, survivals, residues...the persistent return of forms.” In Freud’s view, a symptom, or the result of a psychic infraction that is released in the temporality of *Nachleben*, acts in a similar way as forms according to Warburg. They produce constantly new and surprising ensemble of vital residues of memory—a crystallization or a formula expressing a survival. In this nexus of thought, there is a link between memory, symptom, and symbol.

Freud saw this clearly in his article, “A Connection Between a Symbol and a Symptom.”⁸² In it, Freud describes how a symbol, ordinarily understood, becomes a symptom the moment it changes place sufficiently (it is *displaced*) to lose its original

⁸⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

⁸¹ Didi-Huberman, *Surviving Image*, 12.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, “A Connection Between a Symbol and a Symptom,” in *Symbolization: Representation and Communication* ed. James Rose (London: Routledge, 2007).

identity; when the symbol proliferates to the point of smothering its meaning, transgressing the limits of its own semiotic field. A symptom is affectively intensified, capable of ‘contradictory simultaneity,’ of displacement and, therefore, of dissimulation. Put differently, the symptom changes place: it migrates—*it crosses over*—and metamorphizes. As such, it is a survival, a memory-bearing formation.

Might bread be not merely a symbol, conventionally understood, but also a symptom, understood in this fashion? Or, more precisely put, might bread’s figurative plasticity result from an infraction that takes novel shape with every articulation? Instead of simply meaning ‘rights’ or ‘justice,’ bread might point to something else—a psychic wound that must be warded off, thus producing novel variations. If so, then at certain moments bread qua symptom might disclose the gesture of a counter-effect that *remembers*, in the body of bread, an entirely different temporality—one that opens different social, political, and existential possibilities. Is this not what was already noted by the historians when they marked the shift from history to dreams, from academic archives to the ambivalent temporality of memory?

Memory thus engages with and demonstrates the limits of history that is marked by famine, war, and colonial conquest. Bakeries like al-Furn reckon with this inheritance. They provide a site through which bread not only responds to the fragility of bodies, upheaval of the world, and possibility of collapse, but are also, like in Ibn Khaldun’s vision of history, a place to observe the unfolding of divine signs, lessons, ‘*ibra*—ones that shift the coordinates of the real.⁸³ But just as importantly, the linkage of memory and food suggests that the discourse of rights—social, political, and human—that emerged in the aftermath of the famine may also be a structural effect of that very exposure to ruin. Rights, then, are not merely the site of genealogy and secular transformation (as in the argument of Asad, reading and adapting the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche), but also charged by the very exposure to an outside. The bakery as the site of bread and right is thus a place where these forces can be released, experienced, and inhabited in their various modalities.

A week later after the scene opening this chapter, I arrive at the bakery early in the morning to work, as usual. Tariq is already at the front desk, dressed nicely with his good shoes. I can tell he won’t be working with us in the back today. Tariq tells me the court [*mahkameh*] is on his mind. He says he has to leave for Canada because he can’t stop thinking about the bakery. It quickly becomes clear why—there is no more flour. It will run out the day after, he tells me.

I sit next to him. Unprompted, Tariq tells me that the inspection from the previous week didn’t go well. The General Security accused him of improperly storing flour and selling it to Syria. As a result, they have stopped his government supply of subsidized flour. He is genuinely worried, I can tell.

I’ve heard similar rumors about al-Furn, that a separate government inspection the month before found a secret storage facility full of flour. They accused the bakery of attempting to monopolize the market for profit. People have been accusing al-Furn and other bakeries and traders of taking advantage of the flour shortage for personal profit.

⁸³ See Book One of Ibn Khaldun’s *The Muqaddimah*.

Tujjar al- azmeh, ‘merchants of crisis,’ they call them—a term that recalls the widespread storing of flour and financial speculation amongst merchants and bakeries that fueled the famine of WWI.⁸⁴ It’s also a term I hear often from Syrians about the economy in Syria. I take my leave from al-Furn after speaking with Tariq’s sister, Hajjeh (she tells me that that people have been spreading rumors about the bakery because they are jealous: “If you have *iman*, if you have faith, God will take care of you,” she insists to me), but return when I remember that I wanted to follow up with Tariq about his description of what he called the ‘life and death of dough’ at the bakery. He waves me off, distractedly.

“Not now man! I have to go to Beirut [to court], there’s too much on my mind. Who cares about that if the bakery cannot be open after tomorrow?”

Meanwhile, flour is not the only kind of smuggling discussed that day at al-Furn. When I go to the back of the bakery to make bread, Hani, a short compact Syrian in his mid-thirties from the countryside of Aleppo, asks me about smuggling [*tahrib*] while we work together. This surprises me because he normally doesn’t talk much and talks to me even less.

“Smuggling across the sea,” he tells me, in laconic fashion, as I pass over hand-plucked pieces of dough for him to roll out. I know immediately that this is human smuggling, migration out of Lebanon and into Europe. Three thousand US dollars, it costs, he says.

To where, I ask?

He shrugs, unconcerned. “I don’t know, Switzerland, Germany, Italy,” he offers hesitatingly, as if he isn’t sure himself.

Isn’t it dangerous, I ask? He shrugs again.

“There are fifteen people per boat,” he tells me, instead of directly answering my question. I’m still confused, unsure of why he brought up the subject to me. I don’t fully understand his responses.

How can you go to Switzerland or Germany by boat if you don’t first stop in Italy, Crete, or Greece, I ask him?

Hani shrugs, “I don’t know.” He flips over the large body of dough on the table next to us to keep it from drying out and pours cheap oil onto it from a used blue plastic bottle, rubbing the oil into the dough cracks with his hands.

From a certain perspective, it’s not that surprising that Hani has *tahrib* on the mind. He’s hardly the only one—Syrian, Lebanese, or Palestinian—who has been contemplating the possibility of late in Tripoli. I’ve heard the talk in the bakery amidst the flow work often. It’s been especially bad for Syrians of late in Lebanon, who have been accused of monopolizing the state-subsidized bread. Many Lebanese will say the bread-subsidy is meant for them, not Syrians, non-citizens. Plus, the Central Bank reserves are low; so many Lebanese are hurting, why should the precious state funds go to support the Syrians? Especially when the UN and other humanitarian aid organizations already support poor Syrians, but not the poor Lebanese.

This rhetoric easily turns violent. My Syrian interlocutors show me videos circulating online of Lebanese cornering and beating Syrians standing in bread lines. The anger is palpable. It’s *unsuriyyeh*, discrimination, the Syrian workers tell me, an injustice, *zulm*, as bad as the subjugation, *qahr*, they faced in Syria. Hundreds, Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinian, have already attempted to leave Tripoli in 2022 by boat,

⁸⁴ See Tanielian, *Charity*, Chapter 3.

spurred by the collapsed economy and continual deterioration of living conditions, only to be stopped by the Lebanese navy or drowned in the process.

One incident in April 2022 involved reports of the Lebanese navy smashing into a boat full of attempted migrants—over twenty members of the same family died. The event was later dubbed *safinat al-mawt*—‘the boat of death.’ Despite such well-publicized events, Hani and others in the city still contemplate the possibility of leaving Tripoli through such means. Take a walk through Mina, the port area next to Tripoli, and one will hear eventually conversations about *tahrib ‘ala bahr*, smuggling across the sea. Hani tells me he knows friends on a smuggling boat from Tripoli who were shot at by the Lebanese navy, killing four of the passengers. But they made it across the sea and are now in Germany. I later asked other workers at the bakery about Hani and they told me that he has been thinking about smuggling for some time, but weren’t sure if he’d actually attempt to do so, or, just as importantly, save up enough money to try.

“There’s death here and there’s death there. So why not try?” one Syrian activist, also thinking of *tahrib* told me.

How might we understand this vision of crossing-over? I want to suggest that *tahrib* in this context discloses engagement with a different kind of limit other than simply the border of the secular sovereign state. Both operations of *tahrib* mentioned here—the smuggling over state borders of flour and migrants—appear to involve a predominantly spatial understanding of limits. That is, the crossing-over at stake in both is of a kind of geographic imaginary, constituted by sovereign law and a territorially bound state—what we said earlier is an effect of transformations wrought by the normative project of secularism. Such a geographic imaginary presumes the outside of the border as a spatialized being (a place, a presence).

However, for Hani and others at the bakery who spoke of *tahrib* what was important in the idea of smuggling was not simply arriving at any specific country (and thus a spatialized outside) but, fundamentally, the outside as such. In other words, it was not simply the geography of territorialized borders that was at stake in Hani’s investment of crossing over, despite the context of smuggling across the Mediterranean Sea, but also an attempt to engage with a limit.

This is most clear in my friend’s words: “*Death is already here.*” The risk of death is not the same once it is, in a certain, way already present; it is not life and death that is fundamentally at stake, but the *outside*.⁸⁵ The world is already fallen apart, in ruins—a social death intimated by the very lack of bread, the loss of right—the *injustice*, the *zulm*—and feeling of vertigo injustice engenders. Put differently, Hani’s engagement with *tahrib* is an encounter at the limit *by means* of an engagement with life and death through the possible passage over the Mediterranean but irreducible to it. Instead, there is also a kind of exposure at stake. It is an exposure to an outside similar to what is operative in the work of memory, other philosophies of right, and the persistent return of forms. Crucially, the bakery is also a site of this activity. It is a scene of a kind of figuration born from work with dough and bread that displaces the coordinates of historicism and secular politics by entering it into the temporality of memory and dreams.

⁸⁵ The Crow nation chief Plenty Coups says, “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” Jonathon Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

It is a symptom, to use Freud's idiom, organized around what Tariq had mentioned earlier but would not speak of the day he had to go to court: 'the life and death of dough.'

CHAPTER 3: DREAMS (IMAGINATION)

“The Prophet says, ‘Visions are from God, and dreams are from Satan.’ And there are two types of true visions—a clear, elucidated type and a secretive, concealed type in which wisdom and tidings are deposited in the essence of its manifestation.”

Ibn Sirin¹

Three Scenes

Long ago I had a dream.

“I saw it was raining and cloudy, windy and cold. Then it was light and the sky was full of Koranic verses. I read every verse that appeared in the sky.

After a while I saw a large group of people. A woman in white came to me and said: ‘Why aren’t you praying?’

I said: ‘I don’t know how. Teach me.’ She did and I prayed and noticed the crowd.

I said, ‘God!’

‘What’s the matter?’

They said: ‘It is victory! We have won!’”²

“There’s an entire world under there.”

This is what an interlocutor tells me as we sit together in his car parked by the sea, listening to the midday waves.

“The layers of the psyche are like the webbings of the dough when you tear it up open and look inside.”

“The connections, the links, you don’t know what touches what. And then it changes as the dough expands.”

We are watching the sea and talking about the bakery. My interlocutor is a journalist and photographer now but has lived many lives. He is Greek Orthodox, born and raised in Tripoli. When he was younger, he wanted to become a monk. After the Lebanese civil war he spent many nights in the Orthodox monasteries scattered in the region. Later, he studied to be a pharmacist before becoming the only practicing psychoanalyst in Tripoli.³

¹ Quoted in Mohammad Malas, *The Dream: A Diary of the Film* (New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2016), 43.

² Mohammad Malas, *Al-Manam [The Dream]*, directed by Mohammad Malas, (1987), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0422pOLlmWM>.

³ For more on the convergence of Greek Orthodox and psychoanalytic thought in Lebanon see Spiro Jabbur, *Confession and Psychoanalysis* trans. Aaron Eldridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

I think of the landscapes of dough hidden in its webbings, flowing beneath the surface of the dough like the water in front us, roiling.

“It’s in the depths. Inside the dough, underneath the surface. Inside the unconscious. There is an entire world under there.”

“The dough dreams.”

It has already struck. The hand pulls back, immediately, but the strike is not registered. Blurry, the hand is attached to an arm that hangs from the short, plump body of a grey-bearded man wearing a stained, faded black t-shirt. It circles away from the dough, back to its body.

In the background, against the wall is a shiny silver rectangular surface, blotched by white speckles. Below is a drooping beige mass lying on a marble top table, the latter’s length cut off by the frame. This is the dough.

I’m confused. It’s not how I remember the recording. I stare at my screen and replay the video, searching for something. I scroll back to the beginning. Looking at the first image of the recording, now frozen, I realize that the hand and arm on display were always in retreat. There was never any forward propulsion captured, only the swift return.

The sound, too, is belated. Sonic booms exploding from the mechanized bread machine next door burst onto the scene a full second after the first image is reanimated. It’s so loud that when Walid explains what he is doing to the camera he has to shout. Where is the other sound, the one for which I am listening? The resounding, hollow “*thwack*” resulting from a hand striking inflated dough, a fleshy aural blast that I recreated several times after this video was completed, is absent. I’ve missed the moment I wanted to capture, having pulled out my camera too late.

“There’s air inside of it,” Walid told me at the time of filming, pointing to the body of dough lying prostrate on the table. “Air [*hawa*],” he repeated. “The dough breathes [*al-‘ajin byatanafas*]. He was referring to the way dough expands of its own power, after having been properly mixed and rested.

To demonstrate what he meant, he had slapped the dough that had been slowly rising next to us. It was a large piece, and, now inflated, nearly rivaled Walid in size. The supple matter quivered in response, energy shuddering outward from the epicenter of the collision. A gentle earthquake. Quickened by the impact, the dough depresses, slowly releasing the air inside.

I watched this scene, mesmerized. I asked Walid to reenact the demonstration so I could film it. He obliged, but I was slow to act and only caught the moment afterwards.

In the video, my voice is impressed. I ask about the air inside the dough. The camera view zooms onto the surface of the dough, which is still trembling from the contact. The frame moves away. Walid is already back at work, gathering the oozing dough together. His movements are swift and assured. He cuts the dough into smaller portions with a silver metal rectangle before flipping them over. This keeps the dough from desiccating.

After Walid is finished slicing the dough (this takes only seconds), he turns his back to the camera to attend to a second large body of dough, sitting patiently on top of a box-shaped machine. This machine will also cut the dough, this time into evenly weighted and shaped pieces, ready for hand-rolling later.

Before he starts the machine, Walid turns and looks back, as if remembering me. He slaps the dough again. It sighs quietly and we laugh. The camera returns to the first mass of dough, which Walid has already turned over. My hand emerges from the bottom of the frame, next to the shadow of my body hovering over the table. The hand, covered in flour, grasps the dough and tears it, as if it can't help but want to know what is inside. It moves to another section of the dough. The frame is shaking. The hand rips open another tear. The moving image ends.

Breathe, Soul, Dreams

“The dough breathes [*al-‘ajin byatanafas*],” Walid insists to me in the video. “Dough has a body [*fi jism*].” *The dough breathes*. This last scene, which took place early in my fieldwork at al-Furn, mesmerized me then and has stayed with me since. Not the least because Walid and other workers at the bakery would remind me of it. Perhaps amused by my astonished reaction to what they found banal, they would regularly slap the dough while we worked together and point at it quickened in response, as if of its own accord. It never ceased to amaze me. *The dough breathes*.

The word Walid used, *byatanafas*, from the semantic root, *n-f-s*, means, among other things, ‘to breathe,’ ‘to inhale and exhale.’ Meanwhile, *nafas*, another derivation of the same root, means ‘breath.’⁴ Curiously, in addition to the movements of interiorization and exteriorization (inhalation and exhalation respectively), *tanafas* can also refer to a moment in between—what we might translate as ‘to take a breath’ or ‘pause for a breath,’ and, by extension, ‘to take a rest.’ Between its active (to breath consciously) and passive (to do so without thinking) connotations, there is thus nestled in the concept an idea of an ‘aside’ that discloses a kind of stillness, one that gives shape to a form of life.⁵ We’ll see later how this chapter, in some ways, is about this aside.

Crucially, *tanafas* also shares the same semantic root as the word for ‘soul’ or ‘psyche,’ *nafs*. This is because the ‘soul’ is understood to be related to ‘breath,’ *nafas*, which is sometimes characterized as ‘spirit,’ *ruh*, or the Greek *pneuma*.⁶ For instance, Ibn Sina, at once relying on and departing from the Aristotelian treatise *On the Use of Breathing* by Galen, suggests that ‘psychic *pneuma*’ [*ruh nafsani*] is a kind of breath or invisible, vaporous substance in a cardiocentric physiology. For Ibn Sina, this ‘psychic

⁴ The root *n-f-s* can also mean ‘to be precious’ or ‘to be priceless.’ *Byatanafas* is the colloquial version of the fifth verbal form of *n-f-s*, which in Modern Standard Arabic linguistically denotes the reflexive of the second verbal form, often a causative or intensive version of the root meaning. Put differently, the fifth verbal form is the giving to oneself of the root. The fifth verbal form of *n-f-s*, *tanafas*, can thus be understood schematically as “the being or becoming precious for oneself”—hence the link to its actual semantic range.

⁵ For more on ‘aside’ as a kind of stillness that brings into relief a certain arrangement of form and the senses, see Aaron Eldridge, “Movement in Repose: Notes on Form of Life,” *Qui Parle* 30, no. 1 (2021).

⁶ For an account of Galenic and pre-Galenic uses of the word *pneuma*, see Julius Rocca, *Galen on the Brain: Anatomical Knowledge and Physiological Speculation in the Second Century* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 59-64. Broadly speaking, *pneuma* was regarded by the Stoics as a special compound of fire and air or as vital heat itself, “something capable of underpinning a variety of explanations from material causation to the psychic attributes (and qualitative functions) of the soul itself.” It provided the vital force and psychic agency of the body and operated as the fundamental principle of coherence on a microcosmic and macrocosmic scale. This is a marked change in the use of the word from the time of Aristotle when *pneuma* mostly referred to ‘wind’ and, in the context of animals, ‘breath.’

breathe' is the "vehicle of sensation and movement" [*markab fi l-hiss wa l-haraka*], and functions as such for all organisms that breathe, not only humans.⁷

In the Qur'an, mankind is said to be created of a single soul, *nafs*. Or, more figuratively, from a single breath, *nafas*.⁸ Accordingly, the concept *nafs* is theologically rich, but the word is also common in colloquial Arabic insofar as it means 'the self,' 'oneself,' or the 'same.'⁹ These more quotidian usages indicate that, in addition to its spiritual connotations, *nafs* implies a relation of identity (and thus difference) in the philosophic sense (i.e. A=A), as that which is *self-same* over a temporal duration.¹⁰

We'll return to these ideas later. For now, I want to not only highlight Walid's insistence that dough breathes, but also that its capacity to do so is linked to the idea that dough has a body [*fi jism*] and soul [*nafs*].

Perhaps it is because of this constellation of concepts and practices that my interlocutor, the Greek Orthodox psychoanalyst, sees in dough not only a figuration of unconscious activity but also the very capacity to dream. "The dough dreams," he told me by the ocean, and would repeat to me whenever I updated him on my fieldwork.

If dough has a body and soul, then why not also the capacity to dream? Scholastically, in both the Islamicate and Latinate traditions, dreams were a function of the soul. For Aristotle, the soul is the play of form and matter in time and includes perceptual apprehension, memory, cognition, and the imagination. Dreaming is the activity of sense-perception after the original stimulus had ceased, which is why it is also linked to memory (as the trace of the original stimulus) and the imagination (as the capacity to produce images from those very traces).

Freud built his speculative theory of the dreamwork and topography of the unconscious in dialogue with Aristotle's theory of the soul and its trace-structure, which he had studied with the philosopher Franz Brentano in his youth. In the last chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "The Psychology of the Dream-Processes," Freud cites in a footnote the work of the thirteenth century scholastic philosopher and theologian Albertus Magnus (teacher of Thomas Aquinas) as the first appearance of "the factor of regression"—that peculiar, psychoanalytic temporality. Albertus Magnus, like Freud, locates regression in the imagination's construction of dreams. In that same footnote, Freud quotes Thomas Hobbes, who says in *The Leviathan*: "In sum, our dreams are the reverse of our awaking imaginations, the motion, when we are awake, beginning at one end, and when we dream at another."¹¹ But Freud also references the "Arab dream-interpreters" in *Die Traumdeutung* who too were in dialogue with Greek philosophy.

⁷ Aileen Das, *Galen and Arabic Reception of Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 155.

⁸ Qur'an 4:1.

⁹ I should hasten to add that *tanafas* and *bytanafas* are also common words. For an extensive account of the word *nafs* and its twentieth century philosophic implications, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), especially Chapter 2. See also Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), especially Chapter 15.

¹⁰ While the aforementioned work of Omnia El Shakry and Stefania Pandolfo is closest to this chapter's approach in theme and scope to thinking about breath and the soul, see also recent work on breathing in a theological context by Maria José de Abreu, *The Charismatic Gymnasium: Breath, Media, and Religious Revivalism in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), and Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 544.

Freud ends his speculative, haunting text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a quotation of *Al-Maqamat* of the twelfth century poet al-Hariri of Basra: “What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping...The Book tells us it is no sin to limp.”¹²

What, then, would it mean to think of dough as part of this speculative topography and inheritance, in the present and at the bakery? As a site where these temporalities disclose themselves in their concreteness and sensuous touch? That is, what would it mean to think of dough as not only breathing, but also dreaming?

“Working at night is hard.”

Tariq leans back and adjusts his shirt. He’s sitting at his desk, as usual, handling the money for the bakery. He turns his body to me, right leg crossed over the left, to explain as I sit on the white plastic chair next to him. I sip on bitter coffee in a small flesh-colored disposable cup.

“A lot of people come here, they want to work. I tell them if they work the night shift then they can stay here, above the bakery, and have rent for free. Especially the Syrians, since they are coming here to Tripoli to work. They get excited, because they think they can make more money.”

“But then they start the work at night. Three months, four months, five months, they quit.” He flicks his chin up, as if to indicate that they leave as quickly as the gesture. “They can’t do it any more.”

Why do they quit?

“Man, things come to you at night, when you’re alone. You’re tired,” Tariq explains. “It’s hard. Working at night is hard.” Tariq taps his head, shaking it.

“Only a real man can work at night. That’s when you really learn about someone, what they’re really like. What they’re really like inside.” He points to his chest, where his heart is.

“You don’t believe me?” Tariq raises his eyebrows and his voice. He’s noticed I’ve made a face at his gendered description of the labor. He sees my reaction as skepticism. I shake my head and shrug my shoulders, deferring a response.

“Come, come work at a night. Then you’ll see.”

The night shift *is* hard. Three to four lonely workers stay up through the dead of the night mixing flour, kneading dough, and baking bread. The shift begins at eight pm and ends at eight am the next morning, although it never really ends on time—the shift almost always goes longer, sometimes for hours so. The automatic oven doesn’t run at night, there’s only hand-made bread baked in the wood-fired oven. The work is the same as during the day, but it feels different. The incandescent artificial lights of the bakery are brighter, more intense. Whenever I looked outside to see the sleeping city, the contrast sharpened the light inside and hurt my head. Eventually, I stopped looking outside.

The first four hours of work are not so bad. I’m tired, my legs are tired, my feet and back hurt, but my mind is still lucid. As night goes on, there’s a kind of solidarity

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 78.

born from the fact that the other workers and I know we are the last ones awake in the city. The bakery brims with work and activity while the city sleeps, not unlike the activity of the unconscious. There's laughing and joking similar to the day shift. Around one in the morning, however, the mood begins to turn. I can feel the weariness take over. My mind can't see or think clearly. I'm stuck in my thoughts. The lights are even brighter. The joviality of the first period has passed. Mistakes trigger angry responses and rebukes. The other workers are not talking.

Or are they talking too much? One younger Syrian worker is jabbering nonstop. No one is responding to his questions. He doesn't seem to mind. I think he's talking so much to ward off fatigue. The young workers don't manage their time well during the day. They crash upstairs when the shift is over in the morning, but wake up in the afternoon because they want to go to the beach in the summer or play games on their phones.¹³ But they don't sleep enough and it shows around this time of the night.

Abu Ali's face, the *khabbaz*, is beginning to look wild. His eyes are open unusually wide and the whites contrast with the dark bags under his eyes. He is working furiously, his long, wiry frame making elongated sweeps with the wood paddle from the stacks of dough to the oven, punctuated by jerking, sharp motions. The other workers tell me that he takes *hubub*, 'pills,' to stay awake. Probably *captagon*, the synthetic amphetamine rampant in Tripoli, but perhaps something else too. Abu Ali also works during the day, sometimes at al-Furn, sometimes at another bakery elsewhere in the city, so this doesn't surprise me. I don't know if he sleeps. Around three in the morning, his demeanor changes. Sometimes he becomes quiet and reflective, not saying anything to the rest of us while he stares at the colors dancing in the oven, as if the flames are talking to him. Other times he becomes aggressive, erratic, shouting at me or the other workers.

"Why are you here?" he says to me. "What are you doing in Tripoli? Why are you working at the bakery with us? This work is shit, this country is shit, our lives are shit."

"What do you want?"

One night, one of the young workers, Faisal from Homs, got into a fight with another young Syrian worker, Mohammed. They were arguing over something that I couldn't hear, but I heard the arguing. The shouting got louder and by the time I came over Mohammed had hit Faisal in the forehead with a metal bar. Faisal was bleeding profusely, over the dough and onto the floor. The red seeped into the veins of the dough. It was bright and sticky. Mohammed felt bad. We wrapped a bandage around Faisal's head to stop the bleeding and threw the dough out.

Sometimes, but not often, the Syrian workers will talk about home. Home is in Idlib or Homs most of the time, but there are also some workers from Aleppo. They don't say much to me about it. When I ask them about home they tell me that there is no work there, that the Syrian government destroyed their neighborhood and regime criminals, the *shabiha* [lit. 'ghosts'], had robbed their houses of everything, even the food in the pantry, and, actually, that they'd rather not talk about it. But sometimes, at other times in the night, they talk about going back too.

Another time, another night, another one of the Syrian workers, a different Mohammed, was baking bread in the oven when he shouted and excitedly told us to come

¹³ Although the context is significantly different, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb situate the desire to have fun amongst youth within the matrices of piety and urban geography in south Beirut. *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Morality and Geography in Shi'i South Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

over. It was past midnight and we were tired but the other two workers and I slowly rushed over. He showed us a piece of white and brown circular pita bread, still steaming from the oven. It looked like a normal piece of bread to me, like any other of the hundreds of pieces we'll have made by the time the morning arrives, but Mohammed held this piece of bread in both his hands proudly. The steaming heat didn't seem to bother him. I didn't understand what he was showing us but other two workers laughed.

"Look! Can't you see! It says 'allah'!"

I look more closely. On the soft white underside of the bread, there are two vertical light brown lines parallel to each other, connected by a horizontal line on the bottom. A series of blurry marks moves up from the left side of the figure into what looks like a misshapen, small circle. "Allah," in Arabic.¹⁴

"*Asbahna wa asbahal mulku lillah walhamdu lillah rabi 'alimin*," Mohammed says, the opening lines of the hadith of the morning *dhiker*, one of the remembrances of the divine. "We have reached the morning and the time that is the sovereignty of God, thanks to the All-Knowing Lord." He asks me to take a photograph of him (I have the best camera-phone of the group, something all the workers know). I take several. His favorite is one in which he is standing in front of the oven, fire burning inside, while he holds the piece of bread with two hands at head height, proudly displaying the bread as if it were a precious artifact. I send Mohammed the image and later he shares it on his social media. He returns to work, repeating the *dhiker* the rest of the morning. I don't know what he did with the piece of bread.

The opening scene of this chapter—the woman telling her dream of a sky filled with light and Qur'anic verses or *sura*—is borrowed from the opening scene from the film *Al-Manam* [*The Dream*], a documentary produced by the Syrian director Mohammad Malas with the assistance of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Department of Information and Culture. Malas interviewed and filmed displaced Palestinians in Lebanon about their dreams in 1980 and 1981 while the country was still in civil war. He and his team, which included the Syrian director Omar Amiralay, met with over three hundred Palestinian men, women, and children of all ages—in their homes, in refugee camps, at work, on the frontlines of the war—who recounted to him over two hundred dreams.

"I never understood how or why the idea of the film I was about to make took root inside me," Malas wrote in the diary he kept while shooting of the documentary, published after the film's release. "I was on my way to Beirut. I vividly recall that moment in the car when the memory of Tel al-Zaatar appeared before me, out of nowhere, like a dream."¹⁵

¹⁴ This is a not uncommon occurrence. Amira Mittermaier notes another instance in which the word "*allah*" in Arabic appeared on a piece of bread "without human intervention" in Egypt in 2003. A photograph was taken and published in a local newspaper, thus inserting divine phenomenology into the economy of media circulation. Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 222.

¹⁵ Malas, *The Dream*, 1.

‘Tel al-Zaatar’ refers to the massacre that took place in 1976 at the Tel al-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp in East Beirut when Lebanese Christian militants surrounded the camp, laid siege to it for several months, and killed 1,500 Palestinians.

“Drifting between bitter memory and the merciless collapse of an idea for a film that I was on route to Beirut to make,” Malas continues, “I shrank behind the windshield and soaked in the warm morning sun. When I reached al-Watani Street, or the ‘Last Street,’ as the members of the [Palestinian] Resistance in Beirut called it, this street seemed to me like a parenthetical aside inserted into a dream.”

“At the time, fresh posters about historic Palestine were being printed, coming off the presses like hot delicious bread. Preparations for Land Day celebrations had begun, and Israeli warplanes hovered in the sky above.”

Malas finished filming in 1981. In his diary, the threat of Israeli attack looms large. At one point during the scouting, Israeli warplanes bomb the PLO’s headquarters in Beirut. “The impression was utterly horrific,” Malas recounts, having just visited the places the Israeli planes had struck. “Your head spins, you want to throw up, your stomach churns as if it can no longer hold everything in, then a gray fog sets in where, first your soul then, bit by bit, your body feels like it might fall to pieces.”¹⁶

By the time Malas had finished shooting, he and his team, according to his own account, had filmed sixty-five people who narrated fifty-eight dreams. Ten dreams included the return of a dead one, four of which were about Gamal Abdel Nasser and five about Palestinian leaders. Five dreams were about prison and torture.

Al-Manam wasn’t released until 1987. A year after Malas finished filming, Israel invaded Lebanon. The Palestinian fighters left Lebanon, and the 1982 massacres at the Palestinian refugee camps Sabra and Shatila took place. These events are acknowledged at the end of the documentary in a coda: “These characters were filmed in the camps of Sabra, Shatila, Burj al-Barajneh and Ain al-Hulweh in Lebanon in 1981, before the Israeli invasion as a result of which the Palestinian fighters departed from Beirut and the Sabra and Shatila massacres, and other massacres, were committed. At the present, we do not know anything about the fate of these characters.” Shatila was under siege when the film was completed. A copy of the documentary was snuck into the camp and its residents were among the first to view it.

“Nothing changes on al-Watani Street,” Malas says in the preface to his diary, “this last street that eats its daily bread with one hand, closing with its other the brackets of that parenthetical aside.”¹⁷

Dreams, Imagination, Moving Image

The anthropology of dreams, particularly the literature on dreaming in the Islamic world, is rich.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has developed the linkages between Islamic thought on dreams, especially its Sufi iterations, and psychoanalysis. The thirteenth century Muslim thinker Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi has been a central figure in this work. Omnia

¹⁶ Malas, *The Dream*, 70.

¹⁷ Malas, *The Dream*, 1.

¹⁸ See for instance, Katherine Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Mittermaier, *Dreams*; Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

El Shakry has shown how the twentieth century Egyptian psychoanalyst Yusuf Murad translated the Freudian notion of the ‘unconscious’ into Arabic as *al-la-sha‘ur*, a term he borrowed from Ibn Arabi.¹⁹ The Egyptian analyst Moustapha Safoun, who participated in Jacques Lacan’s seminars, also used a similar conceptual vocabulary when he translated Freud’s writings into Arabic. (Lacan himself was exposed to Ibn Arabi’s thought by way of his friendship with the French Orientalist and philosopher Henry Corbin). In anthropology, Amira Mittermaier’s research on Muslim dream-communities in Cairo, as well as her record of dreams narrated by protestors during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, is one of the most thorough accounts of this conceptual terrain ethnographically, what she calls “landscapes of the imagination.”²⁰ But Stefania Pandolfo’s writings at the intersection of Islam, psychoanalysis, and madness in Morocco, which has helped her articulate a phenomenology of the soul by way of conversations with a classically trained Islamic scholar and healer is closest to my thought here.²¹

Such work at the intersection of Islam and psychoanalysis is especially generative because it foregrounds how dreams and the imagination have scholastically been understood as at once a faculty of the soul with receptive and productive capacities (something we saw in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis) *and* a subtle, intermediary realm with ontological and cosmological dimensions (something emphasized by a certain tradition of Islamic and scholastic thinkers).

The work of Corbin and his colleague William Chittick is especially helpful in explicating the latter’s contours. Corbin, in his idiosyncratic approach to reading Ibn Arabi, identifies the imagination as a sphere of intermediacy that he calls “the world of the imaginal” [*‘alam al-mithal*]²²—at once between the corporeal and spiritual, inner and outer, visible and invisible. In Corbin’s reading, Ibn Arabi’s intermediate realm of “pure imagination” or the “imaginal” bears resemblances to Ibn Sina’s Neoplatonic prophetic interests, a world that combines the Platonic theory of forms with a Zoroastrian cosmology of angels. Corbin explains the ontological dimensions of Ibn Arabi’s speculative theory of the imagination by way of comparison with Christian and Shiite mystics and the European Romantic:

On both [Islamic Sufi and European Romantic] sides we encounter the idea that the Godhead possesses the power of Imagination, and that by imagining the universe God created it; that He drew this universe from within Himself, from the eternal virtualities and potencies of His own being; that there exists between the universe of pure spirit and the sensible world an intermediate world which is the idea of ‘Idea Images’ as the Sufis put it, the world of ‘supersensory sensibility,’ of the subtle magical body, ‘the world in which spirits are materialized and bodies spiritualized’; that this is the world over which the Imagination holds sway; that in it the Imagination produces effects so real that they can

¹⁹ El Shakry, *Arabic Freud*, 1.

²⁰ Mittermaier, *Dreams*; Amira Mittermaier, “Invisible Armies: Reflections on Egyptian Dreams of War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 54 (2012): 392-417.

²¹ Pandolfo, *Knot*.

²² Fazlur Rahman tracks the history of *‘alam al-mithal* from Ibn Sina to al-Ghazali to al-Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi. “Dream, Imagination and ‘Alam al-Mithal,” *Islamic Studies* 3 (1964): 167-180.

‘mold’ the imagining subject, and that the Imagination ‘casts’ man in the form (the mental body) that he has imagined.²³

As Corbin points out, the kind of imagination pursued in this constellation of thought is not reducible to fantasy or the modern binary between ‘real’ and ‘fiction.’ Instead, it is more akin to what Giorgio Agamben says was lost in the “destruction of experience” as part of the shift from pre-modern to modern thinking.²⁴ The imagination has causal efficacy, for the human and for the world.²⁵ It is both the power and the realm of a kind of convertibility and transfiguration, in which images can turn material (“spirits are materialized”) and the material can transform into images (“bodies spiritualized”).²⁶

Chittick reads Ibn Arabi more systematically, describing Ibn Arabi’s metaphysics of imagination within a hierarchy of existence comprised of five realms: Being (characterized by the oneness of being); the world of spirits (angels); the world of imagination; the corporeal world (mundane, sensory reality); and nothingness.²⁷ As part of this hierarchy, the term ‘imagination,’ *khayal*, designates a reality or presence that manifests in three distinct loci: 1) in the cosmos as such, where the existence of all five realms is identical to the imagination (because the cosmos is God’s imagination), what Ibn Arabi calls the ‘nondelimited imagination’ [*al-khayal al-mutlaq*]; 2) within the hierarchy of existence, where the intermediate world between the spiritual and corporeal worlds is what Corbin identified earlier as the ‘imaginal,’ or what Ibn Arabi calls the ‘discontiguous imagination’ [*al-khayal al-munfasil*]; 3) and in the microcosm (for which the configuration of the human condenses the structure of the cosmos), where the imagination is distinguished from spirit and body and is what Ibn Arabi calls the ‘contiguous imagination’ [*al-khayal al-muttasil*]. In addition, Ibn Arabi also uses *khayal* to designate the *faculty* of the imagination, which, as we have already noted, along with reason, reflection, and memory, is one of the internal senses or capacities of the soul.²⁸

Put in philosophic terms, we might summarize by saying that the imagination refers to existence as such [‘nondelimited imagination’], which is also ‘non-being’ insofar as it is only God’s imagination (God being the Absolute Being); an objective structure of the cosmos [‘discontiguous imagination’]; an isomorphic subjective structure of the human configuration [‘contiguous imagination’]; and a faculty of the soul.

On a fundamental level, however, it must be said that for Ibn Arabi, following a Qur’anic tradition, mundane reality itself is a dream—“All men are asleep; only when they die do they wake up.” Ibn Arabi says in the *Futuhat*, his most expansive work: “The

²³ Henry Corbin, *Alone with Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 182.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience* (New York: Verso, 1993), 13.

²⁵ Emanuele Coccia argues from a different perspective that the image, as a medium, is necessary for the work of rational thought and therefore that the modern European philosophic tradition only became possible when it expelled the imagination and work of images. See *Sensible Life: A Micro-Ontology of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

²⁶ In his introduction to Ludwig Binswanger’s *Dream and Existence*, a young Michel Foucault highlights similar capacities of the imagination. He calls dreams a specific kind of “imaginary experience,” one that “silently encompasses... a whole anthropology of the imagination.” Michel Foucault, “Dream, Imagination and Existence,” in Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence* trans. Forrest Williams (US: Humanities Press International, 1992), 33.

²⁷ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 16.

²⁸ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 116.

person of spiritual unveiling already sees (here), while they are awake, what the sleeper sees in their dream state or the dead person sees after they have died.”²⁹ By these words, “the Prophet called attention,” Ibn Arabi adds elsewhere in the *Futuhat*, “to the fact that whatever man perceives in this present world is to him as a dream is to a man who dreams, and that it must be interpreted.”³⁰ The imagination is thus the very texture of dream-reality in its multiple, overlapping levels. Every phenomenal form is in some crucial sense not only an image, but also a cipher to be deciphered. This is why Ibn Arabi’s thought is irreducible to philosophy as a theory of knowledge. Instead, it aims to transform, often employing the rhetorical injunction, “Wake up!”³¹

Regardless of its specific use, however, Corbin and Chittick both point to how the imagination has the function of mediation—what Ibn Arabi also sometimes refers to famously as a *barzakh*. For Ibn Arabi, a *barzakh* [literally an ‘isthmus’] “stands between and separates two other things, yet combines the attributes of both.” This is what Ibn Arabi also calls *jam‘ al-addad* or the ‘coincidence of opposites’ in a single concrete reality.³² Strictly speaking, every existent thing is a *barzakh*, “since everything has its own niche between two other niches within the ontological hierarchy of known as the cosmos.”³³ This cosmology is not entirely unique to Ibn Arabi. That the world emerges first as images or *suwar* [also meaning ‘shapes’ or ‘forms;’ singular: *sura*] has a theological basis and was a common view in the medieval Islamic world. The popular eleventh century Baghdadi group Ikhwan al-Safa, for instance, argued “all things are images presented in matter.” In fact, according to such a cosmology, the universe itself is “made of images.”³⁴

What makes Ibn Arabi’s thought especially powerful, however, is not only the theology that everything is always first an image (a dream-image), but also, more radically, the notion that the fundamental indeterminacy of alterity participates in the cosmic imagination, such that, as an image and *barzakh*, the divine is at once “there and not there.”³⁵ Images, as the plastic stuff of the imagination qua reality, intensify, augment, and telescope one’s relation to alterity—at times they amplify it and dull it at others, destroying established relations of identity and sameness in the process. This can lead to a state of confusion or bewilderment, what the Sufis call *hayra*: a place of profound incapacity that dislocates the coordinates of the real, such that one turns towards God or away. The exposure to alterity is, fundamentally, a risk. The divinity of the imagination is thus, as Ibn Arabi says, *huwa/la huwa* [He/Not He].

²⁹ James W. Morris, “Life is a Dream: Ibn Arabi on the Mysteries of Divine Cinema,” *El Azufre Rojo* 2 (2015): 35.

³⁰ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 8.

³¹ Morris, “Life,” 32.

³² *Jam‘ al-addad* can more literally be rendered as “gathering multiplicity.” For an interesting parallel, see Heidegger’s explication of the Greek *logos* as ‘a gathering’ in the Introduction of *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996). As is well known, Corbin was an early translator of Heidegger into French.

³³ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 15.

³⁴ Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *The Origins of Visual Culture in the Islamic World: Aesthetics, Art, and Architecture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 67.

³⁵ For more on ungraspable or apophatic nature of the “there/not there” in Ibn Arabi, see Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

With this picture of the metaphysics of imagination in mind, the work of film as the media of the *moving image* looks fundamentally different. Released from the burden of representation and mimesis, the image-work of film can now be seen as performing a different kind of labor, something that points to the efficacy of Ibn Arabi's speculative imagination and what Malas called earlier a "parenthetical aside inserted into a dream."

The Cloud, Breathe, Cosmo-Poetics

What might such a 'parenthetical aside' be at the bakery? Is the bakery itself the scene of a dream, in Malas' sense? What is curious about Malas' diary is how, for him, the quotidian activities of everyday life are the stuff of dreaming. "I went down the street alone, trying to grasp the images and motions—the balconies, people's clothing and uniforms, their guns, the loudspeakers, bookshops, women," describes Malas. "I contemplated the lives lived in the twists and turns of this 'Last Street' and was filled with dreams of making a film."³⁶

We have seen how, in a certain way, the bakery workers, in their activity, memories, and stories, dream for the city while it sleeps. We have also seen how the Greek Orthodox psychoanalyst repeatedly told me that the "dough dreams." Might we find a 'parenthetical aside' in the structure of dough's breathing—one that discloses, as we noted earlier, between inhalation and exhalation, a figure of repose? In other words, hidden in the biochemical process of yeast's catalyzation and its imagistic figuration, amidst the dreamwork of the bakery, is a peculiar kind of temporality, one that telescopes the speculative capacity of flour, dough, and bread? A dream inside a dream?

In fact, the workers' insistence on the activity of dough's breathing recalls a commentary by Ibn Arabi on a creation story involving clouds. In a well-known hadith found in the collections of Ibn Maja, Tirmidhi, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the Prophet was asked, "Where was our Lord [God] before he created his creation?" The Prophet said, "He was [*kan*] in the clouds [*'ama*], neither air below Him [*ma tahtahu hawa*'] nor air above Him [*ma fawqahu hawa*'], and He created His Throne upon the water."³⁷

In this account, the Cloud appears as a kind of substrate for existence as such, the substance by which beings emerge and take figuration. Or, as Chittick puts it, "within the Cloud the cosmos in its entirety takes shape...it gives form [*taswir*] to all engendered things [*ka'inat*]. Every existent thing becomes manifest in it."³⁸ At the same time, this hadith invites philosophic and theological difficulties that Ibn Arabi seizes upon in order to explicate his idiosyncratic view of the relation between divinity and the cosmos, one in which images and the imagination are linked to time.

In his commentary, Ibn Arabi relates the Cloud [*'ama*] to what he describes as the "breath of the merciful" [*nafas al-rahman*], which is one of the ninety-nine divine names

³⁶ Malas, *The Dream*, 1.

³⁷ Ibn al-Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations: Selected from Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyya* trans. Michel Chodkiewicz and ed. by William Chittick and James Morris (New Delhi: Kitab Mahal, 2016), 321. There are seven Qur'anic verses referring to God's being "mounted [*istawa*] on the Throne," often following the creation of the heavens and the earth (i.e. what lies 'beneath' or constitutes the Throne in its cosmological sense). As Morris and Chittick note, however, an "even more fundamental meaning of the 'Throne' is 'the Heart of the man of true faith' (which is 'the Throne of the Merciful,' according to a famous hadith." Here, we have the basis for understanding the heart as a kind of spiritual stage or scene.

³⁸ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 125.

of God [*al-rahman*]. Ibn ‘Arabi says: “The immutable substance is the Cloud, which is nothing other than the Breath of the All-merciful.”³⁹ Or, stated differently: “This Cloud becomes configured within the Breath of the All-merciful, inasmuch as the All-merciful is a god...the Cloud itself becomes manifest only through the Breath.”⁴⁰ Ibn Arabi at once identifies and differentiates the Cloud from Breath. From one perspective, he suggests that they are the same (“the Cloud...is nothing other than the Breath”). From another perspective, he suggests they overlap but are part of separate movements (“this Cloud becomes configured within the Breath”).⁴¹

Ibn Arabi associates divine breathe, *nafas*, with another word derived from the same the semantic root, *n-f-s*: *tanfis*, meaning “to air, to cheer up, to comfort, to relieve, to exhale.”⁴² *Tanfis* describes both the exhalation of air and the relieving of a compression or constriction. This cosmology is reminiscent of the Stoics’ for whom change—mechanical, quantitative, and qualitative—is caused by alternation in the *tonos* (‘tension,’ ‘stretching,’ ‘pressure,’ but also related to ‘sonorous tone’ in a musical sense) of what they called the *pneuma*, or ‘spiritual breath.’⁴³ *Tonos*, this tension, is produced by the mixture of cold and heat—the dual movement of expansion and contraction. According to the Stoics, such a variable accounts for nearly all the activities of the living being, which, in turn, links causal activity at different levels of being by similitude.⁴⁴ This efficacious logic of similitude traverses the isomorphic structure of macrocosm and microcosm, as well as a hierarchical chain of beings.

An analogous logic of similitude is at play in Ibn Arabi’s cosmology. When Ibn Arabi says, “the manifestation of the cosmos when the Cloud extends into the Void in accordance with the levels of the engendered things is similar to the human breath extending from the heart to the mouth,” the anthropomorphism or similitude [*tashbih*] is not merely metaphoric.⁴⁵ Instead, Ibn ‘Arabi’s comparison between the divinity of the

³⁹ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 127.

⁴⁰ As quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 126.

⁴¹ Ibn Arabi attributes the idea of ‘merciful breath’ [*nafas rahmani*] or the breath of The Merciful [*nafas al-rahman*] to two hadiths. First, “Do not curse the wind, for it derives from the Breath of the All-merciful!” And second, “I find the Breath of the All-merciful coming to me from the direction of Yemen.” Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 127.

⁴² Ibn al-Arabi, *Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Fusus Al-Hikam: An Annotated Translation of “The Bezels of Wisdom”* trans. by Binyamin Abrahamov (New York: Routledge, 2019), 86.

⁴³ In this worldview, the cosmos itself is a kind of living being. Within it, even inanimate or non-biologically living beings such as rocks also have a type of life characterized by *pneuma*.

⁴⁴ ‘Tension’ for the Stoics also characterizes the complexity of the being—“the greater the tension, the more complex and adaptable the unified functioning of the relevant body, and hence the higher its place within the natural hierarchy.” See Heinrich von Staden, “Body, Soul, and Nerves: Epicurus, Herophilus, Erasistratus, the Stoics, and Galen,” in *Psyche and Soma: Physicians and Metaphysicians on the Mind-Body Problem from Antiquity to Enlightenment*, ed. John P. Wright and Paul Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100. It should be noted that the principle of the efficacy of *tonos* in the *pneuma* is not restricted to biologically living beings but extends to all beings insofar as they are related to a hierarchically organized whole structured or held together by the *pneuma* [the macrocosm]. See Brooke Holmes, “Holism, Sympathy, and the Living Being in Ancient Greek Medicine and Philosophy” in *Holism in Ancient Medicine and Its Reception* ed. Chiara Thumiger (New York: Brill, 2021).

⁴⁵ This tendency towards similitude must be balanced against an approach that stresses God’s incomparability [*tanzih*]. As Michel Chodkiewicz puts it nicely, “[The gnostic’s] knowledge of God never opposes or separates the *tanzih* from the *tashbih*, transcendence from immanence or likeness.” See *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 158-9.

merciful breath and human breath attributes a comparable productive capacity to humans. Rhetorically, we can say Ibn Arabi traverses the two scales to achieve a dramatic effect.⁴⁶ *Tanfīs*, or exhalation, is a necessary part of the activity of speaking. As Chittick explains: “breath is a vapor, relieves constriction in the breast, and is the vehicle for words in the same way the Breath of the All-merciful is a Cloud, relieves the constrictions of the immutable entities...and is the vehicle for God’s words, which are the creatures.” The biophysical process of speaking, or what can also be understood as the articulation of words through the release of tension, is thus linked to the disclosure of immutable forms on an ontological level—a creative and productive process that takes place by way of the cloud qua medium.

This is not only a semantic process. The very shapes of letters and their combination into words—what we might describe tendentiously as their texture as the concrete stuff that makes up the world—give form to the activity of creation. As Ibn Arabi puts it, “The manifestation of the letters in the path of the breath and in words is similar to the manifestation of the cosmos from the Cloud, which is the Real’s All-merciful Breath, within the ordained levels along the supposed extension—not within a body—which is the Void filled by the cosmos.”⁴⁷ Among its many implications, this suggests a fundamental intimacy between the articulation of language and the creative taking shape of the cosmos. What is exhaled or spoken [*tanfīs*], Ibn Arabi makes clear, are the divine names, which burst out in a moment of unbearable tension and give form, by way of the cloud, to creaturely existence. Ibn Arabi thus provides an ontological account of immutable forms as the Names of God, even if the divinity of God still exceeds the intimacy between words and existence.⁴⁸

The divine names play a special role in Ibn Arabi’s idiosyncratic approach to interpreting hadith and the Qur’an.⁴⁹ They not only denote meaning and qualities, but also have mirroring capacity that at once participates in Divine Essence and reflects into the cosmos what Ibn Arabi calls the ‘effect’ [*athar*]⁵⁰ and ‘property’ [*hukm*, pl. *ahkam*]⁵¹

⁴⁶ Toshihiko Izutsu notes a parallel imagery in Ibn Arabi’s use of the word *karb*. *Karb* means ‘distress’ or ‘anguish,’ but can also designate an overfull stomach or a state of extreme tension, just short of explosion. What Izutsu points out in Ibn Arabi’s description of *tanfīs*, however, is not only the release of a tension or pressure [*karb*], but also its anthropomorphic analogue and a relation to pain. *Tanfīs* is an explosive, sensuous process, one linked to the couplets of heat/cold, pain/relief, expansion/contraction, attraction/repulsion, as well as the bodily organs of the stomach, throat, tongue, ears, nose, mouth and, most importantly, the heart. Izutsu, *Sufism*, 132.

⁴⁷ Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 127.

⁴⁸ “If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer’s words, the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer’s words are exhausted. And [thus it would be] if we were to add to it sea upon sea.” Qur’an 18:190. Talal Asad says regarding this verse, “So what the faithful can do is not to try and translate his words into other words (to interpret apparent contradictions away) but awaken the ensouled body into practicing a form of life in submission to him.” Talal Asad, “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” *Critical Times* 3 (2020): 422.

⁴⁹ Chittick goes so far as to suggest that the divine names are the single most important concept in Ibn Arabi’s work. *Sufi Path*, 10.

⁵⁰ *Athar* can mean ‘remainder,’ ‘trace,’ ‘mark,’ ‘sign,’ ‘vestige.’

⁵¹ *Hukm* means a ‘judgment’ or ‘decision.’ In *fiqh*, *hukm* designates a ‘ruling’ or ‘prescription.’ Chittick translates *hukm* as ‘property’ insofar Ibn Arabi refers to it in relation to the Divine Names as that which exercises “the ruling power or governing control of the divine names in the cosmos.” *Sufi Path*, 39.

of the names.⁵² To use an alternative conceptual vocabulary, we might say the divine names provide the objective, ontological architectonics and infrastructure of the cosmos, all the while pointing back the essential reality of the divine real. To see the properties and effects of God's Names is to see the divine realities exercising their influence, determining and modulating the nature of the cosmos.

This explanation already suggests a particular temporality to creation: a recursive, cosmo-poetic activity articulated through the sensuous exhalation of the divine names. In his commentary on the Cloud, Ibn Arabi focuses on the ambiguity of the temporal designation of the Arabic word *kan*, here translated as the past tense 'was' ["He *was* in the clouds"]. While the hadith is clear about the spatial ambiguity of the cloud ["neither air below Him nor air above Him"]—an indeterminacy that suggests the hadith's ontological implications (no being can exist *in* space because space is not yet possible)—the hadith is subtler with regard to time. Ibn Arabi argues that the Arabic *kan* can also be read as 'came to be'—a translation equally available to the grammar. 'He came to be in the clouds;' 'He was in the clouds' [*kan fi 'ama*]. In other words, rather than locate creation in a moment or series of events that took place *in the past*—that is, having already been completed—Ibn Arabi also identifies God with the perpetual emergence ("He came to be") of the clouds. This is a process that, like breathing or the clouds in the heavens, has not ended but is always ongoing.⁵³

Ibn Arabi thus points to the pulsating, metamorphic nature of the cosmos, how it continuously undergoes morphogenesis as part of what he calls the 'renewal of creation' [*tajdid al-khalq*]. The cosmos takes shape at every moment in a kind of repetition—a sameness that also generates difference (hence its recursive structure).⁵⁴

This is related to the imagery of both cloud and breath. The Cloud, like other clouds, undergoes constant transformation in its outward form, even though its substance remains the same. Similar to a cloud, the ruling property of the cosmos is this mutability or evanescence, what Ibn Arabi describes as *zuwal*: the very fact that it disappears, only to appear again. The quality of evanescence shows us that the cloud qua substance is not necessary [*wajib*] in the Peripatetic sense, but accidental ('contingent' or *mumkin*).⁵⁵ This

⁵² Put bluntly, the effects and properties of the divine names *are* the very phenomena of the cosmos; they are the creatures, the things, entities, and forms that make up existence insofar as they manifest—or, what is the same thing, reflect—the divine names. In Ibn Arabi words: "In the case of the Real [*al-haqiqah*], the 'properties' [*ahkam*] are nothing other than the forms of the entire cosmos—that part of the cosmos which has become manifest and will become manifest... The divine name is the spirit of its effect [*athar*], while its effect is its form... No possible thing is brought into existence without there being found within it the effects of those divine names that are connected (*muta'allaq*) to the engendered things (*al-akwan*).” Quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 40.

⁵³ We might read this temporal ambiguity as akin to the injunctive to see God as at once transcendent, incomparable, and distant [*tanzih*] and immanent, similar, and close [*tashbih*].

⁵⁴ For more on recursivity and the structure of the soul or world-soul, see Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019), especially the discussion Plato's *Timaeus*, 4-5.

⁵⁵ This is how Izutsu, following the commentaries of Ibn Arabi's stepson and spiritual successor Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi as well as al-Qunawi's followers 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani and Dawud Qaysari (all of whom wedded Ibn Arabi's writings on Peripatetic and Hellenistic philosophy), interprets the Cloud. Izutsu reads *tajdid al-khalq* and the imagery of breath in Aristotelian terms, as the ongoing movement from potentiality to actuality. He calls *tanfīs* the "constant and everlasting process of universal overflow of the Being of the Absolute into the Being of creatures." Izutsu focuses on Ibn Arabi's description of this movement as *fayḍ*, which means 'flood' or an 'abundance,' but Izutsu interprets as 'emanation'—a concept that invokes the

is because the recursive renewal of creation happens at the multiple levels of imagination identified in the previous section, for which existence as such is merely God's imagination. At the same time, the logic of similitude and the imagery of breath also allow us to see the possibility that this very movement animates the smallest of details—including its isomorphic structure in dough's fermentation.

We can now return to Walid's and other workers' claims about dough's capacity to breathe with a sharper eye. What might the life of dough be, seen from this perspective? Dough inflates [*byanfukh*], dough breathes [*bytanafas*], dough produces air [*hawa*] above and below. It speaks [*'ajin biyhki*], as Walid would say. Dough expands and breathes, it gives shape to sound and word—isn't this what Ibn Arabi describes of the Cloud? Words that give shape to the world, divine words that can be seen in the sky, like the Palestinian woman's dream in *Al-Manam*, and in bread, like Mohammed did at al-Furn that one fateful night. Might the activation of yeast—catalyzing differentiation of heat and cold, dough's rising and falling—also be understood as a similitude of the repetitious act of being by which the world takes shape?⁵⁶ Nestled between dough's expansion and contraction, its inflation and deflation—nestled in the daily dreamwork of the bakery—is the parenthetical aside of a cosmo-poetics.

Belatedness, Trauma

All of this is necessarily speculative. Speculation about dreaming, speculation about the Cloud, speculation about dough as disclosing cosmo-poetic activity. Malas, too, I think was speculative when he walked down the “Last Street,” transforming in his mind's eye the Palestinian refugee camp into images and motion—into the world of the imaginal. In the minor details of the street he saw a cosmo-poetic movement animating the dreamwork of the camp. It is this motion, that parenthetical aside, that I think drives the documentary *Al-Manam*—a work that exceeded its genre and became more like its namesake, a dream. At the bakery too, there is the activity of a dreamwork, as well an aside where speculative motion is enfolded in dough's breathing. “Nothing changes on al-Watani Street,” Malas reminisces, “this last street that eats its daily bread with one hand, closing with its other the brackets of that parenthetical aside.”

This speculative, cosmo-poetic motion is akin to the temporality that, psychoanalytically speaking, is released by the encounter with violence. Joan Copjec identifies this uncanny temporality in Ibn Arabi's commentary on the Cloud. “It was not that God *was* in the Cloud,” she clarifies, speaking about the temporal ambiguity of the word *kan*, “where the past tense of the very ‘to be’ functions merely as a logical copula to situate God in a locale.”⁵⁷ God cannot be so easily predicated (‘was,’ ‘is,’ etc.). Such

Neoplatonic register of the descending movement from the hierarchy of the One, to the Intellect, to the Soul and its ascending return. As we have seen, this profusion or over-spilling of divine nature results from a tension that then takes shape in the form of language, an intimate relation already suggested by the imagery of breath and air. Izutsu, *Sufism*, 133.

⁵⁶ See Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being* (New York: Zone Books, 2006). For another example of dough giving life in a different context but with a similar conceptual grammar and lexicon (*ruh*, etc), see “The Story of the Dough-Boy,” in Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 46-9.

⁵⁷ Joan Copjec, “Cloud, Precinct of the Theological-Historical,” *Psychoanalysis and History* 20 (2018): 286.

syntax would make God either subject or object and thus a mere being. Yet, in the hadith there *is* a relation to absolute alterity. “He *came to be* there – in an act of being.”

How might we characterize this appearance? Does God *determine* the appearance, a formulation that suggests some-thing prior? Does God *cause* the emergence? No, according to Copjec. “The [Cloud’s] appearances are *primary*, they *are*, they *exist*,” Copjec says, “[they] do not represent some given, some pre-existing reality, but are themselves what they represent.”⁵⁸ They are, in other words, *self-expressions*.

What Copjec makes clear is that while beings are brought into existence by way of the Cloud, this act of being does not rely on an original substance or ground—God or otherwise—for its cause. In Ibn Sina’s language, a ‘necessary existent’ [*wajib al-wujud*] did not *first* exist, *after which* beings were created. The Cloud is not a separately existing substance between God and the world, the One and the Many. Creation happens at once, in an act. The Cloud is the locus of this act. It ‘pre-exists’ the terms it separates without existing first, placing them in relation to each other. *It is intermediate, and yet there is no prior*. “It would be better to say that [the act of emergence] is no longer conceived as second to a first...the second is accorded the status of an *original*, rather than of something derived...that which comes forth from the *in-between* world of the imaginary is *first*, without precedent.”⁵⁹ It is only through the act of being, that a relation to pure alterity, God, also, at the very same time, emerges. All at once, in a flash.

We might thus characterize the ambiguity at the heart of the Cloud (Is God *in* the Cloud? Is He Cloud? Is He the emergent *forms* of the Cloud?) as what Ibn Arabi describes as the indeterminacy of *huwa/la huwa*, or the He/Not He—the idea that God is at once ‘there’ and ‘not there.’ Accordingly, the Cloud is “neither being nor non-being, but ‘being in suspense;’ it suspends or limits absolute power and maximizes tension.”⁶⁰ (We might recall from an earlier footnote that for the Stoics alternation in tension, *tonos*, in the *pneuma* is the principle of change, including metamorphosis, the increase of which correlates to the complexity of a given being.) In the context of Ibn Arabi’s speculative thought, the intermediate realm of the imagination could be understood as expressing itself, while, at the same time, in that very expression, also instantiating a relation to pure alterity qua surplus.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Copjec, “Cloud,” 286.

⁵⁹ Copjec, “Cloud,” 286.

⁶⁰ Copjec, “Cloud,” 278.

⁶¹ To illustrate this description of the Cloud, Copjec turns to the neologism ‘tautegory’ used by Henry Corbin to explain the same phenomenon. Tautegory is a concept coined by the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to encapsulate ideas learned from F.W.J. Schelling, who, in turn, used the term himself during his lectures on myth and nature. It is also later used by Ernst Cassirer in his philosophy of symbolic forms, akin what he calls the “free activity of symbolic expression” or a moment of energetic difference in the taking shape of form and images in a sphere of mediation with sensuous intuition. See Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences” in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). Corbin contrasts the root *tauto* (a contraction of *to auto*, ‘the same’) of tautegory with the *allos* (‘the other’) of allegory. Allegory, Corbin argues, establishes a link between two distinct terms to pose a resemblance between them. In contrast, a tautegorical symbol does not represent something other—it *expresses itself*. It is distinct, however, from a tautology, which also expresses itself, but not in relation to a surplus, an other. As Corbin puts it, “the *allo* (the other) of allegory is surpassed, because [tautegory] is the form in which both the one and the other integrally manifest themselves.” Copjec helpfully elaborates: “the tautegorical symbol is not other than the reality it represents; it is the form assumed by this reality, or: it is the reality it expresses.” Copjec, “Cloud,” 284.

The temporality of the Cloud—Ibn Arabi’s identification of absolute alterity with the act of the emergence, an act of being that is secondary and yet originary—is reminiscent of the temporality of what Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, or ‘belatedness.’ The temporality of belatedness, which can also be translated as ‘afterwardness,’ scrambles the relations of cause and effect, linear time, and determinacy. An effect can disclose itself topologically in the present, thus altering the past. Or, even more radically, the future can causally determine something in the past. For Freud, belatedness is intimately related to the work of trauma—understood as an overwhelming breach or wound—such that it becomes a mode of attempting to confront the enigma of the other, of the outside as such.⁶² This is related to the encounter with violence but irreducible to it. As Jean Laplanche puts it: “What Freud tried to discover through *Nachträglichkeit*, is something much more connected with the whole of a life. That is another type of temporality. It is the temporality of retranslating one’s own fate, of retranslating what’s coming to this fate from the message of the other.”⁶³ The message of the other, the cipher that must be interpreted, is akin to the disorientating exposure to the divine via images in Ibn Arabi’s thought. Trauma is in consonance with something like a message.

I began this chapter with scenes from two films (moving images): one of *Al-Manam* and one of Walid striking dough at al-Furn. In the first, the woman sees divine language in the sky. In the latter, dough responds to Walid’s touch, contracting its inflated form and releasing the heat that gives it internal tension and shape. It bends, contorts itself, and shrinks. Dough breathes, it speaks, it dreams. But I also want to suggest that, in that very moment, when Walid strikes the dough, the dough pushes back. In the striking the dough, *the dough also strikes Walid*. The making of dough, its sensuous properties (smell, touch, heat, cold, the suppleness of texture), and biophysical processes (expansion, inflation, contraction) become both a catalyst and medium for an encounter with this speculative movement, including the temporality of belatedness, in the form of an enigmatic message. Such an encounter is the possibility of experiencing alterity—it is also the possibility, as Laplanche says, of retranslating one’s own fate.

“Many of the hopes I had for this film were dashed,” Malas admits at the end of his diary of *Al-Manam*. “The nightmarish charge that had underlain reality with deep and internal misgivings splintered into many scattered nightmares, far beyond anything foreseen in the film, and greatly removed from its time.” ‘Greatly removed from its time’—the charge of civil war, the 1982 Israeli invasion, the expulsion of the Palestinian resistance from Lebanon, the mass killings of Palestinians, transform the content of the film’s interviews—already about dreams, a removed subject—into something other. Something of another time.

⁶² “We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure.” Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 23.

⁶³ Cathy Caruth, “An Interview with Jean Laplanche,” *Postmodern Culture* 11 (2001).

“At the time all I could do was take apart the dreams laid bare of the bodies and places streaming before me on the small screen of the editing table—the fates of which were unknown to me—and race to reassemble them into a dream about dreams that are now a memory of a dream.”⁶⁴

‘Reassemble them into a dream about dreams that are now a memory of a dream.’ Malas’ narrative of film editing resembles one of Freud’s early descriptions of the dreamwork. Dream-thoughts, the plastic material of the unconscious, are fractured only to be reconstructed in new, unexpected configurations by the labor of the dream. Freud likens the process to the formation of pack-ice: “When the whole mass of these dream-thoughts is brought under the pressure of the dream-work...its elements are turned about, broken into fragments and jammed together—almost like pack-ice.”⁶⁵ Ripped apart by force and smashed back together (not unlike Malas’ description of how his body felt in the encounter with Israeli air bombings) the labor produces novel forms and virtual relations, causing things to touch in unexpected, energetic, and sometimes contradictory ways. The result is a kind of poetic work charged by violence.

To breathe. Like dough’s breath, that parenthetical aside that discloses speculative cosmo-poetics. The breath that opens onto a time that is not time, the mutable, evanescent Cloud that is always coming into being. A belated movement that opens the possibility of retranslating one’s fate, the traumatic encounter with violence. Or, as Malas concludes his diary: “All I could do was to draw from that love a breath that would animate the cells of light and darkness, so that the life onscreen would create a time of its own.”⁶⁶

But we have also seen how that same speculative movement, ‘a time of its own,’ is released by violence, one that enacts a breach charged by war and everyday life. This includes the violence of extractive, rapacious migrant capitalist wage labor, as well as the way the workers at the bakery fight at night, become angry, accuse and suspect each other, even as they also joke and find pleasure in each other’s company.

In the first days of the Covid-19 lockdown in Lebanon in 2020, only months after the 2019 Lebanese revolution, dreams reappeared in public discourse. Lina Mounzer, a Beirut-based writer, like others in the country, locked at home with a national currency that was still rapidly devaluing by the day, governed by a central bank that had stolen the people’s presents, pasts, and futures, wrote then: “People are reporting dreams of being out in the streets again. Just that, people out and about in crowds, bodies thronging the street.”⁶⁷ But then just a few months later Beirut’s port blew up, one of the most powerful explosions in human history. People began reporting different kinds of dreams: loud bangs that woke them from their sleep, windows breaking, nightmares. Dreams of childhood, dreams of life during civil war. Or, sometimes there was no dreaming at all.

One day, after all of this, while rolling dough at al-Furn, I ask Mustapha about his dreams. He laughs at me. “What, are you a dream interpreter now? I dreamt that I had one thousand US dollars. How’s that?”

I tell him about Mohammad Malas and the documentary *Al-Manam*. I tell him I want to do something similar, but written and about he and the other bakery workers.

⁶⁴ Malas, *The Dream*, 136.

⁶⁵ Freud, *Interpretation*, 328.

⁶⁶ Malas, *The Dream*, 137.

⁶⁷ Lina Mounzer, “Letter From Beirut: From Revolution to Pandemic,” *Literary Hub*, April 14, 2020. <https://lithub.com/letter-from-beirut-from-revolution-to-pandemic/>.

What do you dream about?

"I dream about work and dough," Mustapha says immediately.

"Not bread," he clarifies, "dough. Sometimes I see dough sticky with yeast. Sometimes I see in my dreams that the bakery machines are broken." He smiles and laughs.

"But yesterday I dreamt that I returned to Syria and opened a bakery."

Coda

Perhaps the contemporary producer of this vision of the image, albeit in its own way, is the Syrian group Abounaddara, an anonymous film collective that argues for what it calls "the right to a dignified image."⁶⁸ During the Syrian revolution, the collective produced short films of Syrian life on the margins against the global media's proliferation of images of Syrian suffering. From 2011-2017, they released a film every Friday, amassing a shared filmic memory of the revolution, a dream archive of sorts.

I see in Abounaddara's films an uncanny sensitivity to the speculative life of images, one that draws the viewer into the world of imaginal. Intensified by the charge of war and haunted by the spectrality of fantasms, the characters in their films often restage a theatre of virtual memory and images in front of the camera's eye. For example, in Abounaddara's short film, "Don't Forget the Plums," a young Syrian man tells the story of a car bombing in Douma, an agricultural suburb outside of Damascus. The film is two minutes and twenty-five seconds long.

"I was taking photos trying to help. A very poignant scene grabbed my attention. In the middle of everything...I was picking up remains, the remains of children, the remnants of the little girl's dress, her hair."

"Imagine the scene: He comes and says I've found a piece. You examine it, ask yourself, whether it's skin, then gather it, you gather it in the bag you're using as a shroud. All of this to preserve what we can of the deceased's dignity."

The camera holds on the middle of the young man's face as he narrates, unflinching. His face doesn't move. The lens is focused on his eyes, nose, and mouth. The top and bottom of his head are cut off by the frame.

"And there, in the middle of the shouting and the smell of burning and blood, and the cars up in flames, and the people who seem traumatized, in the middle of this tumult, this chaos in all of the images, I mean the images going through my head, I spot a child sitting on the ground in the middle of a puddle of mud mixed with blood and water, he was sitting on the ground eating plums."

"With the bloody water, he was cleaning off the blood that stained them. He was cleaning off the blood and eating them. I took a picture of him, then he saw me. He lifted up his head to look at me, then carried on."

"At that moment, I swear I was frightened. I was frightened for the child. Not for myself, but for the child."

He pauses.

"But where are we going?"⁶⁹

⁶⁸ For more on Abounaddara, see Anneka Lenssen, "The Filmmaker as Artisan: An Interview with Members of Abounaddara," *Third Text* 34 (2020): 159-171.

⁶⁹ Abounaddara, *Don't Forget the Plums*, directed by Abounaddara, (2014). <https://vimeo.com/111221242>.

While most scholarly accounts of Abounaddara highlight its political activity and production amidst a popular revolution turned war, the collective in fact first began by filming artisans and craftsmen in Damascus years before the 2011 protests. These films, as well as those made during the Syrian revolution, were inspired by the images in wood, bone, and mother-of-pearl made by the craftsman Jurji Bitar, who invented Damascene marquetry in the late nineteenth century. Bitar's inlay produced images in the form of geometric patterns that unfolded in harmonious configurations, drawing from both Hellenistic mosaic and the rhythmic, interlacing patterns of arabesque.

Along these lines, one of Abounaddara's earliest films, from 2010, is a whirling shot following Syrian artisans making marquetry in Damascus' old souks.⁷⁰ The lens telescopes between scales, zooming onto the artisans' hands, hammering at the material, and retreating out to view the bodies and material in space. Film, understood in this way, might be said to be a kind of dream-vision, a *ru'ya*. The image-work is ecstatic, in the sense of its Greek etymology *ek-stasis*: 'to be driven out of place, to be displaced.' It transforms reality by displacing it. "As a result of this method," Walter Benjamin might have said, "the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled [*aufheben*]; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history."⁷¹

In these two films, we see how Abounaddara's work resembles both the patterned nature of Freud's description of dreamwork qua pack-ice in its attention to the artisanal arrangement of geometric figures that participate in and enfold the world, and the charged images Malas describes in a landscape of war that shatters one's own sense of corporeality and reality. They point to the monadological nature of the fractured, extended world—how each image fragment, cut differently, both enfolds and unfolds the entirety of the structure of the cosmos. It is an image of a broken world, "pregnant with tensions," and the endless, chaotic movement to speculatively transform it.⁷²

What is the work of film, the moving image, in this context?

⁷⁰ Abounaddara, *Sawa'id al-Ba'th*, directed by Abounaddara (2010), <https://vimeo.com/39818330>.

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263. In fact, the collective translated Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Author as Producer" into Arabic. Abounaddara (2019), http://www.abounaddara.com/THE_RIGHT_TO_THE_IMAGE.pdf.

⁷² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.

CHAPTER 4: JOKES (POETICS)

Efrin, al-Jurjani's Poetics, Wonder

When I first began working al-Furn, Mustapha asked me where I was from. I told him I was from California. His eyes lit up. "California? You mean where Messi is?"

His question confused me until I realized that had he mixed up California and Catalonia. (This was before Lionel Messi, the soccer player, moved from Barcelona to Paris). I made this connection later when Mustapha would repeat to the other workers and customers that I was from Catalonia, the same place as Lionel Messi. I would protest and tell them differently, but he casually dismissed my objections with a wave of his hand and a knowing look.

Mustapha is from Khan Sheikhun in Idlib. He is tall (the other workers sometimes call him *al-tawil*, 'the tall one') and wears a greyed mustache, betraying the aesthetic of an older generation. He is in his fifties and has been working at al-Furn off and on for about twenty years, even before the 2011 protests in Syria.

Unlike some of the other workers at al-Furn, Mustapha has a long history working with bread. Growing up, he studied to repair bread machines in Syria, working at bakeries in Idlib and al-Furn afterwards. In 2014, Mustapha opened a bakery in Idlib, which was an active war zone at the time. The bakery was later bombed by Russian warplanes. So Mustapha went to Turkey to open a bakery there. He spent seven months in Istanbul but didn't speak Turkish so he went home to Idlib but then his house was bombed. Eventually came back to Tripoli where's he's been since then.

"*Khibreh* [experience]!" Mustapha would say to me. "That's what I have, I know by touch and smell. Others don't have the same experience as me."

From my perspective, Mustapha worked with ferocity and a pulsating sense of life. This was so much so that the other workers often complained to him about the pace with which he worked. He would respond with colorful curses. But Mustapha's energetic movements were also animated by deep anxiety—a quality that became evident whenever he slumped to a stop. Then, he would speak quietly to me or to his closer friends about his mother, who still lived alone in Khan Sheikhun.

He had good cause to worry. Khan Sheikhun was an active battlefield in 2019. Located on the strategic international highway between Aleppo and Damascus, the town had changed hands several times since 2011 between the Syrian army and a collection of opposition military groups.

In 2019, the Syrian government would win control of Khan Sheikhun with the help of Russian warplanes and fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah. This was an important step of the Syrian regime's years-long plan of subduing Idlib, the last major opposition-controlled region in the country. The government victory in Khan Sheikhun prompted the flight of hundreds of thousands of Syrians north, deeper into Idlib, near the border with Turkey where they were barred from entry. Many of the fleeing were women and children who had already been displaced to Idlib from elsewhere in the country.

The workers of al-Furn would show me photographs of the events on their phone sent to them from friends and family still in the area while we sat on the dusty stairs in

the back of the bakery resting; photos of wrecked buildings in Khan Sheikhun, photos of the thousands of Syrians on the road heading north with whatever they could carry, photos of the massive encampments of displaced stuck next to the Turkish border.

One day, around the time Khan Sheikhun was being bombed, while we were rolling dough together, side by side, elbows rubbing up against each other, Mustapha asked me if I knew where Lionel Messi was originally from.

“Argentina,” I answered confidently.

“No,” replied Mustapha smiling “he’s from Efrin!”

I looked at him quizzically. Efrin is a small Syrian town in Aleppo province on the border with Turkey in the north. It is best known for being predominately Kurdish.

“Who’s the best soccer player in history?” Mustapha asked me again. “Pele?” I asked tentatively, this time uncertain.

Mustapha groaned. “No man! It’s Diego Maradona! Maradona is the greatest soccer player in the world!” I frowned but let it slide. (‘The hand of God.’)

“And where is Maradona from?” Mustapha asked me.

“From Argentina?” I responded hesitatingly, even more uncertain than before.

“No, he’s from Efrin!” The other workers around us burst out laughing.

Mustapha, encouraged by the laughter, continued. “Who was the very first human, who God the Exalted created and put on planet Earth?”

“Sayyidna Adam!” someone shouted out from behind me. Mustapha nodded knowingly.

“And do you know where Sayyidna Adam, peace be upon him, is from?”

Mustapha asked. “Let me guess, he’s from Efrin?” I said.

“No, he’s from Kafr Janneh, just next to Efrin!” The other workers laughed uproariously again.

I was confused. None of this made sense to me. “How is Maradona from Efrin?” I asked naively, not understanding the joke, but willing to play the part of the fool.

“Who named Argentina, Argentina?” Mustapha asked. I had no idea. “Who?” I asked. “Maradona’s grandfather,” answered Mustapha nonchalantly.

What? I was lost. How?

“Maradona’s grandfather took figs [*tin*] from Efrin,” Mustapha explained, “and it was said, ‘the figs came from Efrin’ [*aja al-tin min ‘efrin*].”

“This was repeated, ‘the figs came from Efrin,’ ‘the figs came from Efrin’ ‘the figs came from Efrin’ [*‘aja al-tin min ‘efrin*,” “*aja al-tin min ‘efrin*,” “*aja al-tin min ‘efrin*”] until the name Argentina came from Efrin! So Argentina is really from Efrin.”¹ We all laughed uproariously.

This may take just a bit of explaining, but the joke is quite simple. The phrase ‘the figs came’ in Arabic is *aja al-tin*. But when you repeat it several times, it begins to sound different. Say it enough times, and eventually you get the word for Argentina in Arabic, *argantin*, so that you’re now saying, “Argentina is from Efrin.” Let’s listen: “*aja al-tin min ‘efrin, aja al-tin min ‘efrin, arjan al-tin min ‘efrin, ar-jan-tin min ‘efrin!*”

Get it? Okay so a simple joke.

“And Adam?” I asked. “How is Adam from Kafr Janneh?” Kafr Janneh is a small Kurdish town next to Efrin, also in Aleppo province.

¹ “*Kan ya ‘khudh tin min ‘efrin, kan yaqulu aja tin min ‘efrin, aja tin min ‘efrin, arjan tin min ‘efrin, arjantin min ‘efrin!*”

Mustapha cocked his head at me and made a knowing face. “Sayyidna Adam, peace be upon him, was from where originally?” From ‘paradise,’ from *janneh*, I responded. “And what happened to him?” He got kicked out of *janneh*. “So that’s why he’s from Kafr Janneh!”

Everyone in the room laughed again. Mustapha smiled proudly, youthfulness shining in his face.

Okay, a very simple joke once again. The word *kafir* means a ‘small village.’ But the verb *kafara* means ‘to renounce,’ as in ‘to renounce Islam.’ So Mustapha is just playing with the idea that Adam left paradise, that he was a *kafir janneh*, or someone who renounced ‘paradise.’

This was my introduction to an ongoing joke about the city of Efrin that continued throughout my fieldwork at al-Furn. Whenever I returned to the bakery after an absence, Mustapha would ask about Efrin and tell the joke. It wasn’t just for me either. Anytime a new worker began at the bakery, Mustapha would tell the story again.

“Let’s quit this job and go to Efrin! *Yalla*, to Efrin!” It was a kind of initiation of sorts. As if welcoming the worker to the bakery by telling him the joke was also a way of reorienting him within the topography of the story—the logic of joke, if you will—which everyone at the bakery all shared and lived by virtue of working at al-Furn.

I realized later that the other workers, especially those from Khan Sheikhun, had heard the joke dozens of times before. They never seemed to tire of it. In each retelling, there were variations added to the story that incorporated new elements. Mustapha adopted the logic of the joke to include different details, depending on the conversation.

These adaptations often exchanged the place of Messi and Maradona for whomever was working at the bakery at that moment. Sometimes it was Mustapha, sometimes it was another worker, sometimes it was me, such that it was *our* grandparents who came from Efrin. And subsequently, in a strange way, us as well.

Eventually, the quip about figs and Argentina [*tin wa arjantin*] would also be dropped and exchanged for other objects around the bakery. Rather than figs, it was the state-subsidized flour that we dumped in the mechanical mixer that came from Efrin, or the bananas that we were eating for lunch with cheap honey and the hot bread we had just baked.

There were also references to zebras, horses, donkeys and other animals that Mustapha claimed resembled people in the bakery, possibly because their grandparents copulated with the respective animals before leaving Efrin. Everything and everyone at the bakery could have their origin in Efrin. Crude as the jokes were at times, there was an ongoing fascination with natality, genealogy, and the possibility of their reinvention that became linked with the name.

The alliterative nature of Mustapha’s puns on which his joke relied (*tin wa arjantin*) is one of many colloquial narrative techniques to which the anthropologist Michael Gilsenan has drawn attention in his seminal study of northern Lebanon, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches*. Narrative as social action, Gilsenan explains, is “used rhetorically in argument, didactically, to demonstrate exemplary behavior by a real man (or its opposite), to illustrate the ways of the world, make claims, show off, mislead and deceive...and...for the sheer pleasure.”² Such performances mobilize tone of voice,

² Michael Gilsenan, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 62.

posture, gesture and movement, as well as facial and bodily expressions to which listeners actively respond as part of their participation in a socialized dramatic theatre. Together, dramaturgical re-enactments of memory and stories produce what Gilsenan calls an “affective charge” created by the “carefully timed, shaped, and pointed evocation of particular events figured and transfigured in narrative performance.”³

But such rhetorical and theatrical techniques are also linked to a long Arabic literary tradition theorizing language and its effectiveness in the world. Mustapha’s puns are especially reminiscent of a poetic device in classical Arabic poetry known as *tajnis*, or paronomasia. Paronomasia literally means ‘to name beside,’ and is derived from the Greek *para* (‘alongside’ or ‘beside’) and *onoma* (‘to name’ from *nomen*). Perhaps most prominently, the eleventh century literary theorist ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani begins his commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* in *Asrar al-Balagha* [‘The Secrets of Eloquence’] with a description of *tajnis*.⁴ For al-Jurjani, paronomasia, which for him entails the repetition of similar-sounding words, is not merely an acoustic ornament. Instead, he emphasizes that its beauty lies in how the figure affects the *conveying and reception of meaning*, not simply its sound.⁵ The device’s effectiveness is due to the additional meaning *tajnis* produces, despite not appearing to do so.⁶ The poet “repeats an utterance as if he is tricking you (*yakha’uka*) into [believing] that there is no additional meaning (*fa’ida*) while providing you with one, and as if he is giving you the illusion (*yuhimuka*) that is not adding anything [to the meaning] while adding [to it] and completing it.”⁷

The literary theorist Lara Harb has argued that al-Jurjani’s writings mark the introduction of a novel aesthetic theory in which wonder plays a new role as an organizing criterion. This shift is part of a well-recognized departure from an older inheritance of Arabic poetics in which the categories of sound [*lafz*] and meaning [*ma’na*] were deployed in debates regarding both the effectiveness and purpose of rhetorical devices, imagery, and figures.⁸ Whereas previous poetic standards were organized around principles of truthfulness [*haqiqa* or *sidq*] and falsity [*kadhib*] and thus a certain theory of mimesis organized around accuracy, al-Jurjani’s writings demonstrate a sustained attention to poetry’s ability to produce an *experience of discovery in the listener*.⁹ Put differently, the grammar moved from semiotics to a kind of reception

³ Gilsenan, *Lords*, 62.

⁴ Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* were widely studied in the medieval Islamicate world. They were famously included within the scope of Aristotle’s larger work on logic, or what is known as the *Organon*, as opposed to stand alone works as they were studied elsewhere. This will matter later as we consider how poetic devices, rhetorical techniques, and imagery were mobilized by subsequent thinkers and writers. See Anne Sheppard, “Preface,” in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*, ed. Geert Jan van Gelder and Marlé Hammond (Exeter: Short Run Press, 2009) and Deborah L. Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (New York: Brill, 1990).

⁵ ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani, “The Secrets of Eloquence,” in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*.

⁶ Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁷ As quoted in Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 64.

⁸ Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets: Ma’na in the Eleventh-Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 44.

⁹ Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 35. But see also Wolfhart Heinrichs, “On the Genesis of the *haqiqa-majaz* Dichotomy,” *Studia Islamica* 59 (1984), and Alexander Key’s *Language*, particularly Chapter 3.

theory.¹⁰ This change is part of what Harb calls novel attention to “the capacity to arouse intellectual curiosity through strangeness, unexpectedness, or obscurity, which leads the listener to reflect and search for the meaning, allowing him to go through the experience of discovery.”¹¹

Crucial to al-Jurjani’s argument is his investment in the concept of *takhyil*, what Harb renders as ‘make-believe.’ Morphologically, the word *takhyil* is the verbal noun of the word *khayyala* meaning ‘to produce an image,’ and is related to *khayal*, which today means ‘imagination,’ ‘fantasy,’ and ‘shadow.’ But as Wolfhart Heinrichs notes, the term has been used in a variety of philosophic, poetic, and everyday contexts, demonstrating lexical and grammatical plasticity.¹² For al-Jurjani specifically, *takhyil* was part of a theory of imagery that entailed, “the phantasmagorical re-interpretation of a fact in poetry, most often by means of mock analogy or phantastic aetiology.”¹³

Whereas as the older school of Arabic literary criticism was based on *extrinsic* considerations that depended on explicitness and plausibility of an image, the new, or what al-Jurjani deemed ‘modern,’ school of criticism reorganized the grounds of poetic evaluation to one based on the *internal* logic of an image and its deployment.¹⁴ In recasting *takhyil* in this manner, al-Jurjani foregrounded the efficacy of meditation, the felt or embodied experience of interpretation, and the latter’s causal effects on the listener. Accordingly, al-Jurjani often speaks about how linguistic structures can produce unexpected meaning by way of mechanisms of hiding and obscuring, misleading and tricking, surprise—what we might call poetic language’s concrete, striking capacity.

Poetic beauty thus comes to depend on mechanisms of conveying meaning in such a way that provokes the listener to *go through* the experience of discovery and ensuing wonder.¹⁵ Here, the emphasis on ‘going through,’ but also ‘crossing over’ and ‘passage,’ as well as the idea of ‘experience’ are crucial. Along these lines, al-Jurjani’s aesthetic theory became part of a larger discourse on wonder in the Islamicate medieval world as that which prompts a passionate, experiential response to God’s inimitability.¹⁶ Such an approach, the art historian Persis Berlekamp explains, often also assumed a cosmological perspective whereby a Neoplatonic model of creation by emanation links objects and effects in casual relations by what was known as ‘sympathy’—a ‘shared’ [*syn*] ‘passions’ or ‘affectability’ [*pathos*]. In other words, wonder suggests a theory of imagery and the imagination as kinds of media that are not only to be *traversed*, but are also embedded in a network of speculative relations. We’ll return to these relations, along with the concept of *takhyil* and its morphological and semantic derivations, including *khayal*, later in the chapter.

¹⁰ There is a productive comparison to be made with the Russian Formalists here, particularly Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of ‘defamiliarization.’

¹¹ Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 11.

¹² Wolfhart Heinrichs, “*Takhyil*: Make-Believe and Image Creation in Arabic Literary Theory,” in *Takhyil: The Imaginary in Classical Arabic Poetics*.

¹³ Heinrichs, “*Takhyil*,” 2.

¹⁴ Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 30.

¹⁵ Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 45.

¹⁶ Zakariyya Qazwini’s *Wonders and Rarities* is the paradigmatic example of this genre. See Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) and Travis Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities: The Marvelous Book That Traveled the World and Mapped the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2023).

Personally, I was fascinated by Mustapha's Efrin joke because of the simple and yet, in my mind, lucid sympathetic logics they demonstrated.¹⁷ The effectiveness of each performance was that Mustapha always linked things, places, and ideas through alliterative, homonymic, and metonymic relations to produce an unexpected and humorous effect—a surplus, of sorts, akin to what Gilson calls an “affective charge.” I did not have al-Jurjani's literary theory in mind when I listened to Mustapha stories, nor did I know that *tajnis* as a literary and rhetorical figure might name the operative logic by which Mustapha's stories became effective. I'm not sure if anyone at the bakery would have either. Instead, I heard in Mustapha's stories and social performativity an imaginative work akin to myth-making or a dreamwork—a type of generativity taking shape in the intensity of the bakery and breadwork that had distinct logics. I could feel myself being pulled into the temporality of the story, crossing over into the ontological coordinates of an oneiric space.

What became clear to me over time was that Mustapha's dramaturgical performances were not only ‘narratives’ but also *aesthetic events*—poetic acts—that not only located the bakery workers in the temporality of contemporary aesthetic production, but also gave shape to life on a perceptually. Such a mode of listening, in turn, thematizes questions of image, form, loss, ruin, invention, trace, and figure. But crucially, it became apparent to me that dough and bread—the work of bread—were the very conditions of possibility for such *poesis*.

Stations of the Breadwork, 'Life and Death of Dough,' Symbolic Form of Bread

Over my time working and making bread at al-Furn, I came to realize that Mustapha would tell his stories during specific moments of the bread-making rhythm. Curiously, he most often performed the Efrin joke while he cut, rolled, and flipped dough with his hands. Something about the touch and smell of dough seemed to be meaningful for the story.

Together, cutting, rolling, and flipping dough forms one of the sequential steps of the bread-making process. Doing so helps manage the activation of yeast in the dough, what catalyzes its inflation and deflation. It is useful to think of the process as a series of stages. There is a kind of cycle of the work of bread that is repeated on rotation day and night, overlapping at certain times and slowing down at others (depending on how much bread Tariq wants) but never stopping. This ensures the steady output of always-fresh bread, what is most important to the customers. The stages of the breadwork or dough-

¹⁷ By ‘sympathetic,’ I am thinking of both Neoplatonic ‘sympathies’ as described by Berlekamp and ‘sympathetic magic,’ famously described by the anthropologist James George Frazer. For an early articulation of sympathy and sympathetic magic in anthropology, see Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 11. For more contemporary anthropological approaches attempting to think the logic of sympathy differently, see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Of course, the list for works on this subject outside of anthropology is much longer but for my purposes see, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), especially “The Prose of the World,” but also Paracelsus and the notion of the ‘signature of things,’ and Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), especially Chapter 6, “The Dream-Work.”

making are colloquially referred to amongst the workers as the “life and death of dough,” or “how the dough lives and dies” [*kif al-‘ajin bya‘ish wa bmut*]. The dough, the workers would tell me, must live and die several times before it can become bread.

The bread-making process goes like this: dough is first made in a giant old, mechanized mixing bowl. The machine is essentially a supersized cake mixer. It has a rotating head attached to heavy metal apparatus, crusty from years of daily use. The mixer operates according to two circular movements: one of the rotating head and the other of the bowl itself. The apparatus is located in the back room of the bakery, near a metal door and window leading to the large backyard where the firewood for the oven is stored in mountainous stacks. This is so that the dough gets fresh air while mixing, or so I was told. It also meant that, in the mid-morning, the sun’s light would shine directly onto the churning elements.

Dough is always made in large quantities. When I first began learning how to mix the dough, Walid told me the recipe for one batch: fifty kilograms of flour, which is the weight of one large sack of state-subsidized flour, twenty-five kilograms of water, three kilograms of sugar, seven hundred and fifty grams of salt, one small bag of dried imported yeast. But he never seemed to really follow it himself. Instead, he approximated the ratio and let the ingredients churn in the oversized bowl, periodically jabbing a chubby thumb into the mixture to check its texture. Hence, the common expression, “*Il-id libta‘rif*” [‘an experienced hand;’ lit., ‘the hand that knows’].¹⁸ Occasionally, Walid added a sniff for good measure. He then would adjust the ingredients accordingly: sometimes a little water, sometimes a little more flour, sometimes a dash of salt.¹⁹

Afterwards, the dough is put onto a large marble tabletop to rest. The workers first splash the tabletop with some cheap oil that is stored in an old plastic water bottle. This prevents the dough from sticking. The marble tabletop is cracked from years of use. The cracks have been repaired with an off-white-colored resin.

If the table is already filled with dough from an earlier batch, it is put into a deep silver metal trough instead. The dough is massive. Carrying it from the still-turning mixer to the next station requires several trips of slinging the dough over one’s shoulder.

A plastic sheet or sometimes an old flour sack is placed on top of the moist dough to keep it from drying out. While resting, the dough slowly expands as the yeast nourishes itself on the sugar. Biologically speaking, one of the workers explained to me, the feeding yeast converts oxygen into CO₂, generating heat that pushes the dough outward from the inside. This creates the peculiar internal structure of the dough—a webbed, sinewy texture—making its shape larger but weight lighter.

The yeast [*khamira*] is the active principle of the breadwork, Walid explained to me. It’s what makes everything productive. The Arabic root of *khamira*, *kh-m-r*, means

¹⁸ Aïda Kanafani-Zahar, “‘Whoever eats you is no longer hungry, whoever sees you becomes humble’: Bread and identity in Lebanon,” *Food and Foodways* 2, no. 1, (1997).

¹⁹ I am reminded of fourteenth and fifteenth century ‘recipes’ for talismanic rings in Islamicate Persia and Levant for which written descriptions and instructions were combined with pictorial images. These recipes, Persis Berlekamp explains, presume that “the talisman can work partly by plugging into [a] system of cosmic sympathies that determines fates.” While bakery recipes may not assume the same cosmological logics as talismanic recipes, their embodied form (the lived knowledge of the bakers) does assume a relation of efficacy between objects and properties that can be read according to different causal logics, including, I want to suggest, a kind of efficacious sympathy. Berlekamp, *Wonder*, 134.

“to raise; to ferment; to leaven.” The energetic quality of yeast is perhaps clearer in the English word ‘ferment,’ which is etymologically linked to the Latin *fervere* meaning ‘to boil.’ ‘Boiling’ is the activity of adding heat or energy, a kind of charging that results in the appearance of bubbles or a state of ebullience. There is thus a change in form or state due a difference in energy.

We find this to be also true in other processes of fermentation, with comparable associations in Arabic. For instance, *khamr*, the result of fermentation, is a general term for alcohol. *Khamira*, the yeast at the bakery, would help us make beer, Walid told me chuckling once when I asked him about the yeast, clearly taking pleasure in the mildly subversive thought.

That the kinetics of charging and expansion is at work in the dough is obvious when you place it under the plastic sheet. It soon overflows, creeping from beneath the covering and spilling off the table’s sides.

Opening the dough at this time—either with a knife or by tearing it by hand—releases a light fragrance and shudder of warmth. The smell is at once starchy and pungent. This is how the workers know the dough is ready. As if to mark a threshold, they often give the dough a big slap, making a loud clapping noise and causing it to jiggle. During my fieldwork, this was often done with a knowing look towards me or one of the new workers, as if to make a point of its corporeality. The gesture can also be sexual, such as in slapping a butt or breasts. The workers never tire at making this point, laughing uproariously while sometimes mimicking copulating with the dough.

Striking the dough bursts the external layer—the ‘skin’ of the dough—releasing the pressure built up inside from the force of the heat. It is in this sighing, the releasing of the tension, that the dough perhaps most resembles a body—a quiet exhalation.²⁰ This is something the workers often note, either in their jokes or more explicitly by saying there is a ‘body’ in the dough [*fi jism*] that ‘breaths.’²¹ The dough quivers.

Although dough’s ingredients may be few, their combinations can take many permutations. All affect its quality. Too much salt, for instance, leads to discoloration in the dough, as well as less rising in the oven. Dough with too little salt breaks and crumbles easily. Salt thus plays a mechanical function, holding together the ingredients in a workable substance. Indirectly, this quality can perhaps be linked to the expression, “*fi bayna khubz we milh*” [‘there is bread and salt between us’] that Tariq liked to invoke—an expression used to convey companionship and hospitality at the level of the figurative (as an image) and alimentary (the sharing of a meal).²² Water can also affect the consistency of the dough. Too much results in problems with the dough’s texture, becoming so slick and moist that its suppleness cannot hold. Too little water, on the other hand, causes the dough to dry and crumble when handled. Whenever the dough is made poorly the workers complain loudly, emphatically cursing the person who made it (regrettably, it was often me). What was striking was how quickly each worker could judge the quality of the dough. A single glance, quick touch, and sniff were enough to

²⁰ For more on the relation between dough and the body, see Chapter 5.

²¹ For more on dough ‘breathing’ and its speculative implications at the bakery, see Chapter 3.

²² As quoted in Kanafani-Zahar, “Whoever,” 50.

immediately know the dough's quality and composition. "*Al-ʿajin kasi* [the dough is good]!"²³

The temperature of the water and the air also affects the dough, particularly the rate of yeast catalyzation. This is directly related to the matter of energy and fermentation discussed earlier. If the temperature of the water or the air is too cold, the dough does not rise properly and becomes sticky and difficult to manipulate. To mitigate problems of temperature, the bakery stores cold water during the summer and hot water during the winter, buying ice in the former and extra fuel for heating in the latter. (Tariq stopped doing so during 2020 when the prices of ice and fuel rose exponentially). The yeast used at the bakery is of an instant, packaged variety, mostly imported from Turkey. It requires warm water and sugar to activate, hence the slightly saccharine taste of the dough. Sugar also accelerates the fermentation process, an important factor when the bakery needs to produce bread quickly.

The use of imported, packaged instant yeast is distinct from many villages in Lebanon where, traditionally, they used leavening as the active agent. Made from a piece of old dough and a small amount of flour, salt, and water, leavening is developed [*tarbiya*] to stimulate fermentation. *Tarbiya* also means 'education,' 'upbringing,' or 'cultivation,' and is derived from a verb meaning 'to increase.' According to one description, "it is therefore said that [the leavening] is given life (*yi'ish*)."²⁴ In these villages, dough is exchanged between neighbors and the leavening is renewed through its use, extending the collective body from the household to the community through a recursive series of gifts and exchanges.

The bodily energetics of dough on display at the bakery in Tripoli is also a prominent characteristic of the breadwork in Lebanese villages. In the villages, bread is traditionally made at home or in shared communal spaces by women, according to the anthropologist Aida Kanafani-Zahar. Kanafani-Zahar describes one such scene: "Kneeling in front of her kneading trough and kneading her dough with vigor, the woman imbues the bread with her strength and being, giving it life." While doing so, the baker pronounces the prayer: 'I kneaded you and became tired/God blessed you/Whoever eats you is no longer hungry/Whoever sees you becomes humble.'²⁵

In this account, the woman kneading sacrifices herself to give birth to life in dough, transferring her vital energy through touch. "Everything happens as if the woman is giving up her strength and transmitting it to the dough...The dough's resting period corresponds to that of the woman, who believes that she will only have regained her energy when it is time for her to begin baking."²⁶ The time of breadwork is thus the time of differential energetics, disclosed by feeling at the level of the body. At stake in this portrayal is what we might describe as a kind of haptic charging. It is the description of a life force (energies of forming) that passes through the baker to give sensuous shape to

²³ This is Alawite slang, found in locations with significant Alawite populations like the Syrian city of Tartous but also in the Jabal Mohsin neighborhood of Tripoli where there is a small but significant Alawite population. For more on the twentieth century development of the Alawite community in Tripoli, particularly in relation to Baʿthist Syria, see in Raphaël Lefèvre, *Jihad in the City: Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²⁴ Kanafani-Zahar, "Whoever," 51.

²⁵ Kanafani-Zahar, "Whoever," 45.

²⁶ Kanafani-Zahar, "Whoever," 54.

the dough, which then returns to the baker in the externalized form of the communal gift of bread. In this way, the activity of the baker also gives shape to itself.

Kanafani-Zahar's ethnography describes bread-making practices in Shiite, Druze, and Maronite villages during the 1980s and 1990s, both before and after the Lebanese civil war. The war does not feature in her account. Instead, she thematizes the 'ritual' and 'sacred' elements of bread-making, particularly those that, following classic anthropological analytics, cohere the collective in relation to the divine. In Christian villages, for instance, the women explain to her that they kneel before the dough because it symbolizes the body of Christ. Kneading the dough allows the body to live, to come back to life. Bread and dough are thus the media by which divine resurrection is restaged, rehearsed, and re-enacted in the present. Such dramaturgical performances are based on what Kanafani-Zahar calls "the spiritual relationship between bread and human beings."²⁷

Although Kanafani-Zahar's descriptions of bread-making vary according to the respective tradition of each village, she suggests there is a more salient distinction than religious difference: that between the village and the city. From such a perspective, the bakery is an urban phenomenon—a qualitatively distinct ensemble of work, material infrastructure, and bodily sensibilities that condition the production of bread. In the city, baking is performed by men as wage-labor, severed from the communal relations of exchange and inheritance that link village kinship not only from household to household, but also across generations. Instead, the urban bakery is governed by capitalist market logics, ones that presuppose a fundamentally depersonalized and abstracted subjectivity in relation to what she identifies as the 'sacred' force of bread.

My fieldwork, however, suggests that such judgment about the desacralization of bread at the urban bakery may be hasty. Instead, I ask: how might the blessed nature of bread [*ni'meh*]²⁸—what Kanafani-Zahar calls the 'spiritual relationship between bread and human beings'²⁹—take shape differently at a bakery in Tripoli? Bread's commodification at the bakery may transform the figuration of this relationship, yes, but might this variation be more accurately described as organized *otherwise* around concrete technologies, rhythms, practices, histories, and subjectivities? Rather than merely be subsumed and alienated by market logics, perhaps the work of bread intervenes in people's lives in different, novel ways. In other words, how might what we know as the sensuous, material properties of dough and the biophysical activities by which it takes shape and transforms into bread at the bakery relate to what anthropologists, art historians, and philosophers of culture call 'symbolic form' or 'figural practices'?²⁸ How might we do so without romanticizing either bread (and thus mourning a tragic loss of authenticity) or those very analytics (as if those concepts referenced essential forms or were understood hermeneutically in terms of fixed 'meanings')?²⁹

²⁷ Kanafani-Zahar, "Whoever," 54.

²⁸ For instance, see Ernst Cassirer's three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). But see also Aby Warburg's idea of "pathos formulas" in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute Publications Programs, 1999), and Friedrich Nietzsche's reflections on the Greek gods in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁹ For a strong critique of the symbol in anthropology, particularly in the study of religion, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993). Basit Iqbal's glossing of Talal Asad's methodological approach to

The anthropologist Charles Hirschkind describes a similar problem-space in his fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt when thinking about Walter Benjamin's melancholic account of the demise of a bodily listening necessary for the activity of storytelling.³⁰ Benjamin argues that the accelerated pace of urban life renders the perceptual schema of the body inadequate for the kind of learning subtending the transmission of storytelling, which for him is fundamentally about the transference of what he calls 'experience' [*Erfahrung*].³¹ (The German *Erfahrung*, it should be noted, is semantically related to the verb '*fahren*,' which means 'to travel' or 'to move,' and conveys a sense of passage).

How can storytelling be passed on in the city where the saturation of speed prevents the very boredom functioning as a condition of possibility for the bodily receptivity of listening? How can one 'hear' another's experience if the perceptual schema has not first been 'trained' to be open, so that one can hear in the first place?

But, as Hirschkind notes, acceleration is not the destruction of rhythm. "Acceleration also generates its opposite, slowness, modern monotony with its distinct qualities of repetition, syncopation, dullness...the body as medium of experience is not transcended here but congeals to a specific rhythm, thickness, and density, a sensory substance."³² The activity of the city may be organized differently, but it has its own distinct rhythms. The onset of urban existence and forms of technic life it introduces capacitate novel modalities of the body as a medium—ones by which the authority of the story expresses itself in alternative styles, rather than necessarily disappear.

I am trying to suggest that what is figured in the 'symbolic form' of dough and work of bread at the urban bakery, as well as the practices and energies by which such form articulates itself and is made sensuously concrete, can perhaps be better understood as organized differently than at the village, rather than lost.³³ It is made to do different work, under distinct social and material arrangements. This is a variation that depends not only on the particular technological and infrastructural conditions of al-Furn, but also on the lives and subjectivities of the bakery workers, which, as we have seen in the previous chapters, are conditioned, among other things, by the sensorium and memory of war and flight, as well as the economic and political collapse of Lebanon and Syria.

It is in this context that Mustapha's jokes and stories recited during the breadwork become especially illuminating. It is useful to recall that Kanafani-Zahar's follows her interlocutors in locating the activity of yeast in relation *tarbiya*, or 'cultivation' and 'education.' The dough must be nurtured and developed before it can become bread. At the same time dough is cultivated as part of the breadwork, might the workers also be shaped by their very labor—educated and taught, so to speak? Here, the theatrical nature of Mustapha's performances might suggest a certain way of seeing al-Furn in a more speculative manner—one that relates storytelling and the breadwork to the transformation

anthropology as neither historicist nor tragic is helpful here. See Basit Iqbal, "Asad and Benjamin: Chronopolitics of tragedy in the anthropology of secularism." *Anthropological Theory* 20, no. (2020): 77-96.

³⁰ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

³¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

³² Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*, 28.

³³ See Ernst Cassirer, "The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences" in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

of the self [*al-nafs*] and heart [*qalb*] by way of the imagination [*al-khayal*] and the passing down of what Benjamin and Mustapha both called ‘experience’ [*Erfahrung* or *khibreh*]. Might this imaginative activity—the ‘affective charge’ produced by performance and labor—be understood as catalyzing a kind of pedagogy for not only contending with memory, loss, and the violence of war, but also for acknowledging the fragility of worldly life itself?

Poetics, Dramaturgy, ‘Ibra

Later, I learned that Mustapha’s Efrin story was actually a play on a joke from a theatre comedy called “The Night of Baghdad’s Fall” [*laylat suqut baghdad*]. The play is from the mid-2000s and written and performed by an older but well-known Syrian comedian and theatre actor, Homam Hout. Before 2011, Hout was known to toe the line carefully with the Assad regime—his work was cautiously critical of the political atmosphere, but in a way that was allowed by the government without being censored or arrested (and was also sometimes accordingly criticized as neither radical nor that substantial).

After the 2011 Syrian uprising, Hout became a celebrated pro-revolution figure. He fled the country and hosted a popular satirical news show on one of the major pro-opposition satellite channel, *Orient News*.

When I first learned this, I admit to feeling disappointed that Mustapha’s Efrin joke was not ‘his own.’ By that point, I had become invested in the idea of Mustapha as an individual, poetic originator—that is, a genius of the European Romantic sort for whom *poesis* is the spontaneous and free activity of creating in the manner described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge or the Schlegel brothers.³⁴ And yet even though the Efrin joke was, from a certain perspective, an imitation—copies of a model—it clearly produced something akin to what Gilsean earlier called an ‘affective charge’ for Mustapha and his listeners—a kind of energetic surplus characteristic of exemplary poetic and rhetoric performance as described by Arabic poetics.

Eventually, the joke’s connection with Hout helped me to see Mustapha’s dramaturgical adaptations as a different kind of poetic labor—perhaps not the secular European Romantic model but *poesis* nonetheless.³⁵ It was an aesthetics that not only drew from tradition of Arabic poetics thematizing repetition, alteration, and adjustment, but also spoke from collective memory and cultural production informed by life in displacement, as well as the sensuous practices of breadwork. Each enactment of the joke was a kind of embodied, compositional exercise in which both the story and the breadwork had to be re-animated in order to be effective. Each rehearsal demanded skillful use of what was already there, what was around. Put differently, the iterative quality of Mustapha’s story and cyclical nature of bread-making were kinds of *technologies* (in the sense of media for cultivating certain ways of living, sensing, and being in the world) that could be mobilized to shape the possibilities of action. They thus

³⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1893), and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988).

³⁵ For more on the shifting grammar of the secular and poetics for the European Romantics, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), especially Chapter 1.

point to their highly artificial and technical nature—artificiality and technicity serving as the condition of possibility for *poeisis*, rather than occluding it.

Along these lines, thinking poetically, the anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo says following her Moroccan interlocutors, is “following the path that words take, deploying oneself in the ways of language: a foreign way, which is not one’s ‘own,’ a way that was there before I came, and will be there after I am gone.”³⁶ It was in this context that I understood Mustapha’s performances as being part of a longer inheritance of Arabic literary and poetic production, even if it wasn’t explicitly referenced. Poetry displaces—it calls into question who, or what, is speaking, and to what aim. I began to listen differently to Mustapha, to how he engaged with the bakery, and to the effects his dramaturgical performances had on his fellow workers. I began to hear how the words *and* the dough and bread carried both performer and audience outside of themselves and into a different temporality, even if momentarily.

The Moroccan poets tell Pandolfo that the poetic word must be hermetic. For poetry is the domain of what they call ‘black words.’ Black words are “veiled words, words aimed at concealing the object of desire, but also at showing desire in the drapes”—not unlike how al-Jurjani praises poetic imagery for its capacity to dissimulate in the folds of figuration, provoking the experience of wonder. Black words are what the poets also call *hajbin*, from the Arabic verb ‘to veil’—“disguised speech that point to the threshold between entities belonging to different world, or different dimensions of the real.”³⁷ As a sheikh tells Pandolfo, a word is a poetic composition: “it is an artifact and saying, an act of speech that *katmess*, ‘touches,’ or *katdreb*, ‘strikes,’ those to whom it is addressed.” Speech is thrown, he insists, “like a poisonous spear.”³⁸ It strikes the listener; the listener is touched. But ‘blackening’—that is, the skilled deployment of rhetorical devices, imagery, and surprise—also *amplifies* the affective force words carry. Veiling modulates and intensifies figuration’s shapes, giving them the capacity to wound.

What I am pointing to is how, during Mustapha’s performances, ordinary words, names, and things seemed to take on a speculatively charged, hermetic quality in the condensed space of the bakery. As if ‘blackened’ by the breadwork and their always-possible incorporation in Mustapha’s stories, they transformed into an enigmatic address—one whose very figural quality makes them at the same time concrete and striking, such that they touch the listener and incite a response. The literary and imaginative scaffolding of this activity of ‘blackening’—Mustapha’s theatrical jokes and stories—requires a certain understanding of the plastic and perceptual quality of images in Arabic literary, philosophic, and theological traditions.

Here, the work the literary theorist Maha AbdelMegeed is instructive. She argues that for certain authors of the nineteenth century Arab world ‘the literary’ was understood as the space of *khayal*, or ‘the imagination.’ But she deploys this language carefully, paying attention to genre and the ostensible ‘literariness’ of writings widely recognized as the first examples of modern Arabic literature. In this nineteenth century Arabic corpus, AbdelMegeed demonstrates how there was a thematic obsession with *visualization* and an insistence on what she calls “bringing objects in front of the eyes.” The ‘literary’ is

³⁶ Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 280.

³⁷ Pandolfo, *Impasse*, 272.

³⁸ Pandolfo, *Impasse*, 281.

thus understood as a kind of optic that can make abstract concepts visible precisely by disclosing their nature as being, always first, a series of images: *khayal*.³⁹

AbdelMegeed shows how nineteenth century Arabic writings pull their readers *into the world of the text*, crossing over into the coordinates of the literary, which, as *khayal*, are at once imagistic and the intermediary space of what Henry Corbin, following Ibn Arabi, calls ‘the imaginal.’⁴⁰ In doing so, AbdelMegeed describes a kind of phenomenology by which the figuration and poetic logic of writing is exhibited visually, such that they can be experienced perceptually by the reader. She demonstrates how these texts were the media by which nineteenth century Arabic writers and readers experimented formally with various shapes of perception and exposure to the world, linking them to the principles of history and science—discourses assuming novel prominence at the time.⁴¹ *Khayal* is crucial in this context because it is both the *technique* deployed (as that which brings images to the mind’s eye) and the *medium* (as the imaginal space opened up as the literary) by which history and science emerge as visual objects—a visibility that is *seen and felt*. Put differently, it is through *khayal* that history and science were *experienced*.

In her observations, AbdelMegeed points us to the perceptual quality of the *khayal*—the way *khayal* gives shape to experiential sensation. We might summarize it in this way: *khayal* as *image* is the aspect of an event or thing as it is told, but also the way in which that event or thing sensually presents itself in perception, not as something that already has meaning but also as something that *shapes* perception, affect, and cognition. This is foregrounded in the rhetorical understanding of *khayal* as *poetry*, where the latter refers to the shaping of speech that is meant to have certain effects on the mind of the listener, giving form to the life of her soul (recall al-Jurjani’s emphasis on the efficacious capacity of poetry to incite wonder). Here, *khayal* is not simply form—it is form as it emerges with *a shaping effect of differential intensity*.

In fact, although we have already explored how the Arabic word *khayal* refers to ‘imagination’ in contemporary parlance, historically it has also meant ‘figure’ and ‘theatre.’⁴² *Khayal* was used to designate live plays with human actors and shadow plays [*khayal al-zill*]⁴³—genres popular in the medieval Islamic world.⁴³ The trope of the

³⁹ Maha AbdelMegeed, *Literary Optics: Staging the Collective in the Nahda* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2024), 31.

⁴⁰ For more on the imaginal as an intermediary world of subtle substances as articulated by Islamic thinkers and philosophers, see the work of Henry Corbin, but especially *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Crucial to AbdelMegeed’s argument is nineteenth century Arabic writers’ thematic foregrounding of seeing, visibility, and speculation.

⁴² Shmuel Moreh argues that in the *Jahiliyya* period and during the first centuries of Islam *khayal* had the primary meaning of ‘figure’ and ‘statue,’ but underwent subsequent transformations and only later “acquired, besides the various meanings of ‘imagination’ (as the antithesis of *haqiqa*: ‘truth,’ ‘reality’), ‘phantom’....and ‘fantasy.’” Shmuel Moreh, “The Shadow Play (*khayal al-zill*) in Light of Arabic Literature,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 18 (1987): 46.

⁴³ Shadow plays were especially widespread under the Mamluk Empire and found its apogee in the work of Ibn Daniyal of Cairo.⁴³ Before that, however, Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham discussed *khayal* and shadow plays [*khayal al-zill*] in his work on optics, *kitab al-manazir*. Ibn al-Haytham defines *khayal* as “[translucent] figures which the *mukhayyil* moves so that their shadows appear upon the wall which is behind the curtain and upon the curtain itself.”⁴³ In a different context, Ibn Hazm of al-Andalus describes in his writings on ethics and conduct [*kitab al-akhlak wa al-siyar*] a kind of shadow theatre [*khayal al-zill*] in which images are mounted on a wooden wheel revolving rapidly, so that one group of images disappears as

world as a shadow play was popular amongst several prominent Islamic thinkers, including Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi. For these thinkers shadow plays were pedagogical devices that exemplified edificatory lessons of theological principles, or *'ibra*. For instance, Ibn Arabi invokes the figure of shadow theatre in *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* to foreground the divine nature of images and thus mediation:

He who would like to know the reality at which I have hinted in this matter should consider the 'curtain play' [*khayal al-sitara*], its images [*suwar*], and who is speaking through these images, as far as the children are concerned who are at a distance from the screening curtain, which is fixed between them and the presenter of the characters who speaks through these. The same applies to images [*suwar*] in this world. Most people are like the children that we posit; how should they know from where the voice comes? The children in this gathering are happy and delighted; the heedless take it as amusement and entertainment, while the learned regard it as a lesson [*'ibra*] and know that God has presented it only as a parable.⁴⁴

The word for lesson, *'ibra*, to which Ibn Arabi refers in this excerpt, is derived from the semantic root meaning 'to cross over,' 'to traverse,' or 'to pass.'⁴⁵ This is also why *ta'bir*, derived from the same semantic root, is "the science of interpreting dreams, since the interpreter has to cross from the imaginary to the rational."⁴⁶ A collection of words is known as *'ibarat* [expressions] because they carry meanings from the tongue of the speaker to the ear of the listener. Like the 'black' words of the Moroccan poets or al-Jurjani's description of effective poetry, *'ibra* and its morphological kin index a felt, perceptual quality.

Ta'bir, which can also mean 'translation,' takes on a different dimension when understood in the context of Islamic ontology.⁴⁷ As a form of 'interpretation' or 'translation,' *ta'bir* is a kind of bridge that both joins and separates the realm of the visible [*al-zahir*] from that which is concealed from ordinary perception [*al-batin*]. It

another appears, as generation follows generation in the world. He thus imbues shadow plays with philosophic and historical significance with an eye towards the genre's implications on ethics, likening the world to a shadow play and the *muharrrik*, or the 'mover' of the figures, to the Aristotelian Prime Mover. Moreh, "Shadow Play," 47.

⁴⁴ As in quoted in Moreh, "Shadow Play," 48.

⁴⁵ Similarly, according to the Qur'anic exegete Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, "the notion of 'edificatory perspective' [*i'tibar*] is derived from the word 'crossing' [*'ubur*] and the proximity of one thing to another." As quoted in Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 60.

⁴⁶ Moosa, *Ghazali*, 60.

⁴⁷ Taking cue from Corbin's reading of Ibn Arabi, it is important to distinguish between the imagination understood as the locus of representation, fantasy, unreality, and illusion (the conventional sense of imagination) and what I called earlier, following Corbin, 'the realm of the imaginal.' For Corbin, the latter is an *ontological* space where the manifestation of semblances is fundamentally anchored in a relationship with truth, the reality of God and the cosmos, and the witnessing of the divine. The imaginal, understood in this way, is both an intermediate realm *and* a faculty of the soul that relates the human to the divine. Corbin takes this idea from the Ibn Arabi's saying, "Everything we call other than God, everything we call the universe is related to the Divine Being as the shadow (or his reflection in the mirror) to the person. The world is God's shadow." In Ibn Arabi's description, we can hear the overlap between *khayal* as 'shadow,' as 'theatre,' and as 'image,' not simply as tropes or poetic devices but also in terms of their ontological implications. As quoted in Corbin, *Alone*, 191.

points to the reality of the mystery of the divine—a gesture producing the experience of wonder, as in effective poetry.

The significance of the figural in the philosophic and poetic sites explored acquires a different meaning when understood in this light. They become emblems of an ethical encounter that are not simply Mustapha's or Homam Hout's or even the Moroccan poets'. Instead, the emblems instantiate ontological pathways and gesture towards an incommensurable crossing over between overlapping worlds—emblems that have a pedagogical quality, that teach us how the world moves. Such edificatory lessons [*ibra*] and translations [*ta'bir*], not only give shape to the life of the soul but also enable one to think of continuity between perception, the material world in its extension, and the media that modify the shapes and movements of perception.

In this attempt to think with Mustapha's dramaturgical performances, however, we cannot lose sight of the artifice of the joke itself. Mustapha's story is about a place in Syria, a real city known to the bakery workers. Efrin's own fortunes during the Syrian war have been turbulent. The Syrian army withdrew from the city in 2012 amidst military pressure from armed opposition groups after protests in the city during 2011, including the Syrian Kurdish military group, the People's Defense Units, also known as the YPG. The YPG assumed command of the city shortly afterwards. Efrin was then incorporated into the dream for sovereign Kurdish land in Syria. But it was a dream that has included accusations of the forcible displacement of Arabs and Kurds as part of the ethnic realignment of the region. Efrin's fortunes dramatically changed again in 2018 when Turkey invaded northern Syria and bombed the city as part of its campaign to destroy Kurdish armed forces.

This brief history of Efrin since 2011 points to the elision of over a decade of political violence in Mustapha's stories about the city—the rapid opening up of political and existential horizons, the collapse of those very horizons over the years, the ethnicization of difference, the circulation of violence. The silent background to Mustapha's jokes, indeed what has changed in Efrin since Homam Hout gave his performance years before, is the very material and spiritual destruction of the city, multiple times over.

In fact, it was at that very moment in 2019 when Russian warplanes conducted a murderous bombing campaign in northern Syria and the Turkish military invaded Syria to eradicate Kurdish forces yet again, that Mustapha rewove the lives of Syrian workers at al-Furn, connecting their ancestral lineages to Efrin—a city of ruins.

Ruin, Athar, Difficulty of the Real

“On the ruins of what's to come / I stand / I'm the cursed Babylonian,” says the Syrian poet Firas Sulaiman in his translated collection of poems, *Forgetting*.⁴⁸ The literary scholar Anne-Marie McManus says that there is a thematic attention to temporality and sedimented destruction—ruin—in contemporary Syrian cultural production.⁴⁹ But, McManus adds, there is a singularity in the kind of ruin articulated by this novel corpus,

⁴⁸ Firas Sulaiman, *Forgetting* (New York: Dr. Cicero's Books, 2016), 17.

⁴⁹ 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 (Autumn 2021).

one that is irreducible to the trope of ruin invoked by the twentieth century Arab modernists who were inspired by archeological ruins and classical Arabic poetic form.

We can see this, for instance, in the recurring motifs of rubble [*anqad*], barren lands associated with Temmuzy fertility of death and rebirth, and *al-atlal* or ‘the ruins’ in Syrian poetic production.⁵⁰ *Al-atlal* [sing. *al-talal*] is a literary motif of the classical Arabic ode, or *qasida*, and refers to the traces of a tribe’s abandoned campsite. It is associated with the opening moment of the *qasida*, the *nasib*, which begins with the lamentation of a departed beloved, provoked by the ruins or remains of the beloved’s encampment [*al-atlal*].⁵¹ The vision of the beloved is referred to as *tayf al-khayal*, a ‘spectral image’ (thus linking desire to the other grammars of *khayal* already explored). *Al-atlal* makes present, in the words of Jaroslav Stetkevych, “a frame of time of the utmost remoteness, where there is only an evanescence of objects.” It is not only an impetus to halt, stand, and remember, but also provokes an impulse to journey.⁵²

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that ruin has been a major trope in modern Arabic literature.⁵³ However, McManus suggests that contemporary Syrian artists, while acknowledging this inheritance, “shift the burden of showing time’s dynamism (and stasis) from life in material ruin to its figuration.”⁵⁴ In doing so, they “aim to ‘create new modes’ of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity that acknowledge, but do not cede, to continuities with past destruction in the Middle East.”

Crucially, “this corpus’ eschatology is propelled by a memory of revolutionary opening, a future whose contours were known and lived, now submerged by signs of an apocalypse that will not stop rearriving.”⁵⁵ In other words, they exhibit a kind of ‘*ibra*’ from the recursivity of ruin—the temporality of the ‘evanescence of objects’—that is grounded by a concrete memory. Syrian artists thus attempt to preserve the singularity that contains the possibility for transformation and invention amidst destruction, the potentiality to meet the heteronomy of destruction differently—a felt and lived vision of a futures past. Time, McManus, says, “is held, suspended but not empty.”

Insofar as Mustapha and the other bakeries workers engage in a kind of vernacular poetic performance that locates them in a tradition of Arabic literature and theology, I find that the dramaturgical performances of the Efrin joke operate in a similar problem-space as McManus describes. That is, although Mustapha and the other bakery workers might not be understood normatively as ‘artists,’ they too wrestle with questions of ruin, of a history of destruction, of how to tarry with violence while also being guided

⁵⁰ McManus, “On the Ruins,” 51.

⁵¹ The *qasida* begins with the mourning of loss [*nasib*], moves to a crossing or passage [*rahl*], and ends in affirmation, normally a eulogy [*madih*]. For more on the *qasida*’s influence on modern Arabic poetics, see Huda Fakhreddine, “Form and History in Modern Arabic Poetics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2021).

⁵² Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in Classical Arabic Nasib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 26.

⁵³ The possibilities for citation are many. See Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, Al-Shidyaq to Darwish* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Anneka Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

⁵⁴ McManus, “On the Ruins,” 49.

⁵⁵ McManus, “On the Ruins,” 47.

by a memory that maintains the possibility of re-invention. Crucially, it is bread and dough that helps provide the figurative and imaginative material for such explorations.

A significant articulation of ‘ruin’ in this context is the figure of *athar*. *Athar* has a wide range of semantic associations in Arabic and is often translated into English as ‘trace,’ ‘artifact,’ ‘monument,’ ‘effect,’ but also means ‘ruin.’ It can refer to, for instance, the archeological remains of past civilizations, such as Pharaonic monuments, as well as the idea of tracing history, or ‘following the trace’ [*iqṭifa’ al-athar*].⁵⁶ *Athar* can also refer to a narrative, such as the study of prophetic sayings and deeds, ‘*ilm al-hadith*, insofar as it continues the presence of the prophet and his call. *Athar* thus continues to hold the presence of an object’s sensory experience, despite its referent’s absence.⁵⁷

Athar encapsulates the intersection between two problems that that I have pursuing in this chapter: one, the limits of perceivability, or the tension between presence and non-presence, the speculative and the material, the way that the invisible can be disclosed as ‘seeable’ and thus experiential; two, the ambivalence between time understood as at once a destructive, ruinous force, driving anything towards death and annihilation, and time as the condition of possibility of culture, civilization, history.⁵⁸

To link these concerns back to the discussion of Mustapha and the bakery, or how the generativity of the work of bread can be understood as a contradictory, agitated site of invention, it is useful to return to AbdelMegeed. In showing how modern Arabic literature as *khayal* functions as a kind of speculative optic, she helps us see that *athar* need not be any particular class of thing (whether archeological, architectural, or a product of culture) but instead is “the effect of the literary optic which *enables us to approach any object as athar*.”⁵⁹

The stance that, seen properly, any object is an *athar* is uncannily close to the speculative ontology of Ibn Arabi and his description of the world as a complex network of imaginative effects or trace-structure. As we have explored earlier, in Ibn Arabi’s vision the extant world is at once a shadow and a mirror image. For Ibn Arabi, this is related to a certain ontology of the divine names where in which they are an intermediate stage between God and the universe—an isthmus, or *barzakh*. The divine names are reflected within the cosmos as *athar* to which *khayal* gives material shape.⁶⁰ Accordingly, *athar*, or the traces of the divine, are the *very phenomena of the cosmos*.⁶¹ They are the creatures, the things, the entities—the images that make the divine names sensuously manifest and give shape to the world.⁶²

For Ibn Arabi, the idea of the world as constituted by images [*khayal*], one that is always already an effect or ruin [*athar*] pointing back to a present absence or an outside,

⁵⁶ Elliot Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 79.

⁵⁷ AbdelMegeed, *Literary Optics*, 169.

⁵⁸ AbdelMegeed, *Literary Optics*, 166.

⁵⁹ AbdelMegeed, *Literary Optics*, 208, my italics.

⁶⁰ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 39.

⁶¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 132.

⁶² For more on the relation between the divine names and form in the *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, see Ali Karjoo-Ravary, “Illustrating the Forms: Ibn Arabi’s (d. 638/1240) *Images in al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*,” in *Visualizing Sufism: Studies on Graphic Representations in Sufi Literature (13th to 16th Century)* (Boston: Brill, 2023).

provokes the remembrance of God. The emphasis on this edificatory lesson [*‘ibra*] is something we encountered in the example of his description of the shadow play. In this sense ruin, or *athar*, incites a kind of wonder at divine creation similar to al-Jurjani’s description of poetry. Ruins not only signify remembrance and the possibility of culture, but also gesture to the inevitability of forgetting, to the moment the poetic figure, or its objective referent, would be obliterated by the destructive force of time.⁶³ Curiously, this movement takes shape in its own way at the bakery in the work with dough.

‘Life and Death of Dough’ Again, Eschatology, Figura

Earlier I described Mustapha’s dramaturgical performances as the scaffolding that ‘blackens’ words and things by way of their incorporation into his performative rehearsals. That is, ordinary objects become poetic and their nature as *athar* (imaginal traces but also bridges between overlapping worlds) becomes visible. There is a two-sidedness to this transformation, a kind of bi-polarity. At the very moment that these ordinary words and things become speculative—that is, as their nature as images pointing to an elsewhere, an outside, is disclosed—they also become sensuously concrete and material. This gives them a striking quality that can at once *wound* (as in, they touch in a way that displaces) and *provoke wonder* (as in, they prompt the experience of departure and discovery). They contain an address that demands a response—a moral lesson, an *‘ibra*, an uncanny crossing over from an immanent, other side.

So far, I have attempted to think this process in terms of the form, logic, and content of Mustapha’s theatrical performances. But as I also mentioned, over time I came to see the work of bread itself as an essential part of this dramaturgical production. Storytelling often took place during a specific moment of the bread-making cycle: mainly, when we would cut, roll, and overturn the dough on the marble tabletop, standing next to each other, shoulder to shoulder.

Cutting, rolling, and overturning the dough, I said before, helps manage the catalyzation of yeast—the transformative principle of the dough. The yeast is what the workers call ‘the spirit,’ *al-ruh*, of the dough and is what must be managed through cutting, kneading, and baking. Others have likened the work of yeast to the desirous, expansive nature of what is known in Islamic theology as *al-nafs*, ‘the self’ or ‘the soul.’⁶⁴

I said earlier that this stage of the bread-making process is what the workers called the “life and death of dough” or “how the dough lives and dies.” This is because dough expands and contracts, inflates and deflates. This bi-polarity of dough is reminiscent of the way we described *athar* as conceptually sitting at the threshold between questions of perceivability (as a material image that displaces the subject and the coordinates of the real) and time (understood at once as a destructive, ruinous force tending towards annihilation, and the condition of possibility for the vital activity of invention and culture).

⁶³ Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 81.

⁶⁴ What a sheikh with whom the anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo dialogues calls ‘the *nafs*’: the yeast/*nafs* is “the fertile land that Shaytan cultivates and tills...he cultivates desires, cravings and longings, and with them blastings and bombs...”, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 315.

I find this grammar of yeast and dough reminiscent of the sixteenth century Italian miller Menocchio's idiosyncratic theory of cosmogony, a vision he describes in terms of cheese curdling and the spontaneous appearance of worms. "I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos...and out of that bulk a mass formed—just as cheese is made out of milk—and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels, there was also God, *he too having been created out of that mass at the same time.*"⁶⁵

Menocchio gives an account of what we earlier called cosmo-poetics—a speculative dramaturgy of cosmic formation using the everyday imagery of coagulation and curdling milk from which not only angels (as worms) appear, but God himself spontaneously generates. As Carlo Ginzburg demonstrates, what is articulated in this description is a vernacular philosophy of immanent, materialist auto-generation. Crucially, the principle of activity in this speculative vision is given form in terms of the tropes of fermentation and decay. Such a description points to its similarities with the making of dough at the bakery.

What if we were to understand the bakers' description of breadwork as the 'life and death of dough' in terms of not merely the activity of yeast nor the becoming alive of bread but also in terms of a speculative dramaturgy of the formation of the cosmos? That is to say, the cyclical nature of 'the life and death' of dough—the fact that bread is always being made in rotation, all the time—and dough's continuous becoming alive (its inflation) and dying (its deflation) is at once a dramaturgical cosmo-poetics and eschatology (recall that the workers say that dough must live and die before it can become bread). This vision, I want to suggest, along with the fact that Mustapha's stories take place during a certain stage of the cosmo-poetic/eschatological rehearsal, contribute to the jokes' *figural* effects on Mustapha and the audience. The breadwork's cyclical repetition enters them into the temporality of vitality and annihilation, of *ruin*.

I use the word 'figural' deliberately. Niklaus Largier develops a compelling account of 'the figural' as an effect of ungraspable character of the world itself—a kind of cosmic flow or emanation prior to any ontology or difference. Through their concrete force and singularity, Largier argues, figures or *figura* produce moments of disruption, which, in their striking energetics, are nothing else than the very act, the sheer fact of participation in their effects.⁶⁶ In this act of participation, figures—as that which flit between the finite and infinite, the soul and the world—pull the subject into an asymmetrical opening. Deploying their plastic force, they give shape to life, "to the soul and the flesh, before it knows itself or anything else, before there is a self and another. It is this plastic force that unfolds a kind of agency that is, without origin, always there, and shared in multiple ways."⁶⁷

Figura is thus a term that enables one to think of continuity between perception, the indeterminacy of the material world, and the media that modify the shapes and movements of perception—the way I have tried to describe the activity of *ta'bir* and *'ibra* gives shape by means of *khayal*. In other words, 'figure' is, at once, a concept and an

⁶⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 53, italics in original.

⁶⁶ Niklaus Largier, *Figures of Possibility: Aesthetic Experience, Mystical Theology, and the Play of Sensation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

⁶⁷ Largier, *Figures*, 35.

analytic that not only allows one to delineate a sphere where the soul is intimately woven into the textures of the world and entirely part of it, but also identifies the discursive operations and technologies by which that sphere becomes available, denaturalizing and opening it to contingency and thus a kind of heteronomous possibility.

This is how I want to read the figural tension between the temporality of Efrin's ruin since 2011 as a synecdoche of Syria's destruction and the elision of that violence in the comedic performances about the city at al-Furn. But by 'figural,' I do not mean the mere *representation* of Efrin's destruction since 2011. Thinking of 'figural' as Largier deploys the concept, I am also thinking of *the work of dough itself* as part of the Mustapha's dramaturgical performance—that is, *dough as producing figural effects*.

It is the 'life and death of dough'—its being cut, its inflation and deflation, its living and dying—that produces the striking effect of ruination at the same time as Mustapha's narrates the joke about Efrin. This ruin is lived and felt, and produces a bodily sensibility that displaces the workers, however temporally, pulling them into the textures of the world. Such movement forces reflection, even as the Efrin story elides the violence of war and ruin. But as Abdelfattah Kilito cautions in his reading of *The Thousand and One Nights*, such reflection does not come without difficulty; without incomprehension or blindness, without hostility and pain.⁶⁸ "What am I doing here, making bread? What I am doing with my life?" was a sentiment that came up not infrequently in these moments. These questions were also turned towards me: "What are you doing here, with us?"

In other words, the joke *and* the work of bread, in their figural and iterative performance, have what we might call a pedagogical effect, an '*ibra*, that gives shape to the life of the soul of the workers as they ponder "on the ruins of what's to come." Might we see this as both transforming the bakery into a space of fable, of possible reinvention and futurity, *and* attuning the workers to the recursive work of violence and the annihilating force of time?

Once, I returned to al-Furn for a short visit and saw Mustapha while he was handling the mechanical oven. He greeted me excitedly, complained about Lebanon and the currency situation.

"Let's go to America!" he smiled and said to me.

"Let's go to Efrin!" I said back to him, laughing, expecting him to do the same.

Mustapha makes a terribly sad face. His body slumps. I am surprised. This was not the reaction I expected.

"Efrin is destroyed. The earthquake. The earthquake! It killed 60,000 people and destroyed Efrin."

What about Khan Sheikhun?

Mustapha makes another sad face, slumping his in terrible disappointment.

"Khan Sheikhun is destroyed too. Not as bad, but destroyed. I can't go back there. Everyone I know is in camps."

The coordinates of the real, what has happened to Efrin can no longer be avoided. Reality sets in, and the lessons are difficult.

⁶⁸ Abdelfattah Kilito, "The Eye and the Needle," in *The Arabian Nights: Norton Critical Editions*, trans. Husain Haddawy and ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

CHAPTER 5: BODY (VIOLENCE)

Dough as Body, Tortured Body, Adnan

Walid asks about the resemblance one day while we are cutting dough for bread. Did I know that dough has a body, he asks me offhandedly as we shovel armfuls of it into the mouth of a machine that cuts the dough into small, individual pieces. I pause and look at him. Walid sees the recognition in my eyes. He turns off the machine (me feeding the dough into the small rectangular opening on the machine's top and he retrieving the evenly weighted pieces spit out from the side, stacking them in the wood trays perched next to him). He walks over to the large, drooping mass resting next to us on the smooth marble tabletop.

Walid casually rips off a substantial chunk of dough from the mass with his hands and expertly rolls it into a large ball with a few agile turns of the wrist. "This [*hadh*]," he says, indicating to the newly formed dough ball, "is like this [*mitl hadh*]." He extends his arm and points to the forearm. "This is like this [*hadh mitl hadh*]," Walid repeats for emphasis, pointing again. He explains. "If you cut open this dough, it will open up just like this arm."

I look at him, puzzled still. Walid retrieves a small rectangular-shaped razor blade from his pocket, like the ones you might find at one of the several barbershops just around the corner. He slices the surface of the dough in a vertical fashion. The taut dough skin immediately pulls apart and sighs, as if relieved.

"You see?" says Walid. He peels back the two now-separated sides of the cut dough, revealing the webbed, starchy damp interior. It smells warm. "This is just like the muscles and veins that run through your arm." He traces the razor edge from his wrist to his elbow for emphasis, and then slices open another part of the dough.

We watch as the soft skin of the dough releases and slowly widens. It reminds me of how a Syrian interlocutor had described looking at his wound after an explosion, surprised. "I couldn't feel anything [*ma hassayt shay'*] because the nerve was cut. The skin and the exposed flesh looked like dough [*mitl shay' 'ajin*]. The bone was showing and the blood bubbled like boiling water [*wa hayk biya' mal al-dam mithl ghali al-maiy'*]..."

Walid's voice brings me back. "This is what I mean when I say the dough has a body [*jism*]." He slaps the dough cheekily. "When you first mix the dough, it doesn't have much body. But then you wait a little and it begins to get bigger. You put it on this table and wait and ooooh..."

His eyes expand and he sweeps his arms open wide to communicate the way the dough rises. "Then the dough speaks [*al-'ajin byahki*]."

The conversation took place on a Tuesday morning during 2019. How might we understand the resemblance between dough and the body described by Walid in this otherwise quotidian exchange?¹ What might it suggest about the bakery as a site of

¹ That there is a similarity between dough, and by extension bread, and the body is hardly a new insight. One only must recall scholastic debates on the ontology of the Eucharist and transubstantiation to get a sense of how the resemblance has been mobilized extensively in different traditions for both mundane and

memory, remembrance, and psychic life? Here, I am especially interested in how such figural relations serve as a catalyst that, meeting other conditions, acts as a kind of opening for something to take effect—a kind of ethical and aesthetic transformation with therapeutic dimensions.² More specifically, I aim to demonstrate how bread and its production serve as part of the infrastructural, social, and embodied conditions for the emergence of remembrance amidst loss. I want to show how remembrance, disclosed in imaginative gestures of resemblance, might be understood not only as an opening to a kind of therapeutic ethics in the confrontation with disaster,³ but also how such openings point to the possibility of collective life taking shape differently.⁴

In pursuing this approach, I follow the lead of Frantz Fanon, particularly in his clinical capacity working at the Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria between 1953 and 1956 during of the Algerian War of Independence. Writing about these cases in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon says: “But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes ineffaceable, wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people.”⁵ The anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo has argued that Fanon’s reference to ‘wound’ be understood not only at the level of ‘mental disorders’ but also at level of culture.⁶ What if we were to see bread in light of Fanon’s statement? What if the colloquial relations of bread with ‘life’ and ‘justice’ were not understood superficially or instrumentally, but rather in terms of their capacity to condition the re-encounter with the ‘ineffaceable wounds’ of war, loss, and catastrophe?

profound purposes. Of the many possible references one could cite here, one of the more interesting regarding representation, the body politic, and sovereignty is Chapter 45 in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). For anthropological account of the sacred and religious elements of dough and bread in Lebanon, see Aïda Kanafani-Zahar, “‘Whoever eats you is no longer hungry, whoever sees you becomes humble’: Bread and identity in Lebanon,” *Food and Foodways* 2, no. 1, (1997).

² In identifying therapeutics, I follow the David Marriott’s reading of Frantz Fanon’s clinical work as a revisal and rearticulation of social therapy, one that has messianic dimensions. *Whither Fanon: Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

³ The anthropology of ethics is a substantial topic. For a helpful overview of the ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology, see Michael Lambek ed., *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham Press, 2010); Michael Lambek, Veena Das, Dider Fassin, and Webb Keane, *Four Lectures on Ethics* (Chicago: HAU, 2015); Cheryl Mattingly, Rasmus Dyring, Maria Louw, and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer ed., *Moral Engines: Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017). In my use of the concept ‘ethics,’ I mean the more limited sense of its Greek etymological root ‘*ethos*’ referring to ‘habit’ and ‘habitation.’ Specifically, I have in mind ‘ethics’ as the ‘practices of inhabiting a world with others.’ See Pheng Cheah, *What is a World: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

⁴ In this way, the chapter’s focus is close to the work of Lara Deeb, who describes the shared activity of cooking in Beirut as part of reciprocal social relations (*mu’alamat*) emerging in the kitchen that enact a specific vision of community through ethical means. See Chapter 5 of *Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 181.

⁶ “It is a culture that Fanon sees as incapable of performing its work, ‘the work of culture,’ *Kulturarbeit* (parallel to *Traumarbeit*, the ‘dreamwork’), which Freud had seen as the condition of possibility of human fellowship, in sublimation of unconscious drives into symbolic and spiritual creations.” Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7-8. Fanon himself anticipates the unexpectedness of the subject following the chapter “On National Culture,” saying, “Perhaps the reader will find these notes on psychiatry out of place or untimely in a book like this. There is absolutely nothing we can do about that,” *Wretched*, 181.

Crucially, I want to show how such gestures of remembrance—what opens the possibility of what I call a therapeutic ethics—take place in spaces outside of the clinic. How might the bakery be viewed as a site of memory and thus recollection?

What I am trying to get at is how bread and its production makes possible another kind of work in the midst of loss and recollection. This work of remembrance is made possible at the bakery by the imaginative polyvalence of dough and bread—a figural plasticity revealed by the resemblances, similitudes, and analogies their sensuous shapes incite for the workers within the rhythm and practices of bread-making. For my interlocutors, these resemblances sometimes took the tropological form of imprisonment and torture—what is a legacy of the violence of the Hafez and Bashar al-Assad government and post-2011 war in Syria, as well as the Syrian government’s military occupation of Tripoli (1985-2005). Accordingly, I attend to how practices of bread-making transform dough into a kind of canvass or aesthetic medium by which workers not only recall memories, but also, more radically, re-encounter those memories with others to experience them differently. To do so, I turn to studies in art history of the Islamicate world on the efficacy of images and the imagination to argue how dough and bread become both a mnemonic device and a medium for the externalization of memory that can then be re-encountered. Building from the insights of Fanon and Omnia El Shakry, I conclude by suggesting that might be understood as the basis for a therapeutic ethics in the confrontation with disaster. Such bodily practices form the ground for an alternative kind of sociality than that which is presupposed state-based approaches.

In posing these questions, I follow the work of the anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis for whom “the sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts—acts which open up these objects’ stratigraphy.”⁷ Sensory memory, she insists, is “not mere repetition but a transformation which brings the past into the present as a natal event.”⁸ Or, as one interlocutor from Damascus puts it: “For me, it’s the smell that’s powerful. I smell the *fatayir* and it reminds me of entering the class as a child, because it reminds me of the smells of pens. But sometimes the smells also remind me of my grandfather who was a baker and owned a bakery in Damascus. Sometimes, it reminds me of my father who was also baker. It’s strange. It’s like I’m there again.”

“It’s like I’m there again.”

To pursue this sensorial and mnemonic approach to the resemblance between dough and body at the bakery, however, we’ll first have to take a detour to another space and recent history haunting the region—the prison. A clue, I suggest, emerges from the kind of figuration this relation immediately provoked for another bakery worker, Adnan.

A few minutes after the conversation opening this chapter, Walid repeats the cutting of the dough so I can film it. I want to capture Walid’s account of the similarity between body and dough so I can view it later. Two other workers, Adnan and Faraj, see me filming and come over to watch. They ask what we are doing. Walid explains to them

⁷ Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.

⁸ Such a performance “is not ‘performative’—the instantiation of a pre-existing code...it is a *poesis*, the making of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked or even null and void. Here sensory memory, as the mediation on the historical substance of experience is not mere repetition but transformation which brings the past into the present as a natal event.” Seremetakis, *Senses Still*, 7.

what he has just told me, “The dough is just like flesh [*lahm*], open it up and it looks just like the inside of your arm, with the veins, muscles and all.”

“Cut open his arm and show me!” Faraj, the oven baker, or *khabbaz*, says laughing, pushing Adnan towards Walid with a big smile. He returns to the oven to resume baking.

Adnan nods. The discussion of flesh has taken him another place. He begins to talk about the most well-known torture techniques in the region. All of them are used by the Syrian government now, he makes a point to tell me. ‘The German chair’ [*al-kursi al-almani*], ‘the tire’ [*al-dulab*], ‘the flying carpet’ [*bisat al-rih*], ‘ghost’ [*shabah*].” Adnan rattles off names. Walid contributes. It is clear they are well known. I have heard of them too. Adnan is especially interested in ‘the German chair.’

Meanwhile, I am trying to get Walid to cut the fresh dark dough again so I can record. I want him to explain what he told me earlier, how cutting dough is like a butcher carving up an animal carcass into parts.

Adnan, however, insists on describing ‘the German chair.’ He talks over my video as Walid, distractedly listening to Adnan, tears apart the dough and stuffs it into the cutting machine. Adnan grabs my hand and shoulder in order to demonstrate how the spine bends backwards on the chair until it snaps.

Most of those tortured this way die, he explains. If they survive, they are permanently paralyzed afterwards. He takes a piece of dough, rolls it out, and bends it in half to demonstrate. He pulls it apart. Sometimes, the prisoners’ hands are tied to their feet by which they are hung upside down from a line, like meat over a grill. He dangles the two halves of the severed dough vertically, one piece in each hand. Hence, the name of this technique, ‘the chicken’ [*al-faruj*].

Walid, still listening, expertly slices the moist dough again into two neat parts that resemble glistening chunks of flesh. Broken bodies, carved dough, and fresh meat blend together.

The conversation with Walid and Adnan was not the only time that the corporeal resemblance between dough and bodies came up. It was a common trope, one that was spoken about in different contexts and with different purposes: sometimes pedagogical, sometimes joking, sometimes descriptive. Depending on the situation, there were varying attributes that workers would point out when making this comparison. Often the resemblance was sexualized, gendered, or familial, but they consistently insisted that dough and the human shared two components: a *jism* or *jasad* [body] and a *ruh* [spirit].

Adnan’s intervention in the previous conversation, however, was one of the most explicit references I heard between dough and a tortured body. That is, the resemblance at stake was charged by violence, an intense visualization that struck me. That such an intervention came from Adnan was unexpected, at least for me. He was a rather strange fellow, both in appearance and action, and was implicitly regarded by the other workers as different. He had problems with his eyes and had multiple surgeries on them.

When I first met Adnan in 2019, told me he still had one more surgery to undergo and was working at the bakery to pay for it. Adnan is no young fellow—I suspect he’s in his late forties—but would work multiple shifts at a time, including the overnight ones, to save up the money for surgery. I worried that he didn’t take care of himself. Once I saw him asleep at work, head rested on a pillow of dough. I woke up him up gently and he

laughed it off, nervously, saying he was fine and that he just needed some more coffee, with extra sugar.

Adnan was one of the few people at the bakery who had previous experience working with bread (his father was also a baker) before coming to al-Furn. Perhaps because of his previous experience, Adnan frequently made reference to bread and dough as forms of *ni'meh*. For him, working with bread was a special kind of work, different than other occupations. Every part of the bakery is infused with blessings [*hasanat*], he would often tell me. This was a sentiment repeatedly expressed to me and other new workers by al-Furn's boisterous owner, especially when I was first learning how to bake. Adnan himself didn't have a particularly intellectual understanding of this approach to dough and flour, but he regularly prayed at the bakery and he often used *hadith* [sayings of the Prophet Mohammed] during our conversations when making points.

Despite this recognition of bread's 'blessed' character, however, Adnan frequently made mistakes while working, much to the chagrin of the others. Faraj, the *khabbaz*, would often yell angrily at Adnan because when the latter was responsible for making and rolling dough, it often rose unevenly or sometimes not at all.

"*Jahsh* [an ass]," he said, flicking his head in the direction of Adnan. "The yeast wasn't allowed to sit, it needs to breath. And so now it's not rising." For all his ostensible experience and family history working with bread, Adnan was always a beat off the rhythm of the bakery. He was neglectful, and often forgot to begin making the next batch of dough in a timely fashion, which in turn caused him to speed through the process to catch up. Or, he would work so quickly and enthusiastically that the dough wasn't able to rest and the yeast did not properly activate.

Once when Adnan and I were making *ka'k*, I spotted some maggots in the sesame seed mix. They were probably attracted by the cheap pomegranate syrup mixed into the seeds, which helps the latter stick to the dough and also gives the *ka'k* a slightly sweet profile. The light sweetness balances well with the tartness of the sumac that people like to eat in *ka'k*, a sesame-covered bread and Tripoli favorite. Curious, I took several photographs of the seeds and maggots together. Adnan made an especially repulsed face as I took the pictures. "The sesame isn't clean [*mish nazif*]," he said, screwing his face up in an expressive, disgusted gesture. "But the maggots will burn in the oven."

As he made a face, I noticed, perhaps for the first, that Adnan's teeth were rotten. That is, what few teeth he had left. I asked him about it, playfully. He responded nervously, "It's a long story," before breaking out a toothy smile. Adnan told me that after he saves up more money he wants to replace his teeth, but that there's not any pain right now so he doesn't need to have an operation yet.

I asked Adnan how his teeth got to be so rotten and disfigured but he demurs. Later, I learned from others at the bakery that it—the "long story"—is related to the time Adnan spent in prison in Syria. Faraj tells me this one day, after Adnan has left the bakery, while he is shoveling dough into the oven. When Faraj sees my surprise, he shrugs and tells me that everyone knows someone who has been in Syrian prison.

Prison, Torture, Confinement and Expansion

The figures of torture and imprisonment loom large in the collective imaginary landscape of many Syrians today. It is difficult to overstate this feature of contemporary Syrian life.

As Faraj already intimated, almost every Syrian with whom I have had close contact has had a relative, or someone intimate, imprisoned at some point, if not been incarcerated themselves. Detention, in its presence or absence, is part of everyday life.

While the groundwork for the extensive prison system in Syria was laid by Hafez al-Assad in the late 1970s and early 1980s when he launched a brutal repressive campaign against Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups and leftist organizations, the network was greatly expanded by his son Bashar after 2011. An already existing infrastructure was thus amplified and intensified, its tendrils rhizomatically extending deeper into the roots of the country and psyche of its people. This included in Tripoli, which the Syrian army occupied from 1985 to 2005, and was understood by many in the city to be infiltrated by Syrian intelligence, even after the army's military withdrawal.⁹

The effects of this system have been devastating. The NGO Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated in a 2019 report that 1.2 million Syrian citizens have been arrested and detained since 2011.¹⁰ The organization has also documented the deaths of nearly 14,000 Syrians due to torture during that same time, the vast majority at the hands of the Syrian government. It suggests that the actual total is likely to be far higher, due to its inability to access and verify information. And yet, despite that restriction, "no month in the all years since 2011 has passed without us documenting dozens of deaths due to torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers."¹¹ The 2019 Syrian Network for Human Rights report is only one of many written by Syrian and international human rights organizations recording stories of and crimes against detainees.¹²

So central is the figures of prison and torture to everyday Syrian life that the exiled opposition intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh argues that they have forged a distinct form of life organized around a heightened acuity to the vulnerability of the body and fragility of collective life. "It is the bodies upon which authority has recorded the epic of its clear victory," al-Haj Saleh says, "and it is also upon them that it has drawn the lines of its power and violent but vacant tyranny."¹³

Al-Haj Saleh is well positioned to know. He was a political prisoner for sixteen years during the Hafez al-Assad era. This included incarceration in perhaps Syria's most notorious prison, Tadmur, located just outside of the desert archeological ruins of Palmyra and which, the Syrian writer Robin Yassin-Kassab notes, "resonates terribly in the Syrian imagination."¹⁴ The Syrian poet Faraj Bayraqdar, also a former prisoner of Tadmur, once called it "the kingdom of death and madness." Tadmur is also well known in Tripoli, as Lebanese too were detained in the prison during the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath.

⁹ For more on the Hafez al-Assad-led government in Tripoli, see Raphaël Lefèvre, *Jihad in the City: Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Documentation of 72 Torture Methods*, October 21, 2019.

¹¹ Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Documentation*, 2.

¹² See, for instance, Amnesty International, *'I Wanted to Die': Syria's Torture Survivors Speak Out*, 2012; Human Rights Watch, *If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities*, 2015.

¹³ Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *At Last, Boys! [Bi-l-Khalas, Ya Shabab!]*, as quoted in R. Shareah Taleghani, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ As quoted in Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 12.

Provocatively, al-Haj Saleh suggests that more than simply kill or enact physical harm, the violence performed in Syrian prisons has poisoned the land and its people—a contamination, like the force of violence, not contained by state borders. This also manifests in the mythological. The ancient Arabs believed that a bird named *al-Sada* leaves the body of a slain man and shrieks unceasingly until revenge is taken, al-Haj Saleh says. “Today there are undoubtedly tens of thousands of *al-Sada* birds crying out for revenge all over Syrian skies,” he speculates. “This mad violence must have released armies of such ghouls from torn and ruptured Syrian flesh.”¹⁵

In a similar vein, the 1982 massacre of thousands of citizens in Hama conducted by the Syrian army under Hafez al-Assad—the culmination of a years-long campaign against the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood—produced a referential genre of stories, rumors, and bodily inscriptions that was regularly, if quietly, deployed and circulated amongst Syrians in the years that followed. Whispered in the darkness, reports of the severing of fingers, hands, and ears in search of jewelry after the massacre, or the gouging of doctors’ eyes who tried to help, were enduring images of the Hama event—visceral reminders of the lurking threat to even the incipient thought of political opposition.¹⁶ In this way, neither prison nor massacre existed at the margins of the polity. Instead, they have been the very scenes by which collective figural landscapes have been forged under the Assad regime—akin to what the anthropologist Michael Taussig describes in the context of Colombian shamanic healing rituals as both “implicit social knowledge” and a “dream dialogue” or “oneiric underworld.”¹⁷

The political theorist Salwa Ismail argues that violence, exemplified by the prison and massacre, has been foundational to the formation of subjectivity during the rule of the Assad regime. “Structurally and operationally,” Ismail says, “the political prison is continuous with the polity: disciplining and remaking recalcitrant subjects while being a specter for the purposes of instruction of the wider population.”

Crucially, she also points to how urban spatial arrangements in Syria are structured by state surveillance agencies and quotidian acts of violence at the hands of security members. This establishes a line between the ‘inside’ of prison and the ‘outside’ of the city.¹⁸ More than simply contiguous, however, Ismail argues that the structure of the prison is the very archetype for the organization of space in urban Syria—a typology organized around the ubiquitous threat of either targeted or arbitrary violence. Put differently, the inside of confinement is externalized to produce the outside, thus rendering the city *a modality of the prison*.

It is now common to hear of families in which a kin member mysteriously disappeared or was openly taken, arrested by one of the four major state security branches (Air Force Intelligence Directorate, General Intelligence Directorate, Military Intelligence Department, Political Security Directorate), only to discover years later that that person was killed—sometimes long ago—when photographs of deceased prisoners are leaked online, or when a newly released prisoner relays rumors of inmates. This is the

¹⁵ al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible*, 28.

¹⁶ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory, and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7.

¹⁷ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 328-9.

¹⁸ Ismail, *Rule of Violence*, 6.

case despite efforts to discover information about the disappeared through illicit bribes, personal connections, and whatever other means might be available. Many families still do not definitively know the fates of loved ones. Each time there is a fresh batch of leaked photographs, they are forced to scroll through the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of images displaying mutilated bodies for news.

Perhaps the largest of the leaked caches—images of nearly seven thousand corpses—was disclosed in 2014 by a defected police photographer codenamed ‘Caesar’ whose official government task was to photograph those killed in Syrian prisons. It is said that one Syrian father died instantly upon seeing his lost son amongst the Caesar photographs. This was a story I heard often repeated in 2020 amongst my Syrian friends when the US began implementation of a series of economic sanctions against Syria, dubbed the ‘Caesar Sanctions’ after the same defected photographer who fled to the US and anonymously testified to Congress about the horror of Syria’s prisons.

Amongst Syrians, one of the most well known accounts of the country’s prisons is the semi-autobiographical novel, *The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer* [*al-qawqa’ a: yawmiyyat mutalassis*].¹⁹ Written by Mustapha Khalifa, who, like the protagonist of the narrative, was immediately imprisoned for thirteen years upon returning to Syria after having studied in France during the 1980s, the novel was taken up by opposition activists after 2011 as a rallying cry against the Assad government. The book was commonly recommended to me by Syrian activist friends when I asked why they chose to oppose the Assad regime, refusing to return to Syria while it was still in power.

In the novel, Khalifa details an intensified world of systematic torture and ferocious murder, disfigured bodies invested by the desire and capriciousness of violence. Sometimes called ‘the gospel of the Syrian Revolution’ [*injl al-thawra al-suriyya*], *The Shell* raised awareness of the regime’s brutality and its uncompromising nature amongst a younger generation of Syrians born after the 1982 massacre of Hama, one raised in the event’s silences and shadows. While Tadmur is arguably no longer the most feared prison in Syria as it was under Hafez al-Asad—its infamy and activity surpassed since 2011 by other Damascus-based prisons such as Seydnaya, ‘Adra, and Mezze—the writings about it, what the literary scholar Shareah Taleghani calls Syria’s “prison literature,” serve as an uncanny imaginative link between Syrian generations, past and present.²⁰

Let us linger a little longer on *The Shell*. The novel’s moniker ‘gospel’ [*injl*] is perhaps peculiar, given its brutal content. We might say that the nickname of ‘gospel’ indexes Khalifa’s Christian inheritance, but in making such a claim we also elicit associations of divine orientation as the ‘good news’ of revelation. On the one hand, ‘the good news’ of the text could be akin to a disclosure, one that cuts through an illusory exterior to a difficult interior—the truth of violence under the Assad regime. From the silence emerges the laconic word, from the darkness the recalcitrant light. On the other hand, the revelatory quality of the text could perhaps evince an even more difficult message. Curiously, in a 2019 interview about the novel Khalifa expressed a certain nostalgia for prison: “At times, I miss some of the social and human aspects of prison

¹⁹ Mustapha Khalifa, *The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer* (Northampton: Interlink Pub Group, 2016).

²⁰ Taleghani, *Readings*, 3.

life. I say this honestly: some of the best people I have ever met in my life were in prison [*min afdal al-nas al-dhina ‘ashartuhum fi hayati kanu fi as-sijn*].”²¹

What might we make of Khalifa’s enigmatic statement, made some twenty-five years after his release from prison and almost a decade after 2011? I simply note that Khalifa appears to point us towards what we might cautiously call the expansive, productive capacity of confinement. Perhaps unexpectedly, Khalifa’s statement could be understood as directing us towards the way in which prison could be understood as *opening up a certain kind space* that makes possible a different kind of sociality; it points to the movement of ambivalent expansion, rather than the constriction normally associated with prison.

To be clear, this is not to romanticize the horrors of prison, its unspeakability, but instead to note the specificity of sociality disclosed by Khalifa. “I miss some of the social and human aspects of prison life...some of the best people I have ever met in my life were in prison.” What would it mean to dwell on its strangeness, its foreignness, and, in a certain way, its impenetrability? A sociality born from intense confinement and terrifying vulnerability, the space of death.²² The prison might then become a space of difficult possibility, confinement a point of muted articulation.

In attempting to think analytically about the bakery in Tripoli in relation to the political violence and imprisonment of Syria, I have found the work of the anthropologist Allen Feldman instructive. Feldman’s *Formations of Violence* has been a touchstone for those pondering the peculiar generative capacity of political violence, especially as it manifests itself in bodily fashion and within the confinement of prison. Salwa Ismail, for instance, draws from Feldman when she reads a series of prison memoirs written by formerly incarcerated Syrians, including Khalifa, to demonstrate how torture unmakes and remakes the body through a series of violent inscriptions. This is what Ratib Sha‘bo, a former detainee of Tadmur, calls in an Arabic neologism *istidmar* (combining *damar*, meaning ‘destruction’ and ‘ruin,’ and Tadmur) to describe the lived experience of and being subject to the Tadmur regime of violence.²³

I have also found it useful to think with Feldman’s *Formations*, but in a different way. In his account of the Northern Ireland prison system—one which was spatially and temporally arranged to break not only the bodies and minds of the incarcerated but also any sense of collectivity—Feldman explains how political prisoners carefully organized Gaelic language lessons and hunger strikes amongst themselves as a form of refusal. In doing so, they not only subverted prison authority, but also, more radically, attempted to reanimate an occulted Gaelic imaginary and shared inheritance. At the extremes of biological endurance and physical constriction, they opened a figural space for the possibility of re-temporalizing a latent form of life.

²¹ Mustapha Khalifa, “Author of ‘The Shell’ to DW Arabic,” 2019, <https://www.dw.com/ar/%D9%85%D8%A4%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80dw-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/a-48333358>.

²² I take the phrase “space of death” from Taussig’s *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.

²³ As quoted in Ismail, *Rule of Violence*, 42.

Drawing upon an archive of images and rules of engagement from this Gaelic heritage, the prisoners reorganized the biological limits of their bodies (imprisonment, hunger strikes) within alternative symbolic coordinates and temporal horizons, ones that linked them to the living and the dead beyond the physical confinement of prison. A conversion of social consciousness was thus founded on the conversion of the body and the self through ascetic disciplines and pedagogy.²⁴ There was, as Feldman describes it, “a translation of temporal schedules from the singular biological finitude of the dying hunger striker to the magnitudes of mass protest and even insurrection beyond prison. Immersed in the political efficacy of the signifying body, the political prisoners transcribed biological time into something else: epochal time.”²⁵

Put differently, the biological necessities of the incarcerated, including bodily functions as basic as consumption and defecation, were mobilized and re-temporalized — what Feldman calls ‘resignification’ — by the prisoners according to an alternative referential repertoire and grammar (what the philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck calls a “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”) at odds with prison authorities *and* their former lives.²⁶

But this is not all. Amidst this process of ‘resignification’ — a kind of fracturing of former lives and reassembling induced by the pressure of confinement — Feldman suggests that sometimes, and always unexpectedly, there was something like an event: an unforeseen point of suspension and dispossession in which the world took shape differently. I want to suggest that this is akin to the figurative work of what some anthropologists and critical theorists call *sympathy* or *resemblance* in the moment of ritual experience, wherein a new kind of possibility emerges.²⁷

Feldman’s vocabulary of violence and body thus provides a more precise language to ponder the structural similarities between the bakery and the prison. Thinking from both a historical and figural basis, I have tried to provide some context about the social infrastructure and imaginative landscape relevant in order to think of al-Furn in terms of confinement, expansion, and resignification. In turn, an analytics of confinement and political violence, alongside the biological and symbolic qualities of dough and bread at the bakery, provide the coordinates to understand the kind of figuration that emerges during the iterative rhythms and repetition of the work of bread. These are gestures made possible by their everyday context and yet, always unexpectedly, mark a break from it — what Seremetakis called, regarding sensory memory, a “transformation bringing the past into the present as a natal event.” In moments of such opening, the world can take shape differently, and new temporalities and possibilities become available.

²⁴ Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 226.

²⁵ Feldman, *Formations*, 225.

²⁶ Reinhart Koselleck juxtaposes what he calls “the space of experience” and “horizon of expectation” as temporal coordinates alternative to that of ‘historical time’ i.e. the linear passage of past, present, future. To that, I add, following Feldman, ‘biological time.’ See *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²⁷ For an early articulation of sympathy and sympathetic magic, see James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 11. For more contemporary anthropological approaches, see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

Similitudes, Images, Dramaturgy of Psychic Life

We may perhaps seem far from the resemblance between dough and the body at the bakery in Tripoli with which we began this chapter. And we may also surmise that the similarity and the conversation it elicited do not need further speculation to understand them, given the history and political and labor conditions I briefly described. But I want to propose that, at certain moments for al-Furn's workers, the sensuous and embodied practices of bread-making transformed the bakery into a space of images and resemblances, and thus imagination and memory.

This is because dough, particularly when made in large quantities, functioned like a kind of canvass or plastic medium (as in the plastic arts). During the flow of work, my interlocutors would see concrete figural shapes in the contingent lines, folds, and creases of the dough that they would recognize and name, as Walid and Adnan did earlier. In turn, these shapes would prompt stories, conversations, and reflections that they shared with each other, and with me. The resemblances, or images, workers saw in the dough thus catalyzed a kind of mnemonic work that was singular, and yet collective. Such openings of aesthetic and psychic apprehension continued as the dough sat and rose while the yeast activated, subtly changing the former's texture, feel, smell, warmth, and appearance. The materiality and sensorial qualities of the dough issued an imaginative demand on the viewer, one that points to the efficacious force of images.

Speaking of apotropaics (meaning 'warding off' or 'turning away' but also 'flight') in the medieval Islamic world, the art historian Finbarr Flood explains that the model of representation does not suffice to explain the implied efficacy of such objects.²⁸ Instead, he posits a different way of understanding their semiological functioning and power. "If representation assumes the image an inert and inadequate copy of life located elsewhere, this alternative concept of the image, which might termed presentation or (following earlier scholars) 'presentification,' is premised on the possible dissolution of the distinction between image and imaged, *the potential of the image to instantiate life rather than represent it, acting with the power of the creature that it depicts.*"²⁹ At stake in this claim is an alternate conception of reference, one that assumes the capacity of images and words to partake in the nature of their referents. Crucially, this capacity is organized by both symmetry and contact, and thus operates according to a logic of sympathy.³⁰ The reference, having taken on the qualities of the imaged, becomes *a living image*.

Such a notion of the image is one by which the image and imaged have a relation of *participation*, at once grounded by and extending to the perceiver in, perhaps counter-intuitively, a *tactile* relation. The viewer is *touched* by the image *and* the imaged. The tactile nature of the visual can be understood in terms of an Aristotelian-based model of the psyche or the soul in which the sensorium, including the five outer senses, is

²⁸ Finbarr B. Flood, "Animal, Vegetal, and Mineral," *Representations* 133 (2016): 20-58.

²⁹ Flood, "Animal," 45. My italics added.

³⁰ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 11.

undergirded by the more primary sense of touch.³¹ Or, it can be thought in terms of, as the art historian Persis Berlekamp suggests, a Neoplatonic model, often understood as popularized by eleventh century philosopher Ibn Sina in the Islamicate world. According to Ibn Sina, similarity and efficacy between two objects—not just of form but also of substance—are grounded in a doctrine of emanation, the direct result of contact during the metaphysical procession from God and its return.³² Sympathy and its efficacy in the world would then be understood as activating ontological relations occulted by the multiplicity of beings in the finite realm [*al-dunya*], but shared in their orientation to the divine eternal—an outside.³³

Saba Mahmood, writing about secularism and the semiotics of representation, suggests that the term ‘icon’ is helpful in this context. Whereas a secular model of semiotics, such as Ferdinand de Saussure’s, assumes the arbitrary or unmotivated relation between signifier and signified (reference and referent), an iconographic model functions differently. An icon is not simply an image, Mahmood explains, but also points to a persona, an authoritative presence, or shared imagination. The power of an icon, she says, “lies in its capacity to allow an individual (or a community) to find him- or herself in a structure that has bearing on how one conducts oneself in this world.”³⁴ Analytically, the term ‘icon’ directs us to the form of relationality binding the subject to an object or an imaginary. But it also implies a sense of embodied habitation and intimate proximity. This corporeal and sensorial structure of relationality is what Aristotle called *schesis* and was later incorporated into the Neoplatonic tradition. Mahmood explains that the three Abrahamic faiths adopted *schesis* and a range of other key Aristotelian and Platonic concepts and practices that were historically modified to fit the theological and doctrinal requirements of each tradition.³⁵ Far from becoming extinct, these ideas and practices have been reconfigured under conditions of new perceptual regimes and modes of

³¹ See Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). For a recent anthropological account of touch in relation to the senses, see Nadia Seremetakis, *Sensing the Everyday: Dialogues from Austerity Greece* (London: Routledge, 2019), especially Part III.

³² Persis Berlekamp, “Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation: Talismanic Efficacy and Slippery Iconographies in Early Thirteenth-Century Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia,” *Representations* 133 (2016): 85. See also Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³³ Crucially, such relations take place on the level of images or *suwar* [singular: *al-sura* but also meaning ‘shape’ or ‘form’] because, according to the popular views of the eleventh century Ikhwan al-Safa, “all things are images presented in matter.” In fact, according to such a philosophy, the universe itself is nothing but “made of images.” Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *The Origins of Visual Culture in the Islamic World: Aesthetics, Art, and Architecture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 67.

³⁴ Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 836-862.

³⁵ It is perhaps useful to think of this with Eastern Orthodox icons in mind. Clemena Antonova suggests that one of the characteristic features of icons is the concept of simultaneity—one perceives objects simultaneously, all at once. I am suggesting that the spatialization of the soul or psyche (memory, desire, and gesture, but also psychic conflicts, repression, and defense) onto the bakery and its objects, practices, and forms (i.e. dough instantiating bodies) in certain way parallels this effect, insofar as it allows one to experience opposing or contradictory psychic forces *at once*, producing an effect of ambivalence. But the effect of simultaneity in icons also points to the possibility that there is a view from nowhere, which is to say an impossible perspective that can see all at once (simultaneously). In other words, icons produce the effect of an atemporal non-place, or what can be also understood as a God’s eye point of view. Put differently, it produces the effect of the divine, which is why it sometimes is understood as inducing a mystical experience. *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon* (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2010), 172.

governance—a reconfiguration, Mahmood argues, “that requires serious engagement with the subterranean character of these practices.”³⁶

With this background in mind, might we rethink the efficaciousness of the resemblance between dough and the body described by Walid and Adnan? I have suggested a range of semiotic logics that, while distinct, each imply the effective force of images in a non-representational (and we might add, non-secular) mode. Dough in its resemblance to the tortured body *instantiates* the latter’s fleshliness, animating the figural relation in a manner that connects with the sensibility and subjectivity of the viewer.³⁷ The dough, then, is no longer simply an image that *looks* like a body (as in, the dough represents a body), but, as an image, *is* indissociably a ‘dough-body’—a living image. Speaking scholastically, the living image of the dough-body is a *material instantiation* of what Ibn Sina calls the psyche or the soul [*al-nafs*].³⁸ The dough-body is summoned forth so to speak, such that a kind of psychic dialogue, not confined to the inside, can be played out in the objective world. But at the same time, in its objectivity (i.e. that which stands before the subject) *the image also issues a demand*. The worker/viewer is seized by the image and, having been struck, enters in a kind of theatre of figuration and memory.³⁹

To be clear, I am not suggesting that this happens all the time. In fact, it is precisely the gesture of resemblance that marks a break from the everyday context of the bakery. Resemblance points to the time of the practices of bread-making—an ethics of bread as at once *ni‘meh*, a blessed good, and the product of industrial, state-subsidized migrant labor—becoming the time of image and memory; it both relies upon and produces a distance. In my ethnography at al-Furn, I found that the dough-body resemblance intensified at certain moments in the bread-making process for the workers, even as it, always unexpectedly, struck them in an interruptive moment, such as what we saw with Adnan. Crucially, such semiotic logics do not resolve the tension of what dough or bread resembles—a relation that depends on the singularity of one’s life. This figural indeterminacy of the dough—its plastic quality—is the vacant site where imaginal forms take shape. Instead, we might say that the resemblance emerging from the materiality of the dough facilitates the creative exercise of one’s powers of discernment

³⁶ Mahmood, “Religious Reason,” 850.

³⁷ This is part of what Carlo Severi describes in his anthropology of memory and imagination as the operations of “projection and association” that take place in a ritual context. Severi highlights for us the “mode of relation that is established within a tradition between a form considered as a material trace...and the mental operations, the acts of looking, and the types of associations that it suggests.” Carlo Severi, *The Chimera Principle: An Anthropology of Memory and Imagination* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 66.

³⁸ We can hear in this energetic movement a description akin to what Friedrich Theodor Vischer called *Einfühlung* or ‘empathy’ in the context of his discussion of the symbol and Romantic aesthetics. Vischer articulates a process by which the inanimate is given force through empathy via the production of a demand that Vischer calls ‘the beautiful.’ “The beautiful, that is, the act, the contract between subject and object, through which what we call the beautiful or beauty emerges, is an interpenetration [*Ineinander*] of multiple acts...thus one of its main forms, the transference of the soul from the subject into an inanimate object, will be such an interpenetration, a summation.” Friedrich Theodor Vischer, “The Symbol,” *Art in Translation* 7, no. 4 (2015), 433.

³⁹ I find Seremetakis especially insightful here: “The involuntary circuit of the senses reveals that embodied performance is in part constructed out of the cross-communication of the senses and things. This speaks of a social aesthetics that is not purely a contracted or negotiated synchrony but one that is embedded in, and inherited from, an autonomous network of object relations and previous sensory exchanges.” *Senses*, 7.

and interpretation.⁴⁰ It facilitates a kind of speculative and sensorial hydraulics, stimulating the workers' cognitive and emotional faculties that move outside of the subject, become objective, and return to the self in therapeutic fashion.⁴¹

As I have tried to suggest, this 'event' of striking association or resemblance is inseparable from the recent history of the workers and the region. That is, the bakery workers can both touch and be touched by (notice the passivity here) dough at certain moments precisely because of how subject formation in the recent history of Syria and Lebanon has been wrought by violence, ambivalent memories, lived aporias, and confrontation with the caprice of destruction. My aim in bringing up the social imaginary of the prison, the political violence that capacitates it, and its recent history in the region is not to exhaust the possibilities of relevant context or history for psychic and affective activity at al-Furn. This includes the social and infrastructural conditions that support such laboring, migrant bodies. Instead, I do so in order to give meaningful weight to the quotidian gestures that took place in the rhythm and practice of work.

Being at the bakery meant being in sociality with others. The semiotic logics glossed above suggest that resemblance not only breaks from ordinary context to stage a dialogue with oneself through memory's externalization as an image, but even more radically, is experienced *alongside* others. It catalyzes a renewed engagement with others from the indeterminate ground of memory. At al-Furn, it was a staging that could be played out repeatedly, again and again, with new actors and different scripts, with every cycle of making bread and dough. Resemblance thus facilitated the possibility of reliving or confronting certain difficult memories with the help of others. One's relation to memory, in its making and un-making, could take shape differently—what for Feldman was a 'resignification' and Seremetakis a 'transformation,' but what I prefer to describe as a moment of suspension and dispossession disclosing another kind of possibility, when the world can be cast differently.

Does this not recall Khalifa's statement about the peculiarity of sociality described amidst confinement? "At times, I miss some of the social and human aspects of prison life. I say this honestly: some of the best people I have ever met in my life were in prison." Is this not unlike the movement akin to the expansion and contraction of dough, its breathing in and breathing out, the quiet exhalation upon being cut? Might this allow for a perspective of seeing the bakery as a space of *experiential* knowing for its workers, a type of knowledge that is felt—and what is, as I want to suggest here, a kind of social experiment with life?

A few years after the ethnographic scene at al-Furn described earlier in the chapter, I ask Adnan again about his teeth. Are they giving him pain? How is he eating? Is he still thinking of having an operation to fix them?

We are drinking coffee at his apartment, close to the bakery at which he now works. Adnan left al-Furn some time ago. This is strangely how we get to the topic of

⁴⁰ Michael Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion: Transforming Shapes in the Renaissance from Da Vinci to Montaigne* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 81.

⁴¹ I have in mind Mitchell Merback, *Perfection's Therapy: An Essay on Albrecht Dürer's Melencolia I* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 51.

prison, about what I had hoped to speak with him that day but had not mentioned. In fact, he had not personally told me about his time in prison in Syria, even though I had heard rumors about it from other workers at the bakery, including Faraj.

Adnan tells me that he still needs to have an operation on his teeth, but the dentist says it will cost two hundred US dollars, which he doesn't have. He complains about the cost of things in Lebanon, and how he was going to do the operation earlier but then the Lebanese economy collapsed and now the prices of everything have changed. The dentist only accepts US dollars, so Adnan first has to save enough Lebanese lira to buy dollars.

"It started in prison," Adnan tells me. I look at him, questioningly. He continues to tell me that when he was imprisoned in Syria, the problems with his teeth started. The Syrian guards would beat him and they knocked some of his teeth out. Plus, the food was bad, everything was dirty so he couldn't eat. The lack of cleanliness and food led to his teeth rotting, or being lost altogether, he explained to me. Adnan shows me his forearms and the scars on his wrists from the torture he underwent while in prison.

The wrists. It reminds me of what we saw with Walid, how he told me of the way in which the inside of dough, when cut open, resembles veins and muscles. Walid took his razor and sliced the inflated dough open before pretending to do the same on his wrist, vertically, as if to demonstrate the resemblance. Thinking back, this is perhaps what initiated Adnan's own meandering thoughts on torture that followed, as if the site of transgression marked on his body had been revisited in that instance, catalyzed by the similitude. The interior of the wrist was the point of contact between Adnan's and Walid's accounts of dough and the figural resemblances each associated with it.

Walid's wrists, in fact, were also marked at that time, although we were illiterate to the signs. That same summer Adnan told me about his time in Syrian prison, Walid also told me how a few months prior he had had open-heart surgery because of clogged arteries around his heart. Earlier in the year, he had had sharp pains in his chest and so saw a doctor. His heart was so blocked that the doctor told him it was a miracle that he was able to walk, that he wasn't dead already. At any moment he could have died from a heart attack.

Walid tells me that when they went to insert an IV in the veins of his wrist, they discovered that they too were clogged, that there was almost no blood passing through. All flesh and no color, like the inside of dough. We laughed. The operation was performed immediately afterwards. Two wrists marked by proximity to death, one inscripted on the outside, the other on the inside.

How, then, might we understand the efficacy of images in this context? What kind of shared life might be understood to take shape at the bakery, organized around the production of a state-subsidized food meant to sustain the population? Here, the work of Omnia El Shakry is helpful. Reading Fanon alongside the artist Jalal Toufic, she links Fanon's idea of 'ineffacable wounds' to what Toufic calls 'surpassing disaster.' For Toufic, 'surpassing disaster' encompasses not only material losses, such as death tolls, psychic traumas, and destruction of the built environment, but also immaterial losses such as literary, philosophical and thoughtful texts, as well as spiritual guides and the specialness of certain spaces, that he calls the 'loss of tradition.'⁴²

I read El Shakry as offering insight into the emergence of sociality built on an ethics of therapy in the confrontation with surpassing disaster in spaces outside of the

⁴² Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of a Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009).

clinic. In places undergoing surpassing disaster, El Shakry explains, “so many of the experiments of group life...model other ways of imagining therapy as an ethical and social way of living.”⁴³ But El Shakry is also careful to note that such therapeutics may not lead to a simple cure or the finality of a resolution. Instead, they point to the very ongoing-ness of the wound that serves as a catalyst for change and transformation. Along these lines, might Walid, Adnan, and the other bakers at al-Furn exemplify such sociality born from a therapeutics ethics? Might such ‘experiments with life’ at the bakery be the basis for a reconceptualization of the very nature of ‘the group’ alternate to the categories of the state and the idea of ‘population’—that which informs so much of the discussion of food security seen from top-down perspectives?

Perhaps. But perhaps not. The sense of sociality born from the break that resemblance initiates is fleeting, especially without the infrastructural and social support to sustain such dynamics. It moves as the workers move to other bakeries, jobs, and places, driven by the demands of capitalist migrant life on the margins. Faraj too, the other baker with Adnan, we will recall, laughed off Walid’s analogy between dough and the flesh. He did not refuse the similarity, but did not attribute it any force either. Or rather, there was no force invested in the resemblance, at least not at that moment. Instead, while Walid, Adnan, and I talked, he returned to his break on the dirty steps at the side of the bakery and ate his lunch in silence.

Later, however, as Faraj and I shoveled the moist dough into al-Furn’s wood-fired oven, retrieving the baked bread after having watched the dough rise piece by piece inside, he told me that, at times, the bread spoke to him, in a certain way; that each loaf reminded him of specific people—family members, friends, past lovers, the deceased, customers who told stories of faraway places, workers that came and left the bakery. We stared into the mouth of the oven, the image of the baking bread trembling, distorted by the hot air blowing inside. The more time I spent with him in those moments, scooping hundreds, thousands of pieces of dough and bread each day, the more I realized that he told the same stories again and again—that the characters were the same, repeated, and that he knew and I knew, but sometimes, unexpectedly, he would change the story too.

⁴³ Omnia El Shakry, “The Work of Illness in the Aftermath of a ‘Surpassing Disaster’: Medical Humanities in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Cult Med Psychiatry* 47 (2023): 105.

CHAPTER 6: TOUCH (HEART)

Inqilab and Qalb

On February 24, 1950 at the Ba‘th Party office in Homs, Michel Aflaq delivered a public speech explaining one of the most important concepts of Ba‘thist political philosophy: *al-inqilab*.

By *inqilab* we understand this real awakening that cannot be denied or doubted, an awakening of spirit [*yaqza al-ruh*] at a decisive moment in the stages of human history. The *inqilab* in its truth is this awakening... This spirit, at last sensing a great danger, the decisive danger rises up in decisive revolt.¹

In contemporary parlance *inqilab* refers a military coup, the kind that repeatedly intervened in Syrian politics in the first decades after the country’s independence from the French Mandate in 1946. However, by *al-inqilab* Aflaq has something different in mind: an epochal transformation at once spiritual and material, individual and collective, erected around the singularity of Arabness [*al-‘uruba*]. As the subject of history, this newly awakened spirit will cast off its fetters—“corrupt, sick, false conditions”²—and negate the staid reality, marking “the overcoming of truth over actuality.”³ Although Aflaq’s language is suffused with Arab Renaissance or *Nahdawi* tropes (e.g. ‘the awakening of spirit’ [*yaqza al-ruh*] from its ‘stagnation’ [*inhitat*]), he braids them together with an anti-colonial discourse to form a novel articulation of secularism, political sovereignty, and nationalism.⁴

Curiously, however, Aflaq characterizes *al-inqilab* as originally an eruption of *non-phenomenal energy*. “For *inqilab*,” Aflaq declares in the same speech, “before it is a political and social program, is first this propelling movement [*al-haraka al-dafi‘a*], this powerful psychological current [*al-tayyar al-nafsi*], this overcoming [*al-mughalaba*] that is inevitable.”⁵ Before politics and before society—that is, before anything extant—*inqilab* is sheer force that springs forth. Accordingly, the historian Max Weiss, whose lead I follow in identifying this passage of Aflaq’s speech, translates *al-haraka al-dafi‘a*

¹ Michel Aflaq, *fi sabil al-ba‘th* vol. 1, 88, <http://albaath.online.fr/Pocket%20PC%20Fi%20Sabil%20alBaath/Volume%20I-Chapters/index-Volume20I-pocketpc.htm>.

² Aflaq, *fi sabil*, 88.

³ Aflaq, *fi sabil*, 90.

⁴ For the classic account of the Arab Renaissance or *al-nahda al-‘arabiyya*, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a more recent revisit of the term, see Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For a problematization of the category of the Nahda and its implications for historiography, see the Introduction of Maha AbdelMegeed, *Literary Optics: Staging the Collective in the Nahda* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2024). For an interesting alternative approach to the Nahda from a finance- and materialist-informed literary studies approach featuring Beirut as a trade hub, see Elizabeth Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁵ Aflaq, *fi sabil*, 89.

as a “burst of movement.”⁶ This suggests not only *inqilab*’s spontaneous qualities, but also its potentially explosive, irruptive force.

The historian Hanna Batatu argues that Aflaq used the word *inqilab* to refer to political revolution rather than the term *thawra* “because [Aflaq] is, as ever, anxious to differentiate his movement from that of the Communists.” According to Batatu, for Aflaq *inqilab* is “first and foremost a spiritual revolution, a revolution in Arab values, in the Arab way of thinking.”⁷ Attempting to find a language adequate to the coming appearance of Arab nationalism while also contending with conditions of coloniality and the threat of Zionism, Aflaq reinvests Arabic with novel meaning and direction—a language that, like the spirit animating it, must shake off the fetters of the old.

Aflaq was not alone in reinvesting in the concept of *inqilab*, even if it held different possibilities for others.⁸ The prominent Arab historian Constantine Zurayq also called for an *inqilab* around the same time as Aflaq. But for Zurayq *inqilab* meant an *inqilab of consciousness*. According to him, *inqilab* first begins with the self—an internal revolution of values that gradually precipitates the formation of a political movement and an intellectual vanguard. This perhaps explains the curious alignment of historical *taqaddumiyya* [progressiveness] alongside *inqilab* and *inqilabiyya* in Zurayq’s work—a tension between the overturning of consciousness and the overturning of action that the historian Hana Sleiman has recently fleshed out.⁹

Like Aflaq, Zurayq was responding to the existential, political, and social demands of the moment. Indeed, Zurayq is often credited with coining the 1948 events in Palestine as *al-nakba* in his most well-known book, *The Meaning of the Disaster* [*ma’na al-nakba*].¹⁰ But we can already see how *inqilab* was situated as part of a distinct nexus of concepts and ideas that not only located *inqilab* alongside ‘progressiveness’ and ‘reform,’ but also a certain concept of history and its animating forces.¹¹ This differed from, for example, the use of *al-inqilab* to describe the Young Turk Rebellion of July

⁶ Max Weiss, “Genealogies of Ba’thism: Michel ‘Aflaq Between Personalism and Arabic Nationalism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17 (2020).

⁷ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 739.

⁸ Elias Khoury describes a similar history of *inqilab*, locating the concept in what he describes as the “second Nahda.” Elias Khoury, “For a Third Nahda,” in *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual history of the Present* ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁹ See Hana Sleiman, “History Writing and History Making in Twentieth Century Beirut” (PhD diss. University of Cambridge, St John’s College, Faculty of History, 2021). Here we should note that an *inqilab* of consciousness, as Zurayq describes it, necessitates that the latter be properly historical. This was understood as the kind of historicism organized by principles disclosed from the history of science that build from the past in order to lay the foundation for the future.

¹⁰ Constantine K. Zurayq, *The Meaning of the Disaster* (Beirut: Khayat’s College Book Cooperative, 1956), especially pages 37-44.

¹¹ For different readings of *The Meaning of the Disaster* and its revolutionary dimensions, see Edward Said, “Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction After 1948” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a more recent account, see Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, “Introduction: Language, Mind, Freedom and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words,” in *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*.

1908 under Ottoman rule decades earlier, which in Arabic was known as *al-inqilab al-uthmani*.¹²

Despite these bold philosophic and political efforts, however, today the concept *inqilab* has a largely pejorative valence. This is perhaps due to its association with the numerous military coups in the region that took place during the second half of the twentieth century. The contemporary association marks the transformation of not only the meaning of the concept, but also the lived grammar and concrete formations by which it is articulated. *Inqilab* qua ‘coup’ has won over (overcome, perhaps) Aflaq’s vision of a ‘spiritual revolution.’ ‘Coup’ suggests a lack of popular support, something closer to regime change than the productive negation of social and political conditions. And yet, we can see how *inqilab* qua ‘coup’ is a relatively recent association and that, at the moment of Aflaq’s speech, the concept held other potentialities.

My interest in Aflaq’s usage of the concept *inqilab* is twofold. On the one hand, I am struck by his insistence that the primary subject of *inqilab* is a kind of spirit [*ruh*] that, incited by historical conditions, is activated, producing speculative kinetics whose force extends into the political and social only secondarily. In fact, the language of ‘psychological current’ [*al-tayyar al-nafsi*] used in Aflaq’s speech to describe *inqilab* might also be translated (if admittedly awkwardly) as ‘psychic current,’ as *al-nafs* also refers to ‘the psyche,’ ‘the self,’ and, in a more scholastic and theological vocabulary, ‘the soul.’¹³ Aflaq’s use of figurative language to exhibit the activity and shape of *inqilab* thus indicates its capaciousness and mutability. Already we have seen how it is explained as having an explosive, interreptive power not unlike Walter Benjamin’s description of a historical ‘leap,’¹⁴ as well as an energy that conducts, flows, and circulates according to currents [*al-tayyar*] and resistances in a manner akin to Michel Foucault’s influential account of ‘power’ in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*.¹⁵

On the other hand, I am fascinated by Aflaq’s implicit investment in the forms of movement made possible by *inqilab*, ones that can be better understood from the concept’s semantic root, *q-l-b*. The semantic root *q-l-b*, as we explored in Chapter 1 of the dissertation, has several related but distinct meanings: ‘to turn around;’ ‘to turn face up, or face down;’ ‘to turn outside in, or inside out;’ ‘to invert, reverse, overturn, upset, or topple;’ ‘to roll over;’ ‘to subvert, to overthrow;’ ‘to change, alter, turn, transform, transmute;’ ‘to exchange.’¹⁶ The root thus marks a variety of kinetic motions, subtly different, that reference not only distinct spatio-temporal change but also socio-political action. *Inqilab* can thus be accurately translated as ‘revolution’—spiritual or political—

¹² Thomas Philipp, “Participation and Critique: Arab Intellectuals Respond to the ‘Ottoman Revolution’” in *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³ For more on the plasticity of *al-nafs* and its twentieth century transformations as part of novel secular and social scientific horizons, see the work of Omnia El Shakry, particularly *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ In a 1943 speech at the University of Damascus celebrating Mawlid entitled, “In Memory of the Arab Prophet,” in fact, Aflaq characterizes the historical transformation of spirit as a “leap,” or a *wathba*. Aflaq, “dhikra al-rasul al-‘arabi” in *fi sabil al-ba’th*, 141.

¹⁵ See Walter Benjamin, “These on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007) and Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 92.

¹⁶ I am culling definitions from Edward Lane’s *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Hans Wehr’s *Arabic-English Dictionary*, and Ibn Manzur’s *Lisān al-‘Arab*.

along with ‘upheaval,’ as it is often used in Aflaq’s writings,¹⁷ but also opens the possibility for various kinds of oscillation, circulation, and recursivity without the purposive *telos* Aflaq attributes to it.

As far as I am aware, however, *inqilab* is no longer used in this manner in casual conversation.¹⁸ The legacy of the Ba‘th Party has transformed tremendously since Aflaq’s early philosophical articulations of its political program, the ascent of the Assad regime in Syria disfiguring its language and thought into a murderous new reality.¹⁹ Aflaq himself has been marginalized with time, his ideas dismissed, contemptuously so, whenever I attempted to bring him into conversation with my Syrian interlocutors. It’s not difficult to understand why, given the history of the region and the Ba‘th Party. While Aflaq’s 1950 Homs speech and other writings preserved in the volumes of *fi sabil al-ba‘th* have been the object of academic study in the latter half of the twentieth century, it is challenging not to see them in the light of the actualization of concrete history.

This is an admittedly heterodox reading of Aflaq, one that he might not have entirely recognized. In introducing Aflaq’s concept of *inqilab*, my intent is neither to attempt a recovery of its foreclosed possibilities, nor to argue for its salience in the contemporary. Rather, I am interested in how Aflaq articulated his vision of *inqilab* as part of an attempt to contend with the rapidly shifting political, social, and historical coordinates of his time—what the fourteenth century Muslim philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun called in *The Muqaddimah*, “a general change of conditions.”²⁰

How might we learn from Aflaq’s attempt—what I am describing as a kind of spiritual, linguistic, and political experimentation of thinking- and acting-in-the-midst? In what ways might that effort shed light on contemporary struggles to perform a similar work in Lebanon and Syria? Put differently, might the conditions of the emergence of *inqilab* not only structurally correspond to the demands of historicity in Lebanon and Syria during my fieldwork, but also point to a linkage between the semantic root *q-l-b* and the experience of upheaval—a thought born from the October 17 Lebanese revolution [*thawra*] in Tripoli and the financial collapse of both countries?

This chapter looks to al-Furn as a perhaps unexpected site for such an attempt. I want to posit that the bakers of al-Furn, in their own way, conduct a kind of experimentation with possible lives in response to the times—an exploration that relies on an archive of cultural and religious resources undergoing fracture, as well as the material conditions of the bakery in Tripoli. It is an experimentation, I put forward, that is articulated through a grammar of the heart, or *qalb*, in relation to what I have described so far in this dissertation as the work of bread.²¹

¹⁷ See Weiss, “Genealogies,” for more on translating the concept *inqilab* in ‘Aflaq’s writings.

¹⁸ I am reminded by my Persian-speaking friends that *inqilab* or *enqelab* means ‘revolution’ in Persian and holds distinct associations due to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

¹⁹ For more on the cultural transformations of Ba‘thist Syria, see Max Weiss, *Revolutions Aesthetic: A Cultural History of Ba‘thist Syria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

²⁰ This is Franz Rosenthal’s translation. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 30. I take my reading from Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²¹ It should be noted, however, that Aflaq was keenly aware of the centrality of the ‘heart’ for the ‘Arabs,’ a term which for him included different religious traditions, including Christianity: “Arabs have historically been very attracted to words. Because the words they used had always been filled with facts pulsating with life, the words they listened to *were meant to be heard by the heart and not just the ears*. They were supposed to evoke a response of the whole person, not only the tongue. Therefore, it has always been that

In the heady first days of the October 17, 2019 popular protests in Tripoli, the workers at al-Furn were skeptical.²² Their reticence to participate or even acknowledge what was taking place just a ten-minute walk away at the city's main square, Sahat al-Nur, was noticeable, at least for me.

Tariq, the bakery owner, was the only one following the news closely. As I worked with the laborers in the back of the bakery—mixing, kneading, rolling, flipping, stacking dough—Tariq sat at his desk in the front, eyes glued to the TV perched across from him on top of the glass wall. On it was the four-way split screen for which the Lebanese news channel *al-Jadeed* had become well known. Reporters in different Lebanese cities interviewed protestors about *al-thawra*, the revolution. One of the four screens always broadcasted live from Tripoli. This was a testament both to the robustness of the protests in Sahat al-Nur, and the country's surprise at the demonstrations there. Hence Tripoli's new nickname: '*arus al-thawra*, the 'bride of the revolution.'

Tariq was fixated on the screen. He would distractedly hand out change to annoyed customers, sometimes giving it to the wrong person, hardly ever breaking his gaze from the display. Walid, however, showed little interest. Neither did Faraj, nor Mustapha. Osama was more worried about the protests effect on the value of the Lebanese lira than anything the protestors were saying or doing.

"What do you think of the revolution," I asked Faraj? He clicked his tongue at me and lifted his face, a common gesture indexing a negative response. "It's all for nothing," he told me dismissively with a knowing face.

Faraj's and the other workers' tepid responses to the revolution taking place in the streets just beyond the bakery's glass doors were perhaps understandable, especially in the early days of the demonstrations. Protests were a fairly common occurrence in Tripoli even before October 2019—a political tactic commonly used by various, often undisclosed, backers who paid young men and boys to ride motorbikes and chant slogans as they marched around the city.

I was initially intrigued by such events because they appeared to me to be public displays of civic voice, but Tariq and the bakery workers dismissively brushed off my interest when I asked, calling them 'political games.' Even in just the several months since I had begun working at the bakery before October 17, I had seen three or four marches pass by the front of the shop on their way to Sahat al-Nur before eventually petering out as quickly as they had assembled.

"Go join them!" Faraj retorted to me mockingly, when I excitedly pointed at the chanters the first time I saw a march.

The protests of the October 17 and afterwards, however, felt different. Others, especially those participating in the demonstrations in Beirut, enthusiastically told me this

for Arabs, words had a certain sense of sacrality [*qudsiyya*]: to them they were similar to promises, linking life and actions, whether this life is that of the individual or group." Aflaq, "dhikra al-rasul al-'arabi," 141, my italics.

²² For more on the early days of the 2019 Lebanese revolution, see the essays in the edited volume, Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed ed., *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022).

as well. Crucially, there were demonstrations all over Lebanon, not localized to a city or region, something that indicated its cross-sectarian appeal.²³ It was a *thawra*, a revolution, the protestors insisted, investing deeply in the word.²⁴

Still, as days of robust and lively protests after October 17 turned into weeks, and weeks into months, the tepid attitudes of the workers to the revolution happening just outside were consistent. In fact, conversation during the long hours of work hardly ever strayed towards the topics of revolution or the protests, unless I explicitly asked.

It was not as if the idea of revolution or its echoes had not spread to the bakery. Walid, for instance, often cheerfully hummed the popular slogans (*'hela hela hooo...'*) while going about his tasks, and the workers punned on those same slogans jokingly. Tariq, on the other side of the bakery, bemoaned the increasing price of flour and sugar due the popular tactic of cutting off roads, including the Beirut-Tripoli highway, with protests and burning tires. Rather than talk about constitutional rights or the prospect of oil and gas in Lebanese waters—topics feverishly debated in the activist tents set up around Sahat al-Nur—Faraj preferred to listen to Fairuz as he did every morning while he baked dough, Mustapha continued to crack jokes about Adnan and sometimes reminisced about his hometown Khan Sheikhun. Bread and work called.

To be fair, there were ample reasons for them to be skeptical of the *thawra*. The Syrians working at the bakery, after all, were all too familiar with the language of *thawra*, its seductive vitality and invidious violence; its long, mournful afterlives. Apart from the ongoing war, Syria itself, like many postcolonial states, had been born from an anti-colonial revolution while its government was toppled several times by coups in the decades that followed. The last coup in 1970, shortly after Syria's botched intervention between the Hashemite Kingdom and the PLO in what became known as in Jordan as Black September, brought to power the still-reigning Assad regime—an administration that promulgated the platform of a revamped Ba'athism.

Meanwhile, several of the bakery workers had grown up in Tripoli amidst Lebanon's civil war. They, too, were sensitive to the mendacious and deadly play of politicians and political parties.²⁵ Even though the Lebanese *thawra* of 2019 was often described by its most ardent supporters as an effort to overcome the very sectarian system that had solidified at the end of the country's civil war in 1990—an end that, it was said, took place without meaningful resolution or reconciliation—it was all too easy to dismiss the emergent economic issues propelling people to the streets in 2019 in favor of the already fortified (materially, discursively, infrastructurally) social divides.²⁶ New political languages, especially the sensibilities they exhibit, are not born easily.

²³ For a recent attempt to think sectarianism and politics in contemporary Lebanon, see the essays in Lara Deeb, Tsolin Nalbantian, Nadya Sbaiti ed., *Practicing Sectarianism: Archival and Ethnographic Interventions on Lebanon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

²⁴ For more on the concept of *thawra* in the Arab world, see Azmi Bishara, *fi al thawrat wa qabiliyyat lil thawra* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2011).

²⁵ For more on this sensibility in Lebanon, especially post-2006 Israeli invasion, see Sami Hermez, *War is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

²⁶ For an example of how sectarianism is articulated materially via infrastructure, see Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

But perhaps there was already a kind of language adequate to the times at the bakery, one that required a certain attunement to hear? That is to say, rather than view the workers' skepticism of the *thawra* as political quietude, reducible to economic determinism or disinterest from migrants and refugees merely trying to stay out of the way, perhaps it points us to a different orientation to politics. Or, more specifically, to the time of politics.

So far in the dissertation, I have explored a lived grammar immanent to the bakery—an embodied form of life evinced not only by the workers and practices of al-Furn, but also by the materiality and stages of making bread, what I called 'breadwork' or 'the work of bread.' This chapter, I want to think about that lived grammar in terms of the rupture and transformation charged in the early days of the Lebanese *thawra*, an exploration prompted by the kinetics of the bakery and condensed in the word, '*allab*.'

Colloquially, '*allab*' means to 'turn,' 'flip,' or 'reverse.' Within the context of the bakery, it is said while the dough is flipped and overturned. This happens in two moments during the dough-making process: while the dough is in the workers hands, and while the individually cut pieces of dough are placed in trays. After the trays are filled with dough they are stacked on top of each other. The trays are then restacked in reverse order as the workers progressively move through the next stage in the bread-making process. This is done so that the dough last placed in the tray is first in line again in the following step, while the dough most recently rolled becomes last. In both instances (in the hand and in the trays), overturning the dough helps to manage its exposure to air and the catalyzing of yeast—dough's inflation and deflation.

The yeast, if we recall, is what the workers call 'the spirit' of the dough, *al-ruh*. The yeast is the principle of activity in the dough. The yeast, or 'the spirit,' must be cultivated through cutting, kneading, and overturning dough before it can become bread. In the earlier chapters, I showed how this process of cutting, kneading, and overturning was colloquially referred to amongst the workers as the 'life and death of dough,' or "how the dough lives and dies" [*kif al-'ajin byi' sh wa bmut*]. This is because dough expands and contracts, inflates and deflates. Crucially, as the workers make clear, the dough must experience both life and death before it can transform into bread.

"*Allab, allab, allab*"—you hear this frequently shouted amidst the bustle of the bakery. At the bakery, the word is often used in its imperative form, generally between two people, because the larger trays are too big to be turned over by one person. It is also sometimes used as the start of a joke, "*allab, fa inta bi idlib*" ["bend over for you're in Idlib"]—a saying that plays on the stereotype of prevalent homosexuality in the Syrian province Idlib. Many of the Syrian workers are from Idlib and the joke was often invoked between those from the province and those from elsewhere.

Allab, it should be pointed out, shares the same semantic root as *inqilab*: *q-l-b*. As its use in the bakery indicates, the word *allab* has a prosaic nature. At the same time, its function as part of the cultivation of bread, life, and death at the bakery provides insight into the forces animating Aflaq's vision of *inqilab*—an insight that discloses a quality of *inqilab* that Aflaq himself perhaps did not fully articulate.²⁷ The cyclical, repetitious

²⁷ My thought here on etymology and the mutability of Arabic semantics is guided by Toshihiko Izutsu and Ghassan El Masri. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Quran* (Ithaca: McGill Queens Press, 2002); Ghassan El Masri, *The Semantics of Qur'anic Language: al-Akhira* (Boston: Brill, 2020). But

quality of the bread-making process suggests that *inqilab* is neither as definitive nor as final as Aflaq proposed. But the destructive, bi-polar quality of yeast (dough's spirit) and the co-presence of death in the production of life in the breadwork, also point to how the spirit subject to *inqilab* in Aflaq's political philosophy already contained the possibility of the (later) actualized future (Assad's Ba'athism) at the very moment of its articulation in the 1950 Homs speech.²⁸ Something indigestible, an excess of sorts, rests at the heart of the kinetics of *inqilab*, inassimilable to theorization.

As we saw earlier, Aflaq was not alone in attempting this kind of philosophical and political experimentation using the vocabulary of *inqilab* during the early and mid-twentieth century. While others have traced the influence of European thought on Aflaq's intellectual development—the vitalism of Henri Bergson and Andre Gide, as well as the French adoption and re-articulation of German Idealist philosophy, including Kant, Fichte, and Hegel—Max Weiss argues the Catholic personalism of Emmanuel Mounier, particularly its spiritual dimensions, looms large in Aflaq's theory of *inqilab* whose ideas he encountered studying at the Sorbonne during the 1920s.²⁹ But the spiritual and speculative dimensions of Aflaq's vision also locate him alongside other Arab modernist artists and poets, often also trained and educated in Europe, who conducted similar kinds of experimentation-in-the-midst with avant-garde techniques and forms. Recent English-language scholarship has telescoped the work of such Levantine modernists and the complex, knotted compression of aesthetics, figuration, and theory during the inter-War and post-independence years into greater focus.³⁰

In a relevant example, Aneka Lenssen shows how the Syrian painter Sidqi Isma'il, who was affiliated with the Ba'ath Party and studied European philosophy under another Ba'ath Party founder, Zaki al-Arsuzi, describes painting as not so much a "fixed object as much as a stage for glimpsing irruptive forces (*al-intilaq*), which makes individual marking and surface delineations into indexical traces of an energized whole."³¹ Influenced by Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso, and the French Surrealists, Sidqi and his brother Adham promulgated a theory of art as a "portal into an underlying register of the imagination's free play—as necessarily precedes and sustains any singular painting."³² Like Aflaq and his investment in the activation of a vital spirit for liberatory purposes, this experimental approach to art was born from the dynamic translation and novel redeployment of European avant-garde aesthetics, Islamicate philosophy, and a shared figural archive in a rapidly shifting historical milieu.

The Isma'is' emphasis on an expansive theory of the imagination [*al-khayal*], in particular, dramatized an interface between some of the most capacious Muslim thinkers of the imagination, such as Ibn Sina, and Picasso. In fact, these exchanges mirrored

as previously noted in a footnote, I also follow Aflaq's own understanding of language as that which links "life and actions" by way of 'the heart,' the latter understood as a synecdoche of the entirety of a person.

²⁸ I do not mean it was either necessary or inevitable at that moment. My point is that we can retrospectively see its potentiality even at the moment of *inqilab*'s articulation.

²⁹ Weiss, "Genealogies," 1212.

³⁰ Aneka Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020). See also Aneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (Brazil: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018); Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

³¹ Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation*, 4.

³² Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation*, 4.

Picasso's and the Surrealists' own borrowings of early 'anthropological artifacts' from French colonial Africa, Pacific islands, and the Middle East, including the cosmologies and metaphysics those objects enfolded.³³

Lenssen attends to such displacements and translations carefully, noting the grammars—Sufi, psychoanalytic, formalist, Marxist, vitalist—with which the artists she studies played. In each artist she presents, Lenssen sees at work a subtle but volatile kinetics between what she calls 'reservoir' and 'surface' that was mobilized for political and aesthetic purposes. For Lenssen, 'reservoir' is an intemporal depth, a kind of storehouse of charged forms and affect, while 'surface' is the determinate temporal world. Together, they maintain a chiasmatic relation across reciprocal crossings.³⁴ Lenssen, following Bergson's influence in Syria at the time, attributes to this oscillation a type of vitalist play—the transmutation of and energetic investment in figures from an inherited archive whose creative transformation is expressed in the pulsating 'agitation' [*qalaq*] exploding forth in the staging of artwork. Thus, for these Arab modernists, art is not merely a representation of an object in the world, a mimetic relationship with an already existing mechanical nature, but the compositional installation of the charged relationship between the seen and the unseen—an ontological staging that bursts forward in interruptive fashion, rather than simply depict.

In this chapter, I am proposing that a similar kind of aesthetic, perceptual, and historical experimentation takes place at the bakery. This experimentation, however, is articulated by means of the kind of embodied sensibility I have been attempting to excavate thus far in the dissertation: a figural grammar of norms, ethics, and values articulated in practice and enfolded in lived experience, what Wittgenstein called a 'form of life' [*Lebensform*], including the form of its own interruptions.³⁵ Within this context, a relation to embodiment and the inner sense discloses itself—one that evinces a horizon of expectations related but ultimately irreducible to not only the conceptual grammar of *thawra*, but also Aflaq's philosophy of *inqilab*. Here, it is by means of lived, bodily experience—what people say and do—that form, or the rules of engagement of life, is disclosed, something discernable through ethnography.

Put differently, I am attempting to demonstrate how a form of life at the bakery is the ground and means by which its workers experientially explore and test the limits of possible life, where new and old worlds can appear and become reconfigured in order to meet the heteronomous exigency of the moment—an experimental, speculative activity to which attention is usually reserved for artists, philosophers, and thinkers.

Crucially, one link between the historical, political, and spiritual exigency of *inqilab*, which is to say revolution or upheaval, and the sensible embodiment of a form of life resides in another derivation of the etymological root *q-l-b*, mainly *al-qalb*, or 'the

³³ For a well-known account, see James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, 1981. For an intriguing more recent study of a similar phenomenon but with different geographic coordinates, see Jacquelyn Bass, *Marcel Duchamp and the Art of Life* (Boston: MIT University Press, 2019). For an account of Surrealism outside of Europe, see Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale ed. *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021).

³⁴ Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation*, 8.

³⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Pearson, 1973). For more on *Lebensform* and the syntagm 'form-of-life,' see Giorgio Agamben's account of Christian monasticism, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

heart.’³⁶ As we saw in Chapter 1, the figure of the heart is not only used as a trope in common expressions, most often expressing a ethical feature of one’s character, but is also part of a longer inheritance and network of speculative relations in spiritual and mystical traditions, both Islamic and Christian. In fact, the heart was a figure that many Arab modernists, including Adham Ismail, drew upon.

A contested phenomenology of the body, centered on the heart, with multiple inheritances is thus at stake. It is the medium by which experimentation with life and a certain conception of the outside takes place. Said another way, the heart-centered body serves as a *stage*, a medium for testing, so to speak, similar to the Ismails’ description of painting and art, transforming the body into a kind of artifice or installation.³⁷ It is the body, grounded in the heart, and the grammar it exhibits that is put under pressure at the bakery, potentially giving rise to its own modality of irruption and interruption.

“The Subtle Heart”

“Brent, in any situation, there will be difficulties. There will always be *bala’* [‘tribulation’ or ‘ordeal’], always be *ibtıla’* [sing: *bala’*; pl: *ibtıla’*]. *Bala’* is an *ikhtibar* [‘test’].”

Malik talks quietly, lying on the couch. He closes his eyes before speaking again.

“But what does that mean?” Malik continues. “It means that there must always be fear [*khawf*]. Fear of Allah. There must be sincerity. If there is no fear, then there is no sincerity. If there is no sincerity then people will stray.”

It is nearly winter and the weather is cold. Malik looks old and tired. He has on his glasses and shivers. He is shorter than I remember. He wears an American college sweatshirt, black sweatpants, and a head cap. Malik asks me how my studies are going, and I tell him about my work at the bakery.

Malik is the imam of a large mosque near al-Furn. I met with Malik not only because of his mosque’s proximity to al-Furn but also because my friends told me he was well trained in Islamic jurisprudence [*usul al-fiqh*]. In addition to attending his sermons on Fridays, I would meet with him periodically at his house just outside of Tripoli where I explained my project and he would patiently answer my queries about classical theology [*kalam*], jurisprudence, and contemporary politics.

That day, I am asking him about October 17 protests, which have just taken place.

“Look what happened here in this country, in Lebanon,” Malik tells me. “There was investment, there was money, and people did well. But they strayed. They forgot their *din*. So there is another type of pain, the internal punishment.”

Malik picks himself up from the couch and sits, looking at me.

“People here, they talk about the revolution, about the politicians who steal. They talk about justice [*adala*]. Look, the revolution is good. I say it again, the revolution is good. But you have to know that this is merely the justice of appearance [*adalat al-zahir*]. So it’s not enough to go to the protests—one has to remember that one does so for the sake of Allah.”

³⁶ See previous footnotes on Aflaq’s recognition of the centrality of the ‘heart’ for the Arabs.

³⁷ For the classic anthropological account of the body understood as a technical means, which is to say, a kind of *technology* (and hence it’s nature as an artifice), see Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 1 (1973).

“If you go to the protests,” he continues, “and you have a revolution, but your intention [*niyya*] is not right, what good is it all for? You’ve already lost your *din*, you’ve already lost yourself.”

Malik adjusts his position on the couch as he waits for me to write down my notes. I eagerly scribble his words down, occasionally checking with him to make sure my notes are correct.

Malik speaks softly. He is in his late-sixties, perhaps early seventies, and wears a long, greying beard. Malik’s demeanor is warm and he moves delicately as he speaks. He is short and carries his body gently as if it pained him.

Another pause in the conversation, as Malik lets me write again. He is contemplative, and looks out the window next to the couch on which he’s sitting. It has been raining and the sky is still dotted with dark clouds. During the winter, the sky changes quickly in Tripoli, the winds often sweeping inland from the sea in the morning and cascading down from the snowy mountains scaffolding the city to the sea at night.

“Suffering is beautiful.” I look up at Malik from my writing, questioningly. “Really, it’s true. Suffering is an opportunity, it’s training [*tadrib*] for the soul. It’s seclusion for the soul.”

I think of my Syrian friends and all they have gone through. I become uncomfortable.

“Do you the know story of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali?”

This surprises me. It is the first time Malik has spoken to me of twelfth century Islamic theologian and thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali.

“Abu Hamid al-Ghazali taught for many years and then left. Later, he came back to teach again but it was different. He wasn’t in a court like before. People ask him why he left, what had he changed? Imam al-Ghazali said I had to fix my intention. He said, before I was interested in the courts and the rule, I wasn’t always thinking of Allah. You see? He had to account for himself.”

Malik pauses and smiles.

“This is what the protesters here in Lebanon have to do, but haven’t. Okay, you want justice? You want the right [*al-haqq*] and justice [*‘adala*]? But you must remember there are two senses of *al-haqq* and *‘adala*: one for politics and one for Allah.”

Malik continues as I write notes.

“The soul [*al-nafs*] has part of it that resembles the body, and part that resembles the spirit [*al-ruh*],” Malik continues. “Thus, there is the world of the spirit and the world of the body. The intellect [*al-‘aql*] is in the heart [*al-qalb*]*—it’s not in the brain.*”

He repeats this point for emphasis.

“The intellect is not in the brain but in the heart [*al-‘aql meno bi al-mukh bis fi al-qalb*]. The intellect, *al-‘aql*, decides. It decides between the body and the spirit [of the soul]. It is freedom.”

“But there are limits,” Malik clarifies. “It’s not unlimited [*mutlaq*]. There is the right of God [*haqq allah*] and the right of the servant [*haqq al-‘abd*]. We are the servant, so we have limited right [*haqq mahdud*]. It is the intellect, *al-‘aql*, that decides. The intellect is the lord of the soul [*al-‘aql rab al-nafs*].”

Malik stops after this lengthy explanation and reflects as I write my notes. He looks out the window again into the cloudy skies.

“Look Brent, for me it’s simple: the body is made from soil and only God knows what the spirit is made from, but the spirit is connected with God and the eternal. If one gives oneself to its desires [*shahawat*], which is to say to the body, the heart becomes heavy and ugly. There is a conflict between earth and heaven.”

Malik repeats this several times: “There is conflict in the soul.”

“And if one develops the spirit?” I ask, attempting to follow Malik’s logic.

“If you develop the spirit [*al-ruh*],” Malik replies, “you can develop the senses to see the real, *al-haqq*. A good heart [*qalb tayyib*] has insight [*basira*]³⁸—it can see into the real, *al-haqq* of the matter. But if the spirit, *al-ruh*, is not strong, the soul will be sick and tired. Then it cannot see the inner truth [*haqq al-batin*], the inner justice [*adalat al-batin*]. The spirit is high and the body is earthly. There is a conflict between them, and it takes place in the soul [*al-nafs*].”

In his linking of justice and a conflict in the soul, Malik invoked several prominent tropes of twentieth century revivalist Sunni theological-political thought, which find perhaps their clearest, or at least most popular, expression in the writings of the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb. The human spirit, Qutb declares in *Social Justice in Islam*, “has a care both for the aspirations that soar aloft and for the material necessities which are chained on earth, for the human strength that is ever limited and for the perfection that is always absolute.”³⁸ It is up to the law [*namus*] and conscience [*damir*] to check the desires [*shahawat*] inherent in the soul. Social organization should accordingly be arranged in a manner that reflects this psychic design. Along these lines, we can see how Malik thinks in terms of a contemporary arrangement of state, law, and human sociality that is similar to, if also distinct from, Qutb’s.

But Malik had specifically invoked Ghazali, and his centering of the heart in the architecture of the human soul is also reminiscent of the latter’s thought. In *The Marvels of the Heart*, Book 21 in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, perhaps his most widely read work, Ghazali writes:

The term heart...is used with two meanings. One of them is the cone-shaped organ of flesh that is located at the left side of the chest...The second meaning of the ‘heart’ is a subtle tenuous substance of an ethereal spiritual sort, which is connected with the physical heart. This subtle tenuous substance is the real essence of man.³⁹

Ghazali explains that this second meaning of the heart—the subtle heart—is not only the “real essence of man,” but also the locus of cognition. More specifically, the subtle heart is ‘the locus of cognition of God’ [*mahall ma‘rifat Allah*], the site of possible saturation of the divine.⁴⁰ It is cognition, Ghazali specifies, that differentiates humans from non-rational animals. The heart is thus characterized as the core and true reality of the human being [*jawhar al-adami; haqiqat al-insan*].⁴¹

³⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *al-‘adala al-ijtmā’iyya fī al-islam* (Cairo: Dar Sharouk, 2005), 81.

³⁹ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Marvels of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 6.

⁴⁰ Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: A-Ghazali’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and its Avicennian Foundation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17.

⁴¹ It should be noted that in distinguishing between the two meanings of the heart at the outset of the book, Ghazali points at once to their irreducibility and necessary relation. That is, rather than understand the subtle heart as severed from the physical organ and thus outside of time and space, he explicitly points to their connection, thus disclosing the phenomenality of the spiritual heart and, by extension, subtle reality.

Scholars of Ghazali have noted that the subtle heart [*al-qalb*] is also sometimes called the spirit [*al-ruh*], the soul [*al-nafs*], or the intellect [*al-'aql*], as well as the inner eye [*'ayn batina*].⁴² The subtle heart is characterized by insight (hence the trope of the inner eye) in the way the external, physical eye [*'ayn zahira*] is characterized by sight [*basar*].⁴³ Here, we can hear echoes of Malik's explanation that the heart has capacity for insight [*basira*], a kind of inner sight—the capacity for perceiving phenomena irreducible to the material, i.e. the non-phenomenal or the unseen.

In regarding the heart as the seat of *emotion*, Ghazali followed a view that was common to the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Late Antiquity. In positing that the heart is also the seat of the *intellect*, however, Ghazali departed from these traditions, especially scholastic, Aristotelian-influenced thinkers. This included Ibn Sina who, following Galenic thought, viewed the brain as the seat of cognition and perception.⁴⁴

Against this scholastic inheritance, Ghazali argued that the heart held the powers of perception, knowing, and experience. He thus linked the heart to the imagination, memory, and knowledge.⁴⁵ The heart that integrates these complex capacities—the emotional and intellectual, the material and immaterial, the worldly and divine—such that humans are, at once, perceiving, knowing, and experiential subjects.⁴⁶ It became, in one scholar's words, the “meeting point of the two dimensions of spiritual life: the ascetic praxis (*mu'amala*, purification of the self) and the mystical *theoria* (*mukashafa*, unveiling and illumination with divine realities).”⁴⁷ It is that which learns and self-cultivates through experimentation, experience, and discovery.

The speculative turn from the brain to the heart as the locus of the intellect has profound implications for the concept of the soul [*al-nafs*], one that, in turn, shifts the coordinates of ‘the self’ [*al-nafs*]. According to Talal Asad's reading of Ghazali, the soul [*al-nafs*] is a set of potentialities at birth (*nafas*, which shares the same semantic root *n-f-s* as *nafs*, means ‘breath,’ suggesting the soul's breath-like shape) that becomes ‘a self’ [*nafs*] only gradually and with the help of others. This understanding of the soul is linked to Aristotle's writings in *On the Soul* [Greek: *peri psyches*; Latin: *de anima*], including for Ibn Sina who rewrote the text [*kitab al-nafs*] as part of his great treatise, *al-shifa*.

⁴² In addition to being sometimes identified with the subtle heart qua human essence, however, each of the previously mentioned spiritual organs (*al-ruh*, *al-nafs*, *al-'aql*) also plays a separate, discrete role within the architecture of the human. As Ebrahim Moosa describes it: “despite the distinct function of each separate entity—heart, soul, spirit, intellect—all form part of a psychosomatic network...with the heart at its center.” Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 226.

⁴³ Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge* 17.

⁴⁴ For more on the shifting coordinates of the body and the soul in relation to medicine vis-à-vis Greek sources in the Islamic world, see Aileen R. Das, *Galen and the Arabic Reception of Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁴⁵ Alexander Treiger suggests that the heart for Ghazali corresponds to what those of the philosophical tradition—most prominently al-Farabi and Ibn Sina—alternatively called the rational soul [*al-nafs al-natiqa*] or the intellect [*al-'aql*]. Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 18.

⁴⁶ Moosa, *Ghazali*, 225.

⁴⁷ Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 18. For an anthropological version of what such *mu'amalat* might look like, see Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), especially Chapter 5.

But, as Asad helpfully points out, Ghazali differs from Aristotle insofar as the former does not consider *thinking* to be the essence of the self, even as the intellect is what distinguishes humans from other beings (something we noted earlier). Instead, for Ghazali it is the self as created by and learning to orient itself toward God that is essential.⁴⁸ The self is not grounded in the will [*irada*] as an origin, such as in classic Euro-American liberal thought, but as an *orientation*—an orientation to the real, *al-haqq*, that is expressed through and with others.⁴⁹

As part of this form of life—the gradual learning how to orient oneself to God—Asad explains, the “self’s dependence on others—for everyday projects as well as for completing its potentialities—is essential...The yearning, the awareness, and the realization of the [divine] virtues are all made possible only through the body’s senses that are intrinsic to reasoning within and about relations with others.”⁵⁰ The intellect [*al-‘aql*] is thus a necessary part of the realization of the soul’s potentialities, but is ultimately subordinate to one’s orientation to the divine—a subordination reflected in Ghazali’s thought in the shift from the brain to the heart as the seat of *al-‘aql*.

Malik’s insistence, then, on describing the intellect, *al-‘aql*, as the source of freedom, but of a limited kind, can be understood in terms of the theory of *al-nafs* just glossed. The human intellect does not have absolute freedom [*mutlaq*], but the freedom to choose between desires [*shahawat*] that are conditioned by its constitution. Desires that, if properly trained, can actualize its divine potentialities, including the shaping of perception to see into the subtle, inner matter of things, or what Malik called ‘insight,’ *basira*. Accordingly, *al-‘aql*—what we have been calling ‘the intellect’—is irreducible to the ‘mind’ or ‘reason’ as it is commonly translated into English (a translation that elides its sensuous quality), but instead ranges “from the most banal sense experiences (apprehensions) of the finite being to the most esoteric realization of transcendent truth that the human soul is capable of.”⁵¹

I have lingered at length on this subject not only to show how the weight of temporalities past presses up against the ethnographic present, but also to demonstrate the perpetual, restless taking shape that make up a form of life. Malik’s passionate assertion that *al-‘aql* is ‘of the heart and not the brain’ [*meno bi al-mukh, bis fi al-qalb*], as well as his invocation of Ghazali, can now be situated as part of a longer series of debates about the nature of the soul and its relation to God. We can see that as part of this living inheritance, the subtle heart has the capacity to see into phenomenal reality and the inner meaning of things. It is the subtle heart that grounds the human soul, at once an organ and subtle substance, as it, in its agitative movement, oscillates between phenomenal [*zahir*] and non-phenomenal [*batin*] realities. Properly cultivated, the heart can distinguish between the justice of the temporal world [*al-dunya*] and the justice of the intemporal real [*al-akhira*]—what Malik called *haqq allah*, or the actuality of divine justice.

The difficulty of the lives of the bakery workers, however, suggest that such capacities of the subtle heart are hardly transparent, if ever so. Instead, the heart is also replete with opacity, deception, violence. The subtle heart has distinct complex

⁴⁸ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 69.

⁴⁹ Asad, *Secular Translations*, 71.

⁵⁰ Asad, *Secular Translations*, 72.

⁵¹ Asad, *Secular Translations*, 72.

modalities and potentialities linking it to others, the extant world, and the intemporal, ones that reflect the kinetics of its root semantic form *q-l-b* glossed earlier—turning, exchange, and transformation, but also deception, reversal, subversion.

And yet from such a perspective of the heart, Malik, Tariq's cousin the Sunni sheikh from Chapter 1, Tariq himself, and the bakery workers are still linked in crucial ways. Even as they might argue and suspect each other, they also depend on each other to live, articulate themselves, and fulfill their potentialities, as in Ghazali's model of the soul, *al-nafs*. Might we now understand the figure of the subtle heart in its ethico-political, spiritual, and theological iterations, a kind of nodal point indicating the lived, embodied grammar by which my interlocutors contend with finitude, the world, and each other?

Crucially, what connects the heart to the soul, according to Ghazali, is the nexus of intent [*niyya*]. "Intention is the 'condition and attribute of the heart,'" which can maintain the purity of the soul even when the body fails."⁵² Or, as Ali Mian helpfully puts it, "when writing in a Sufi register, Muslim religious thinkers interiorize intention (*niyya*) by seeing it as an action of the heart."⁵³ To be clear, this is not a kind of intention born from the individual will, such that it is the basis for belief as kind of choice. Rather *niyya* qua action of the heart is an integral part of the rite of worship, what is known in Islam as *'ibadat*—a disposition that can be cultivated and, as Talal Asad puts it, "which links one through mutual responsibility and trust to others who are faithful."⁵⁴ Or, as Tariq says, working with bread, a 'blessed' material, is a kind of *'ibadat*.

Perhaps then we can better understand Malik's repeated appeal to intention at the Friday *khutba* the morning after the first protests of the October 17 *thawra*, declaring a refrain repeated by many imams in Tripoli during the weeks after its outburst: "*la tansi al-din* [do not forget religion]!"

Touch and Installation (or The Body as a Stage)

Faraj laughs at me when I tell him about my conversation with Malik.

"I know him," he tells me, "Malik talks a lot."

Tripoli is a small city, Faraj explains, and through a friend of a friend he has heard stories about Malik. He does not say more, nor does he comment when I ask him about the theological questions of the soul and the heart.

"Maybe," he shrugs unconcernedly, flipping the dough in the oven as I attempt to relate my meetings with Malik to him.

I also try to tell Tariq about my conversations with Malik. He waves me off and instead lectures me about the three things that everyone who works at the bakery must have: *sadaqa* ['charity'], *imaneh* ['loyalty'], and *karamah* ['dignity' or 'generosity'].

"These three things!" Tariq bellows. He counts them on his hand. "If you have these three things you'll be good. You can have trust! This is what you must know for any work, but you can learn it here at the bakery."

⁵² Moosa, *Ghazali*, 224.

⁵³ Ali Altaf Mian, "Agents of Grace: Ethical Agency between Ghazali and the Anthropology of Islam," in *American Journal of Islam and Society* 39, no. 1 (2021): 6-40.

⁵⁴ Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. 'The Meaning and End of Religion,'" in *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001).

“Look, you see this guy here?” He gestures to a man lingering by the bakery front door, probably in his mid-forties.

“He was homeless and on the streets. We took him in, gave him a place to live and he worked with us. Now I trust him, I give him the keys to my home!” Tariq shouts out each line, emphasizing the last word of each the sentence.

“You see this guy?” he says, gesturing to one of the workers standing nearby. Adorned with a youthful face, he started working at the bakery just a few months ago. Clearly surprised at being addressed, he looks up sheepishly, uncertain.

“He was on the streets too! I don’t need him! But he needs help, he needs work. It’s better than being an alcoholic, doing drugs, or in prison. But I can’t help everyone, I can only help some. Remember, you have to have a good heart [*qalb tayyib*].”

In these discussions of the heart, it is perhaps tempting to interpret the polyvalence of the concept, as well as the technical concepts *al-nafs*, *al-ruh*, and *al-‘aql*, as merely metaphorical or philosophic abstractions. This is especially the case regarding the heart, which has a distinct physiological referent. Rather than be guided by such an approach, however, I have tried to show thus far how it is more instructive to foreground the rhetorical figures that give shape and energetic amplification to such discourse, making them efficacious.⁵⁵ Here, attention to language and its use in relation to the plasticity of the body, understood as a kind of stage or installation, is especially helpful.

Recall the Ismails’ theory of painting: less a “fixed object as much as a stage for glimpsing irruptive forces (*al-intilaq*), which makes individual marking and surface delineations into indexical traces of an energized whole.”⁵⁶ Not a ‘fixed object as much as a stage for glimpsing irruptive forces’—is this not close to how Marcel Mauss describes the body as a *technical object* in his famous essay?⁵⁷ Mauss spoke of the body in terms of techniques, which is to say in terms of *technics*, and thus as a kind of *technology*. Here, we should recall that *techne* means ‘art’ or ‘craft’ in Greek, an activity of producing traces (‘character’ in ancient Greek is a figure stamped onto wax tablet). This points to the body’s quality as an *artifice* that bears energetic tracings, an installation in the modern sense as that which exhibits, or puts on display, art.

Commentating on Mauss’ essay, Asad helpfully explains, “the human body was not to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of ‘cultural imprints,’ still less as the active source of ‘natural expressions’ that are clothed in local history and culture’...[but] was to be viewed as a developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement (e.g., walking), through modes of emotion being (e.g., composure), to kind of spiritual experience (e.g., mystical states).”⁵⁸ Asad’s reading points to the body as an energetic medium that can be given sensuous shape (shapes that are imprinted or installed by images and language) to achieve a range of purposes. This includes as a stage by which subtle and difficult forces can burst out and be perceptually experienced.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See Chapter 4 for an extended discussion of poetry and *takhyil* as part of this rhetorical tradition, especially by way of the writings of al-Jurjani.

⁵⁶ Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation*, 4.

⁵⁷ Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body.”

⁵⁸ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 76.

⁵⁹ Mauss says at the end of his essay, “I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied, but which were studied fully in China and India, even in

It is not surprising, then, that Asad also notes for Ghazali language may not be representational or semantic in a straightforward sense. This is particularly so regarding the Sufi trope of tasting, or *dhawq*, which is linked to ‘truth.’ Asad insists that “learning to ‘taste the truth’ is not an instance of translating verbal signs into nonverbal sign system” but instead is “learning to ‘realize the truth’ as feeling-and-attitude.”⁶⁰ Such use of language is premised on a particular architecture of touch:

Most commentators on Ghazali, incidentally take ‘taste’ to be ‘a metaphor,’ but since taste is a form of touch, it is part of a complicated history of sense awareness that links it with the truth of certain states of being...because ‘taste encompasses the sense of touching and being touched [passivity] and of how the enunciation of revelation touches one.’⁶¹

We should add that Michel Aflaq himself articulated a similar relation between words and senses, when he said in a speech commemorating the Prophet Mohammad’s birthday, “words [the Arabs] used had always been filled with facts pulsating with life, the words they listened to *were meant to be heard by the heart and not just the ears*. They were supposed to evoke a response of the whole person... linking life and actions.”⁶²

Daniel Heller-Roazen has suggested that certain Greek-influenced Muslim thinkers, including Ibn Sina and Ghazali, inherited an Aristotelian thematic in which the soul is organized around perception and sensation, rather than consciousness as such.⁶³ Central to this formation is the Aristotelian notion of what is known as the ‘common sense’ or *hiss mushtarak*—an elusive capacity that, while playing distinct roles for various thinkers, unites the five outer senses (feeling, tasting, hearing, smelling, tasting) insofar as it is understood as the *very perception of perceiving*.

Amongst the five outer senses, Aristotle suggests that feeling—touch—has a privileged position because it is the basis for this ‘common sense.’ Heller-Roazen explains, “the tactical power seems to shelter within it the possibility of all the others that follow...to the extent that all five senses operate in a medium and so by means of contact, ‘they all,’ as Aristotle writes in the last chapter of *De Anima*, ‘sense by touch.’”⁶⁴

For Sufi thought adopting this primacy of touch as part of the architecture of the soul, truth itself becomes a type of touching that can be understood in terms of tasting—hence the trope of *dhawq*. But this is also because tasting involves touching with the tongue, ingesting the blessing [*ni‘meh*] of words. Words that can be divine, understood in terms of the *touch* of God that is revealed in Arabic. Through this tasting or *dhawq*, a subject can cultivate itself to transform and orient itself towards the divine—hence, as the anthropologist Kirsten Scheid points out, *dhawq* might more accurately translated as “the

very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communion with God.’” Mauss, 87. To which Asad adds, “Thus, the possibility is opened up of inquiring into the ways in which embodied practice (including language in use) form a precondition for varieties of religious experience. The inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies. ‘Consciousness’ becomes a dependent concept.” Asad, *Genealogies*, 77.

⁶⁰ Asad, *Genealogies*, 73.

⁶¹ Asad, *Genealogies*, 73-4.

⁶² We noted this is Chapter 1. Aflaq, “dhikra’ al-rasul al-‘arabi,” 141, my italics.

⁶³ Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

⁶⁴ Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 30.

capacity to incorporate.”⁶⁵ This is the language of eating, yes, but also, thinking with Mauss, one of installing and thus installation.

We should not forget, however, that touch is also includes ingesting the blessings of actual food, such as bread, which as Tariq’s cousin the sheikh told me, is of the highest *ni‘meh*—one that, by analogy with the sacrality of words in Islam, also holds the possibility of divine disclosure. The primacy of touch in both instances (words and food) becomes connected to a particular emotional or affective state—what in Arabic is known as a *hal*.⁶⁶ In this instance, the state or *hal* is an experience of justice or the real, *al-haqq*.⁶⁷ It is the touch of the inner reality of the world, *al-batin*, one that takes shape at the very moment it is felt. Hence, touch such as *dhawq* for the Sufis is a manner of *inner touch*.

The affective or energetic quality of *dhawq* is crucial. Typically, *dhawq* has been understood to convey knowledge of the highest order—a more advanced mode of knowledge on the same spectrum of knowing as analogy [*qiyas*] and faith [*iman*]. It is usually tied to the idea of felicity [*sa‘ada*], which is to say, bliss or pleasure—intellectual, sexual, and spiritual.⁶⁸ As a state, then, there is a passional quality to this kind of touch as a modality of the soul that gives the latter perceptual shape, making truth concrete.⁶⁹

Dhawq, as direct tasting, is “thus a stage of cognition that is, in a sense, ‘above’ philosophical knowledge...it is a ‘perfection’ [*istikmal*] of philosophical knowledge, achieved when that knowledge is internalized, reaches the level of inner state of certitude and assurance [*yaqin*], becomes a psychological or cognitive state [*hal*], and ceases being mediated and discursive.”⁷⁰ As an incommunicable experience, it is often likened to witnessing or vision [*mushahada* or *ru‘ya*]*—a kind of dreamwork.*

It is useful to think of Malik’s description earlier of life as *bala’*, or divine tribulation, with this background in mind. Stefania Pandolfo and Basit Iqbal have shown how the analytic of *bala’*, seen from the perspective of Islamic eschatology, opens up questions of affliction as not simply that from which one suffers pathologically—an approach that implies a kind of prior whole—but as an essential condition of life.⁷¹ (Indeed, we might even say as a condition of possibility of life.) In theological terms, life as *bala’* or tribulation, is the fundamental obfuscation of God from existence—the veiling

⁶⁵ Kirsten Scheid, “Cultivation Discourses in the Arab East,” in *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 76.

⁶⁶ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 197.

⁶⁷ This point is explored in the Iraqi context of post-revolutionary horizons regarding the artwork of Kadhim Haidar by Saleem al-Bahloly, “The Migration of Form: An Ancient Concept of Justice Resurfaces in the Modern Artwork,” *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2020).

⁶⁸ Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 48.

⁶⁹ More specifically, *dhawq* is the experiential knowledge of the pleasure of the afterlife, also sometimes referred to as *yawm al-sa‘da* [Day of Bliss], which can only otherwise be conveyed discursively through analogies of similar pleasure. Ghazali writes that until we experience such pleasures directly by tasting [*bil-dhawq*], they can only be explained in symbols and figurative language, such as when the prophets speak of the afterlife. Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 51.

⁷⁰ Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 51.

⁷¹ Pandolfo, *Knot*, 225; Basit Iqbal, “Reprising Islamic Political Theology: Genre and the Time of Tribulation,” *Political Theology* 23 (2022).

of divine truth, a limit. It is an occultation of the reality of the world that, at the very same, is the structure of its manifestation.⁷² It speaks to the incompleteness of the present.

This logic of finitude and limit is already built into the structure of *nafṣ* and *nafas*—the link between ‘soul’ and ‘breath’ glossed earlier. Each breath gives life and then ends, a rhythm that mimics the co-presence of death in life. The movement of temporalization encapsulated in the structure of breath, of *nafas*, is thus also that of the soul, the *nafṣ*, wherein the only difference between life and death is the opening to the outside of time [*al-dunya*, but also ‘breathing out’] and its necessary return to the infinite, or non-time [*al-akhira*, but also ‘breathing in’]. Thinking of this phenomenology of breath, Ghazali’s *Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* [*dhikr al-mawt wa ma ba’ dhu*] stresses every moment is a small death—fundamentally contingent, reborn in the next moment only due to the mercy of God [*rahmat allah*] and his blessing [*ni’ mah*].⁷³

These are ideas explored earlier in the dissertation, both in terms of the worker’s description of the ‘life and death of dough’ as a kind of vernacular eschatology, as well as the cosmo-poetic structure of dough’s ‘breathing.’⁷⁴ My point here is to show how existential struggles and theological ideas born in response to them, such as those invoked by Malik (ethics, justice, divine tribulation), might take concrete shape on a figural level (the soul as breath, the heart), helping give perceptual, sensuous form to those struggles and ideas at the bakery—what I have been calling a form of life.

Malik also spoke of *bala’*, of tribulation and ordeal, in terms of opportunity. Or, we instead of opportunity [*fursa*], we might say capacitation and potentiality. “Suffering is beautiful,” he insisted. Suffering leads to proper fear [*khawf*] and the remembrance of one’s finitude and thus one’s heteronomous dependence on the gift of time. *Bala’* is therefore, according to Malik, a kind of test—what he called an *ikhtibar*. *Ikhtibar* means ‘test,’ ‘experiment,’ or ‘exploration,’ as in the sense of a ‘laboratory experiment,’ conducted by criterion and trial. But it also means ‘experience’ as in that which is acquired over time, captured in the English expression ‘practical experience.’ We can see this range of associations emerging from *ikhtibar*’s semantic root *kh-b-r*, meaning ‘to experience’ or ‘to know.’ From this root the word for ‘news’ [*akhbar*], as well as the verbal action of ‘informing another’ [*khabara*] are also derived.

The divine trial of life understood as an *ikhtibar* thus evinces a disclosive quality, as a form of testing that reveals truth, or the real. But it also speaks to the experimental quality of *bala’* and life, a feature exhibited by the subject of *bala’*, who explores life and can only know experientially, which is to say, temporally. Hence, another related derivation of the root *kh-b-r*, is *khābir*—an ‘expert’ or ‘one with experience.’ Mustapha, we might recall, thought of himself as someone who had ‘experience’ or *khibreḥ* with bread and thus could see things differently.⁷⁵ That is, someone who knows ‘from

⁷² We can perhaps reframe this argument in terms of temporality: life is the exposure of the infinite to an outside that is time itself. Together, this helps us to see that *bala* is both the necessary condition of finitude and thus of culture, life and existence, and the destructive character of time. Time as such is the time of *bala*, or tribulation—better yet, time is tribulation.

⁷³ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife* (Islamic Texts Society, 2016). Accordingly, Frank Griffel suggests that Ghazali might be thought of as an occasionalist. See Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*.

⁷⁴ See Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷⁵ See Chapters 1 and 4.

experience,’ from having experimented, to whom experiential knowledge has been disclosed or passed down.

In an early essay, Giorgio Agamben argued that experience and science were not coupled in the medieval scholastic world in the way that they are in modernity.⁷⁶ The subject of experience in medieval times was ‘common sense,’ or the *psyche* [*al-nafs*], while the subject of science was *nous*, which was associated with Neo-Platonism and the divine. Modern science, he argues, makes ‘experience’ the locus—that is the pathway—to knowledge by locating their conjunction in the Archimedean point of the Cartesian *cogito*, or consciousness.⁷⁷ Because of this transformation, Agamben writes, traditional experience is no longer accessible to us—it has been destroyed.⁷⁸

But Agamben’s account elides the way in which medieval thinkers—Christian and Islamic—consistently broached the boundary between experience and knowledge through the idiom of touch, *not consciousness*. This is relevant insofar as we just saw that touch is, in fact, the organizing perception of the Aristotelian and scholastic ‘common sense.’ Touch is what links the *psyche* and *nous*, and grounds the form of life explored in Tripoli in this dissertation. Agamben’s melancholic account of the destruction of experience thus seems to me to be premature.⁷⁹

Instead, I want to suggest this kind of touch-based experimentation, or *ikhtibar*, is staged at al-Furn by means of the heart-centered body and its participatory link to an outside. And like the distinction Asad makes between Aristotle and Ghazali, such a link between the soul and its outside is structured not by thinking or consciousness as such, but as an orientation that is acquired over time—a perceptual and experiential transformation of turning towards and becoming closer to God.

Tellingly, Alexander Treiger argues that Ghazali’s appropriation of the trope of *dhawq* as ‘incorporating experiential knowledge’ has its philosophic roots in Ibn Sina’s thought. Ibn Sina argues that there is an experiential side to knowledge that cannot be captured by syllogism: this is the intellectual pleasure [*al-ladhdha al-‘aqliyya*] associated with it, its own distinct mode of knowledge.”⁸⁰

In his argument, Ibn Sina uses the word *tajriba*, or ‘experience.’ *Tajriba* is derived from the Arabic semantic root *j-r-b* meaning ‘to try’ or ‘to attempt.’⁸¹ Treiger

⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience* (New York: Verso, 1993).

⁷⁷ Agamben, *Infancy*, 19. He has in mind Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was originally named *The Science of the Experience of Consciousness*. We might gloss the transformation of the title from the latter to the former dialectically and say that the book is at once the ‘disappearance (experience) of consciousness’ and the ‘appearance (phenomenology) of spirit.’

⁷⁸ Agamben uses the word ‘destruction’ in a Heideggerian register. In a very different context regarding a different tradition, Robert Sharf makes a curiously similar point about the distinction between the grammar of ‘experience’ emerging from modern Europe and other parts of the world. Robert Sharf, “Experience,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁷⁹ We also explored the concept of ‘*Erfahrung*’ in Chapter 4 and Benjamin’s account of its ostensible demise because of the loss of conditions necessary for storytelling.

⁸⁰ Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 60.

⁸¹ There is a complicated inheritance regarding the relation between the words ‘experience’ and ‘experiment’ in English, particularly the latter’s transformation amidst the secularization and changing status of scientific experimentation in early modern Europe. See Peter Dear, *Discipline and Experience: The Mathematical Way in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Talal Asad notes that “the concept of experience that from early on had the sense of putting something to the test was now being used to identify an internal state through an external manipulation (‘experiment’).”

suggests that Ghazali replaces *tajriba* with *dhawq* to communicate this state of non-syllogistic experiential knowledge, expanding on the possibilities opened by Ibn Sina by combining it with Qur'anic vocabulary and archive and a heart-centered architecture of the soul (recall that Ghazali also deviated from Ibn Sina by shifting the locus of thought and perception from the brain to the heart).

Frank Griffel similarly endorses the argument that Ghazali relies on Ibn Sina's philosophy of experimentation, despite the former's refutation of the latter in the *Tahafut*. He adds that it is important to know that for Ibn Sina, *tajriba* plays a more significant role than in earlier Aristotelian philosophies of knowledge because Ibn Sina argued that induction [*istiqla*] should always be combined with experience [*tajriba*].⁸²

In fact, Griffel suggests that, for Ibn Sina, *istiqla* relies on *tajriba* to produce universal judgments not limited by determinate conditions. Ghazali's treatment of experience builds from this insight. Like Ibn Sina, Ghazali also requires experience to be pursued with a certain degree of rigidity, a mode of acquisition that can produce universal and certain knowledge of all kinds of casual connections.⁸³ Unlike Ibn Sina, however, Ghazali does not limit *tajriba*'s capacity to produce universal judgments. This opens the door for a more capacious understanding of *tajriba* as a form of experiencing divine knowledge. This theory of mystical cognition, condensed in the language of *dhawq*, served as a template for later Muslim writers, including Ibn Tufayl, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, who engaged with Ghazali's and Ibn Sina's thought. Such an inheritance, as Malik exemplifies, is not simply history past, but continues to be part of living traditions in the Mediterranean and Islamicate worlds today.

Dhawq, *tajriba*, and *ikhtibar* thus form a nexus of concepts organized around a certain conception of perceptual and experiential knowledge centered on the subtle heart and its relation to the divine and the extant world. In this context, Malik suggested that the hardships of the Syrians and Lebanese working at the bakery—hardships that condensed the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war, the ongoing Syrian war, colonization and its afterlives, sectarianism, a collapsing hyper-neoliberalized economy, the post-Arab Spring—be understood as an ordeal [*bala*], as a test, as an *ikhtibar*.⁸⁴

Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49. In his own way, Raymond Williams makes this distinction. "It is evident that the grounds for reliance on experience past ('lessons') and experience present (full and active 'awareness') are radically different, yet there is a link between them, in some of the kinds of action and consciousness which they both oppose." *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 127. I am not equipped to give an account of the genealogy of *tajriba*, but here merely note its transformation as part of a shifting conceptual and lived grammar.

⁸² Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 210.

⁸³ Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 212.

⁸⁴ At the same time, *ikhtibar* as a form of testing by means of experience and experiential knowledge speaks to the two-fold structure of *ikhtibar*—as an object being tested, in the *passive sense* i.e. as tribulation, and as the subjective of an *active testing*, as experimentation. Put differently, time is at once the veiling of the heart from divine reality, a dissimulation of the infinite in the finite, and the heteronomous opening of the possibility of a singular kind of actualization or knowledge [*ma'rifa*]*—the return to the infinite. In contradistinction to historical contingency, this is an account of an ontological contingency, one built into the structure of life itself. Here, it is useful to recall that the human, al-insan, is etymologically linked to 'forgetting.' The temporal exploration of tajriba—that which leads to a particular kind of ontological knowledge in the idiom of dhawq—thus speaks to its necessary emplotment onto the very structure of finitude and time. For an exploration of the implications of memory, forgetting, and the human, see Abdelfattah Kilito, The Tongue of Adam (New York: New Directions, 2016).*

While not explicitly articulated in this language, I am pointing to the way that Tariq and the bakery workers' actions and idioms resemble the function of *dhawq*, *tajriba*, and *ikhtibar* in the manner Ghazali and other Islamic thinkers. But it is also reflected in Sufi imagery that takes bread and the bakery as figurations of these very ideas, such as the trope of God as the Divine Baker and the finite world as His bakery in which God's lover is baked in the fire of tribulation or separation from God.⁸⁵

This is not to suggest that the bakers are gnostic 'knowers' [*'arifin*], a designation that indicates access to some of the highest divine knowledge [*ma'rifa*]. Rather, it points to how the bakery workers live orientated to the horizon of finitude, understood as a limit. This opens up alternative ways of understanding the workers' lives and tepidness to *thawra*, as well as to the politics of the region. Like the self-named revolutionaries [*thuwwar*], Syrian and Lebanese, the bakery workers respond to both the historical *ikhtibar* of the region and the subjective experience of life as a mode of tribulation. And like the twentieth century Arab modernist artists and thinkers discussed in the first section of this chapter, they also respond to the fundamental *ikhtibar* of finitude by experimenting with life at the bakery, its extant symbolic forms and figures.

But I have also tried to point to how this play might be disclosed experientially at the level of pleasure and pain, of doubt and opacity, of suffering and knowledge, passional and affective states—all as they are facilitated by the material, sensorial, and infrastructural conditions of wage labor at a state-subsidized bakery in Tripoli. These are possible imaginations of life exhibited by the heart-centered body. Such imagery, I have attempted to show, is staged and rehearsed at al-Furn. It foregrounds the bakery as a scene of struggle. That struggle gives shape to body and perception, understood as a stage—the heart as soul, as history, as world.

The events that took place during my fieldwork—the upheaval of revolution, the destruction of war, the spread of disease, the fracturing of the earth—cannot be contained by the grammar of the secular state. Instead, they point to the incompleteness of the present and signal an elsewhere, another temporality. They gesture to the restlessness of an indeterminate topological force in a broken world. For the bakery workers, such a perspective of the kinetics of the heart, of the work of bread, can parochialize the time of revolution and secular politics, including the nation-state, without losing sight of them, all the while pointing to a heteronomous, impersonal outside.

During the spring of 2020, when the infectious terror of Covid-19 caused the Lebanese government to lock down the country, closing its borders and airport and forcing all establishments except bakeries, pharmacies, and hospitals to shut down, I spoke to Ali, another young Homs bakery worker, about whether he was scared to come to work. He spoke to me in an informed and yet distinctly matter-of-fact manner.

"Look Brent, you know that you can get the virus from anyone right? And even if you don't show symptoms, you can still pass it on. So you, me, Faraj we're all coming from different places—you from Abi Samra, me from Tabbanneh, Faraj from Qabbe. We don't know if one of us might get it on the way, or from someone else outside the bakery.

⁸⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study in the Works of Jalaoddin Rumi* (New York: State University of New York Press), 146.

And then we come here and we'll definitely get it from each other. There's nothing we can do. The only way to ensure we don't get it is if we stay at home and don't leave. That's the only way."

And Ali can't stay at home, I asked him?

"If it were just a matter of staying at home, I could do it for one hundred years. But I have to work. So I had to leave home and come here. Enough, there's nothing more to the matter. If we die, we die. We all have to die anyways. We shouldn't be afraid it."

'I had to leave home and come here.' Ali did not specify if he meant home in Tripoli, at his apartment, or home in Syria, Homs. But he had to leave to work. Is this not the opening of a possible ethical relation to life and one's finitude, one grounded in the subtle organ of the heart and an orientation to others?

Just a few weeks earlier Ali and I had found a pigeon that had somehow managed to find its way into the building staircase that led to the apartments above bakery where the night-shift workers slept. It fluttered its wings in search of food until it found some sugared sesame seeds, usually reserved for *ka'k* bread, scattered on the ground.

"*Mashallah!*" Ali had said at the time, shaking his head impressed. "Every being has its sustenance, its *rizq!*" We watched the bird nibble at the seeds, a cautious eye also observing us until it hopped away and flew out through the open door above us.

CONCLUSION

As I finish writing this dissertation in the spring of 2024, tens of thousands of Palestinians have been murdered by Israel in the past eight months as part of an ongoing state-sponsored genocide. It is hard to write about war and violence amongst Syrian bakery workers in Lebanon without thinking about what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank now, or about the British and United States' respective roles in the colonial and imperial occupation of Palestine as an organizing part of the twentieth century history of the Mashriq. Palestine, as this dissertation has gestured to at various moments, has been at the heart of the region's history. Today, Israeli warplanes, drones, and soldiers, whose weapons are supplied by the United States, target bakeries and humanitarian flour distribution in Gaza amidst deliberate tactics of starvation. Meanwhile, Israel is also bombing Lebanon and Syria in ongoing acts of war, assassinating political figures, journalists, and civilians, and poisoning the land of south Lebanon with white phosphorous so as to make it uninhabitable.

What to make of anthropology in such an atmosphere of violence, when the discipline seems to die in life because it is unable to meet the challenge of death? I think, strangely enough, of Talal Asad's turn to myth and poetics in *Formations of the Secular* in his attempt to assess the secular in relation to politics. In it, Asad explores differing accounts of the secular by the literary critics Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin. For Asad, de Man retains a commitment to the secular as 'the real'—a real that de Man locates in early European Romanticism. Such a world of the European Romantics is secular because it is neither sacred nor enchanted. According to de Man, this secular world becomes obscured, however, by the emergence of a symbolic imaginary—myth—that obfuscates 'the real,' which must be recovered.

Conversely, Benjamin, in Asad's reading, describes a "secular world that is not merely to be discovered (through clear-sighted knowledge of the real) but precariously assembled and lived in contradictory fashion."¹ For Benjamin, allegory is central to a secular world because it must be lived in uncertainty, without fixed moorings, even for the faithful. We might state this differently and say that Benjamin registers secularization from within the ruin, while de Man laments (mournfully) a ruin (the loss of the secular) that has already been completed.

Such divergent readings of the secular (de Man's and Benjamin's) direct us to different kinds of analysis and politics. As Asad puts it: "one calls for unmasking a collective illusion, for seeing through an 'enchanted world,' the other for exploring the intricate play between representations and what they represent, between actions and disciplines that aim to define and validate them, between language games and forms of life."² We might be even more forceful and say that this is a different vision of anthropology.³ Such a vision of anthropology has informed this dissertation in its

¹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 63.

² Asad, *Formations*, 66.

³ Basit Iqbal felicitously calls Asad's methodological antihistoricism "chronopolitics." See "Asad and Benjamin: Chronopolitics of tragedy in the anthropology of secularism," *Anthropological Theory* 20, no. 1 (2020): 77-96.

approach to war, violence, and memory, and it guides my thinking on what is happening in Palestine and in the region today.

I want to conclude the dissertation by briefly considering what this other anthropology might direct us towards in the current moment amidst Israel's ongoing destruction of Palestine. I think of Asad's analysis of myth and poetics when I watch the recording of a lecture on English poetry given by the Palestinian professor and poet Refaat Alareer, who was murdered on December 6, 2023 by the Israeli bombardment of Gaza.⁴ In the lecture, which was part of seminar given at the Islamic University of Gaza in 2019, Alareer gives a close reading of Tamim al-Barghouti's poem "Fi-l-Quds" ["In Jerusalem"].⁵ (The Islamic University of Gaza, founded in 1978 after the Camp David Accords were signed, has since been destroyed by the Israeli military, along with all other universities in Gaza).⁶ The first part of the poem is highly standardized and regular, written in the style of classical Arabic poetry. "We passed by the home of the beloved/but the enemy's laws and wall turned us away/I said to myself, 'Maybe, that is a blessing,'" declaim the first lines. This is a typical opening in classical Arabic poetry, Alareer explains, an *istihlal*—the mobilization of formal poetic tropes, such as the passing over the home of the beloved or the standing over the ruins of a past tribe.

Then, however, the poem abruptly shifts to irregular free verse, formless, as it describes "blonde European tourists who don't see Jerusalem at all." The very sound and perceptual qualities of the text, its rhyme and sonic resonances, change. The Israeli occupation of Palestine has taken place not only at the level of the poem's content where the enemy controls Jerusalem, Alareer explains to his students, but also disfigured the poem's very structure, its textual fabric and the historicity that gives it perceptual sense and shape. But by deploying these distinct, sharply contrasting styles, Alareer suggests, perhaps there is something else at play. "Maybe Tamim is also trying to connect Jerusalem with our past, our future, and our present."

This is what Samera Esmeir points us to when she asks us to tarry with the violence of the Israeli state against Palestinians, a violence that aims at obliteration. More than simply biological death, obliteration is the destruction of all that which makes a form of life possible. Esmeir explains how Israeli state violence exceeds even the legal grammar of genocide:

What genocide in a restricted, legal meaning cannot fully frame are all those colonial obliterating acts that target not only the biological and physical life of a people but also houses, neighborhoods, mosques, churches, schools, streets, and finally, land—all those spaces that are not only the infrastructure of life in the present, but also the sites in which memory dwells, in which one can tell a story about her life, in which one inherits a collective life and can participate in it, in which one can perceive

⁴ Thanks to Basit Iqbal for bringing this lecture to my attention.

⁵ Refaat Alareer, "English Poetry Lecture 3: Tamim Al-Barghouti in Jerusalem by Tamim Al-Barghouti." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rU-7taayAk&list=PL9fwy3NUQKwYGN66V9CL-c7DFnG0_Swb2&index=3&t=6s.

⁶ For more on the history of Palestine's universities, including the Islamic University of Gaza, see Esmat al-Halaby, "Toward an Intellectual History of Genocide in Gaza," *The Baffler*, March 27, 2024, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/toward-an-intellectual-history-of-genocide-in-gaza-elhalaby>.

herself as part of a more extended history, a past that exceeds her, and a struggle that marks her.⁷

In other words, Israel seeks to destroy an entire collective existence, its form of life—its relation to the earth that opens the possibility of time itself. And, we might add, as Esmeir and others do elsewhere, its poets, its journalists, its doctors and its children, its living and material archives—everything that gives shape to that life.⁸

Such poetry hearkens less to the terrain of the secular understood in terms of modern aesthetics (as in Asad's analysis of the Syrian poet Adonis in *Formations*, for instance) but to a tradition of resistance, of Palestinian revolutionary poetry, in which perception and body are cultivated in relation to the land.⁹ Such a tradition, like Jean Starobinski's description of Renaissance myth that Asad cites, is mobilized towards the shaping of possibilities of action. Possibilities and limits of action—or, as Asad also puts it elsewhere, “the powers they release or disable.”¹⁰ This Palestinian imaginary does not reflect a principled binary between the secular and religious, nor a historicized time. Instead, it is a conceptual grammar forged from a radical Palestinian tradition, where land, sea, and sky are not thought of in terms of private property or a measured economic resource but disclose a plenitude. “The imaginary that produces land in the face of its destruction,” Esmeir tell us, “maintains collective existence in struggle.”¹¹ Benjamin might have called it “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”¹² My Syrian interlocutors say it is “how dough lives and dies.” A leap of the heart.

The work of bread, as described in the dissertation, teaches us that the past, indeed violence itself, is not simply an object to be overcome or discarded. Its historicity is the existence of the ongoing formation and destruction of social worlds that are continually being made and re-made, like in Palestine or Syria today, or in a bakery in Tripoli. It teaches us, as scholars, of the necessity of a different mode of listening. Of the necessity of an approach capable of apprehending this dialectic and its opacity, its creativity and its contradictory and energetic agitation.

Such a methodological opening might enable us to carefully rethink political violence, revolution, and non-secular modes of possibility, as well as the place of individual and collective spiritual transformation within these landscapes. Following my interlocutors, Asad, Alareer, Esmeir, and others, I would like us to hold with those forms of life a little longer.

⁷ Samera Esmeir, “The End of Colonial Government,” in *From the River to the Sea: Essays for a Free Palestine*, ed. Sai Englert, Michal Schatz, and Rosie Warren (New York: Verso Books, 2023), 172.

⁸ This, as many have long noted, is a deliberate Israeli strategy. For instance, Israel famously looted the ‘PLO archives’ during its 1982 invasion of Beirut. See Anthony Lowenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports Technology of Occupation Around the World* (New York: Verso Books, 2023), 49.

⁹ Nadine Fattaleh also points us to Palestinian revolutionary poetry as part of this tradition of defiance, “A Tradition of Defiance,” *n+1*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/a-tradition-of-defiance/>.

¹⁰ Asad, *Formations*, 17.

¹¹ Esmeir, “The End of Colonial Government,” 184.

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.