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**The Animal at the Scene of Writing:
Narrative Subjectivities of the Lebanese Civil War**

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**The Animal at the Scene of Writing:
Narrative Subjectivities of the Lebanese Civil War**

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Thesis

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Abstract

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This thesis inquires into anti-humanist trends in Lebanese literature of the civil war and post-war period by examining the limit concept of the animal in three novelistic works: *Beirut Nightmares [Kawābīs Bayrūt]* (1976) by Ghādah Sammān, *Yalo* (2002) by Elias Khoury, and *The Tiller of Waters [Hārith al-miyāh]* (1998) by Hudá Barakāt. Marking a departure in previous critical work done on this body of literature, which has been dominated by trauma theory as an analytical framework, this thesis employs an innovative synthesis of narrative theory and affect theory to describe how the authors utilize narrative to humanize the war experience, thereby mitigating the effects of contingency and fragmentation on the narrative subject. After the collapse of the state, the human being is separated from its political form, leaving it perilously exposed to acts

of violence. It may also, however, carry out aggressions on its fellow man with impunity. Both of these terrible aspects of man's nature in wartime are understood conventionally as exposing a beast within man, since they radically undermine the precepts of moral value and self-sovereignty that constitute the pillars of humanism. Through acts of "composition" the first person narrators of these novels strive to insulate their affective core from participating in ambient currents of violence, which are viewed as a kind of contamination understood as "becoming-animal." While implicating the subject in a participation that is other-than-human, these animal becomings are also, following Deleuze and Guattari, ways of attaining a new vitality and escaping the hierarchical symbolic power of logos. Use of this animal figure allows the authors to rethink the human in ways that does not assume a fixed humanist ontology. For Sammān, the animal represents a principle of vitality that allows her protagonist to overcome human sources of inertia, such as melancholic memories or ingrained habit, thereby preserving the authentic voice of the writerly self. For Khoury and Barakāt, the animal permits them to foreground the figure of the subaltern who stands in a minoritarian relation to logos. They also propose a post-humanist ethos of co-presence based on the affective subject's receptivity and vulnerability; its capacity to both affect and be affected.

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Introduction

Man cannot seem to live without regret, for even in the pride of his humanity he looks enviously on the beast's happiness. He wishes to simply live without satiety or pain, like the beast; yet it is all in vain, for he will not change places with it. He may ask the beast—"Why do you look at me and not speak to me of your happiness?" The beast wants to answer—"Because I always forget what I wished to say": but he forgets this answer too, and is silent; and the man is left to wonder.

--Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*

That night in the shelter I felt no such revulsion. I watched the cockroach crawling in the corner near which I sat and wished it no harm, feeling that it was a kindred spirit, a creature, like me, of dark hidden places, living out its life in ignominy. It seems that everyone down there reacted in a similar fashion, for there was none of the flurry that normally accompanies a sighting of one of these beasts. When someone finally crushed it with his shoe, the crunching sound brought no reaction and the cadaver was merely kicked absentmindedly aside into the outer space of the garage, to be swept up later with the cigarette butts and other debris of our sojourn in the shelter.

--Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments*

Jean Said Makdisi is emblematic of a certain cosmopolitan vision of Beirut. Sister to Edward Said, that preeminent figure of literary homeland, Makdisi was born to a middle-class Palestinian family, came of age in Cairo, went to college in the United States, married a Lebanese man and finally settled in Beirut—an adoptive city, but one that she would take to heart, doggedly refusing to leave even through 15 harrowing years of civil war. As an exiled intellectual at home in the world, Makdisi found refuge in this cosmopolitan Arab city of letters. Her war memoir, *Beirut Fragments*, was hailed as a testament to the city's indomitable spirit and enduring humanity in the face of the civil war's most brutalizing effects. And yet strangely, Makdisi's narrative abounds in images of animals. Often, the animal is used as a simile; it stands in serviceably for the supine earth, which is subjected to a "never-ending beating" of torrential

shelling; it “suffers its agony dumbly...like a stupid beast, like me, like us all.”¹ Chic Hamra Street, once a fashionable West Beirut boulevard, succumbs to interment under its own refuse, “like a sick, scabby animal...permanently scarred by its garbage.”² In other instances, Makdisi employs more individuated animals, as opposed to *the* animal, and permits them, so to speak, to play themselves. The reader encounters companion species that suffer or persevere alongside humans during the travails of war. A kitten, trapped helplessly in an abandoned shop, mews bewilderedly for rescue; days later, it reappears at the same location, but transmogrified to a wasted corpse animated by maggots. Meanwhile, luckier cats benefit from the stubborn “humanitarian” spirit of a kindly neighbor woman, who regularly lowers parcels of left-over food to them with a rope suspended from her balcony. Yet juxtaposed with these scenes of inter-mammalian solidarity are other, more uncertain human entanglements with parasites and vermin. During air raids, roaches brush shoulders with families of humans cowering in the shadows of subterranean bomb shelters. Huddled together in misery and fear, these humans liken themselves to rats as they combat a swarm of mosquitoes that relentlessly tap their veins for nourishment. After the terrible shelling has subsided, Makdisi climbs the stairs from the shelter to her upper story apartment and, upon rising from bed the next morning, dresses herself with studious care: “in choosing particularly neat and orderly clothes, I felt I was undoing the humiliation of my ratlike state last night.”³

In Makdisi’s memoir, the figure of the animal opens up a plurality of associations, among them humiliation, abjection, stupidity, and filth. We see the animal as something scarred,

¹ Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments* (New York: Persia Books, 1990), 44.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

incomplete, disintegrating, and putrefied. It can be dependent, vulnerable; but also predatory and parasitic. In this litany, the animal comes to represent all that is weak, loathsome, and *bodily* in man. An aberration in a genetically noble character, deficiency in moral conduct but also in posture and hygiene. Tellingly, however, Makdisi's simile always maintains a critical distinction—man and the venerable city that confers his civic identity are not animals, but have only come to resemble them during the exceptional hour of war. Even in midst of violence and destruction, the human being remains a figure freighted with a powerful moral value, as is his habitat, civilization, which issues from his hands. Enacting the ethical code of the human, or “humanitarianism,” is still possible in wartime through an uncompelled act of generosity—perhaps one might call it grace—toward a lesser form of life. In that sense, the proper object of humanitarianism could be the animal just as easily as the subaltern. If Makdisi's memoir is indeed a testament to enduring humanity, and I see no compelling reason to claim otherwise, it nevertheless begs the question: why does humanity's proof require such intimate proximity to this bestiary?

Progress and Regression

People have a tendency to view national histories from a teleological standpoint, one that comprehends past events as links in a causal chain leading ineluctably up to the present. However distorting the vision may be, however ceaselessly history continues to unfold into an unknown future, the historical record is generally read as either comedy or tragedy with a view towards how the story ends, projecting backward either the patina of a thriving present, or the pallor of contemporary strife. Some fifty years ago, there was ample reason to revel in the historical trajectory of the young Lebanese nation. This was the time of Lebanon's Golden Era, an optimistic period of economic prosperity when the state's foundational myths, centered on themes

of “origin, progress, and national development” were consolidated in the national imaginary.⁴ As an open, democratic, multi-cultural society with long-standing economic, religious, and educational ties to the West, Lebanon was celebrated as that remarkable Middle Eastern nation that had best absorbed the lessons of the Enlightenment while maintaining its authentically ‘Arab face.’ Flows of international petrodollars processed by Lebanon’s banking sector were largely reinvested in the urban development of Beirut and the expansion of the service sector catering to an international business and tourist clientele. As a result, the staid elegance of Ottoman architecture was blended into an exhilaratingly modern cityscape featuring luxurious high-rise hotels, sun-drenched beaches, and a vibrant cultural scene representing a panoply of both high and low-brow forms, including cinema, theater, poetry readings, public lecture and debate. Lebanon’s development success story led citizens to believe their homeland was peerless among Arab nations.

With the outbreak of civil war in 1975, the darker visage of Lebanon’s Janus-faced history imposed itself, violently disrupting this ascendant trend of successful nation-building and development. Post-war histories written about modern Lebanon have endlessly puzzled over the spectacular failure of the modernizing narrative, and the troubling persistence of a sub-narrative of religious factionalism. Indeed, this uncertain other self has accompanied Lebanon since its inception as a distinctly Christian entity in the Ottoman Empire, established through international intervention following a massacre in 1860 between the Maronite Christians and the Druze settled around Mount Lebanon.⁵ While historian Fawwaz Traboulsi cautions that “history does not repeat itself,” violence between Muslim and Christian sects has had an uncanny tendency to re-

⁴ Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 31.

⁵ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (London: Pluto Press), 38-9.

emerge at flash points in Lebanon's history, notably during a 1958 political crisis that precipitated into armed insurrection, and in the protracted civil war that broke out in 1975.⁶ In hindsight, it is tempting to see the modernization narrative as a mere surface veneer, periodically and explosively pierced through by an underlying reality of deep-seated animosities. However, it is likewise true that each of these conflicts were born of grievances over the uneven distribution of wealth and power associated with Lebanon's insertion into global capitalism, and only later came to be expressed as inter-confessional conflict. Ken Seigneurie reminds us that Lebanon is not the only country in the last quarter century where a secular, "East-West ideological struggle" has evolved into an "ethnic-sectarian struggle."⁷ Moreover, there is sadly nothing unique about the seeming absurdity and duration of the Lebanese Civil War, given that war now appears to be "an enduring, nomadic feature of late modernity," that is nonetheless disproportionately visited upon the global south.⁸

The atavistic emergence of violent antagonisms arranged according to the allegedly pre-modern categories of religion and tribe have led some to portray Lebanon's civil strife as periods of 'regression' or 'retribalization.' Samir Khalaf, for example, describes the war as a movement from modern 'civility'—a peaceful, prosperous multiculturalism where differences among groups are settled through negotiation; to 'primordial' loyalties—communal and confessional identity. He approaches violence as a self-reinforcing social pathology that entraps ordinary people and

⁶ Ibid, 39; 133.

⁷ He includes among them Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, Yugoslavia, Israel-Palestine, the post-9/11 United States, and Iraq. Ken Seigneurie, "Anointing with Rubble: Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28.1 (2008) 50.

⁸ Ken Seigneurie, "Ongoing War and Arab Humanism," in *Geomodernisms*, ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, 96-113 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) 96.

communities in a “vicious cycle of vengeance and reprisal.”⁹ Thus, “the protracted and displaced features of collective strife feed on each other, and...by doing so, they compound the pathologies of each.”¹⁰ Moreover, he remarks that Lebanon’s militarization was partially motivated by group dynamics, whereby the outward spectacle of militias, including their “garb, demeanor [and] lifestyle” became “a fashionable mode of empowerment and of enhancing one’s machismo.”¹¹ While Khalaf in no way neglects the war’s international dimensions, the internal picture inside Lebanon was of a conflict in which participants were seduced by a vogue for armed struggle; once ignited, the self-sustaining features of violence ensured its proliferation and longevity.

Khalaf synthesizes two main concepts that will be pivotal for the argument developed below. Firstly, progress and regression appear not to refer to society’s movement through history; rather, they describe two distinct and potentially contemporaneous modes of organizing community: pluralistic civil society versus the homogenous communal enclave.¹² For Khalaf, communalism abdicates civility, and signifies a failure to successfully occupy the modern citizen’s universal identity. Regression is also equated with violence, which the title of Khalaf’s work neutrally calls ‘incivility,’ but which attains a more charged valence as the text develops. Atrocities emanate from “the pathologies of human bestiality;” they are the reprehensible “effects of man’s baser instincts.”¹³ In other words, man appears to be inhabited by a beast or, at the very

⁹ Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

least, a beastly potential. Secondly, much like Hannah Arendt, who has commented on evil's 'banality,' Khalaf maintains that those who resort to violence are not inherently monstrous. Rather, the cyclical nature of violence wraps them up in a powerful *affect*. Affectivity, as opposed to feeling, is pre-subjective, sub-coetaneous; it is a "substrate of potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness."¹⁴ The civil war novels examined in this thesis highlight the tension between these two conceptions of the beast within man. The animal will come to stand for a de-subjectivized self, both in terms of the human's involution into affective states under the "crisis ordinary" conditions of sustained ambient violence, as well as its dual potential for rapaciousness and vulnerability, which appears once the protections of citizens' rights are suspended through the exceptional state of war.¹⁵

The Human Animal

Humanist tradition is predicated on the assumption of a moral and ontological difference between man and animal. Man is acknowledged to be a kind of animal, but one endowed with certain qualities that exult him over the beast, granting him an intermediary position on a continuum between animal and God. Much of Western metaphysical thought has been dedicated to identifying the threshold of this difference.¹⁶ In its modern incarnation, Humanism assembles a cluster of assumptions about human ontology inherited from the Enlightenment, combining Descartes's rendition of the subject with Kantian moral coordinates. This synthesis endows man with qualities of "reason, logic, cognition, [and] reflexivity" as well as "responsibility, duty,

¹⁴ Patricia Ticineto Clough, introduction to *The Affective Turn*, Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds. 1-33 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 1-2.

¹⁵ Here, I borrow Lauren Berlant's terminology, which will be elaborated below. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

respect, self-sovereignty, [and] agency.”¹⁷ Within this purview, the figure of the animal forms both a critical reference point as well as a shadowy threat to the human’s privileged status precisely because of its uncomfortable proximity. Properly speaking, other animals should be understood as simply non-human (different than); however the animal as *figure* has been designated as *inhuman* to emphasize its antithetical position, inoculating the human from this uncomfortable proximity. As Sheehan explains, “to invoke the human-as-animal or the human-as-machine is to affirm the cohabitation of human and the inhuman.”¹⁸ Moreover, Derrida notes that the special endowments and privileges that Humanism has carved out for man are predicated on a defamation of the animal. The plurality of animal species, each possessing a world incommensurable with our own, is reduced to a single figure, “the animal,” which defines humanity by serving as its binary other. This animal is classified among the *res extensa*, lifeless objects exterior to the subject and precluded from possessing a subjectivity of their own. Based on this principle of inferiority, animals fall under the purview of human mastery, to be harnessed, named, and utilized as man sees fit. This same hierarchical logic also assigns men dominion over women.¹⁹

Through his deconstruction of the animal-human binary performed in *The Animal that Therefore I am*, Derrida identifies the kernel of the human’s supposed superiority over the animal in a supplemental capacity for “response.” Cartesian tradition understands the animal as indistinguishable from the automaton, capable of a kind of mechanical reaction when addressed,

¹⁷ Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

but not of subjective response. “Response,” which is denied the animal, presupposes the ability to constitute oneself as a subject, an antecedent to the rational ability to think, as well as to any induction into a system of signs. Derrida describes this autobiographical function as a pre-linguistic potentiality: “not necessarily *the power to say* “I” but the ipseity of being *able to be* or *able to do* “I,” even before any autoreferential utterance in a language.”²⁰ For our purposes, this ability to occupy the place of “I” will be crucial in a double sense. Firstly, insofar as it is autobiographical, this “I” leads us seamlessly toward a narrative function, such that narrative stabilizes the subject through the normalizing conventions of genre, shielding the subject from contingency and rendering it legible.²¹ Secondly, the actualization of this potentiality—the linguistic declination of the subject through which it occupies the place of “I”—constitutes the subject as a member of a language community. In this manner, it is also made subject to logos in its capacity as law, bringing it into relation with sovereign power:²² As Agamben explains:

The question “In what way does the living being have language?” corresponds exactly to the question “In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?” The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it...In the “politicization” of bare life—the metaphysical task *par excellence*—the humanity of living man is decided.²³

²⁰ Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 92.

²¹ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, 10.

²² This brilliant phrase “the linguistically declined subject” I take from Kalana Rahita Seshardri, “Other/alterity: Lacan and Agamben on ethics, the subject and desubjectification,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* (2009) 14, 65-73).

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 8.

This thesis is concerned with the narrative consequences of the subject's de-suturing from language upon the collapse of the *polis*, signified here by the Lebanese Civil War. Agamben's theorizations of contemporary biopower utilize a dualistic conception of "life" native to Ancient Greek culture: *zoe*, which signifies the basic fact of living, a "bare life" common to all living things, and *bios* which indicates "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group."²⁴ Under the normal workings of the state, bare life is protected through its exclusion from politics, which is the realm of *bios*, the political being of man. However, when exposed through a state of exception, which the sovereign may declare at his pleasure, this bare life becomes *homo sacer*, a man who may be killed with impunity, and yet not sacrificed. Structurally, the state of exception resembles the Hobbesian state of nature, in which man is described as a wolf for men: "it is not so much a war of all against all as, more precisely, a condition in which everyone is bare life and a *homo sacer* for everyone else."²⁵ Agamben maintains that the state of nature, much like Khalaf's movement of civility/incivility, "is not a real epoch prior to the foundation of the City, but a principle internal to the City."²⁶ It lies dormant until "the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissolute*, "as if it were dissolved."²⁷

The animalistic body exposed by the dissolution of national sovereignty is horrifying since it bears, at the very least, a double nature. Stripped bare of his political form, the human is de-laminated from the anthropocentric coordinates of self-sovereignty and moral value. This feral human animal may freely abdicate its moral responsibility to "respond" and grant free-reign

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁵ Ibid, 106.

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Ibid., 105.

to instinct, given that the legal structures designed to maintain the state's monopoly over violence are inoperative. At the same time, the animal is vulnerable, absolutely beholden to any stronger, more powerful beast. It may be instrumentalized, devoured, or treated according to the whims of its superiors. Thus, a feral human combines both the capacity to kill without consequence or remorse, and the vulnerability to being liquidated, summarily disposed of itself without notice or reason: in Derrida's terms, "*de crèver*" (croak)—to suffer the stupid, unmournable death of the beast.²⁸

Civil War Subjectivities

Technically defined as a low-intensity conflict, but one which nonetheless lasted for nearly two decades, the Lebanese Civil war wreaked unimaginable havoc on the lives of civilians:

Lebanon was besieged and beleaguered by every possible form of brutality and collective terror known to human history: from the cruelties of factional and religious bigotry to the massive devastations wrought by private militias and state-sponsored armies. They have all generated an endless carnage of innocent victims and an immeasurable toll in human suffering. Even by the most moderate of estimates, the magnitude of such damage to human life and property is staggering. About 170,000 people have perished; twice as many were wounded or disabled; close to two thirds of the population experienced some form of dislocation or uprootedness from their homes and communities.²⁹

A cataclysmic entanglement in which the contours and combatants seemed to shift incessantly, like mercurial shapes in a kaleidoscope, the civil war had "no predictable or coherent logic to it."³⁰ Its theater of combat had no front-stage or back-stage, but was "everywhere and nowhere," obliterating the critical and physical distance between citizen and combatant.³¹ Under

²⁸ Derrida, 143.

²⁹ Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 232.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 240. The kaleidoscope metaphor appears in Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments*, 30.

³¹ Khalaf, 236.

such circumstances, phrases like “war-front” or “home-front,” as spatial metaphors of exposure and concealment, masculine and feminine, heroic action and patient perseverance, lose all relevancy, ringing farcical and meaningless. After the initial shock and pageantry of the “danse macabre” stage of the war, the all-pervasive killing settled into quotidian life rhythms.³² It was “domesticated...rendering it a normal, everyday routine; sanitized *ahdath* (events) bereft of any remorse or moral calculation.”³³ Given such quixotic features, one can understand Ken Seigneurie’s perspicacious observation that this war of obscure origins, which did not even elicit the name of war but passed, in the vocabulary of those who lived through it, under the innocuous term “*al-ahdath*” (the events), truly resembled a “poststructuralist nightmare”.³⁴

The nation-state’s inexorable precipitation into progressive formlessness and chaos exposed citizens to conditions of arbitrary violence that shattered notions of a sovereign and cohesive human subjectivity. Even now, some 20 years after the Taif Accords officially ended hostilities, Lebanon continues to drift in and out of the ranks of so-called ‘failed states,’ unable to maintain a requisite monopoly over the legitimate use of force. The permeability of the nation, subject to mutation under the pressures and mysterious workings of internal and external forces, found an echo in the immanent vulnerability of the body in wartime and the alarming susceptibility of the subject, unknowable to itself, and animated by impulses of unknown provenance. For this reason, the Lebanese civil war served as a major catalyst for stylistic innovation in Arabic literature, as authors innovated in order to capture these frightening new realities. In his assessment of the experimental novel in Arabic, Stefan Meyer cites three major

³² “Danse macabre” is Miriam Cooke’s phrase in *War’s Other Voices*, 15.

³³ *Ibid*, 237.

³⁴ Seigneurie, “Ongoing War and Arab Humanism,” 97.

literary trends engendered by the war: the rise of a “radical fragmentation of form,” the emergence of women authors with their own distinctive voice, and an “increasing introversion on the part of the writers.”³⁵ Taken together, these suggest a coupling of subjectivizing and de-subjectivizing elements—the emergence of a voice amid the disintegration of a world. The increased introversion could be seen as the logical outcome of their combining. Watching its world come apart, this emergent self may have opted to explore its interior more deeply, sounding its own depths and contours in order to verify its continued integrity.

After a century of unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, we are familiar with the concept of writing in the wake of disaster as a moral responsibility, commonly understood as ‘bearing witness.’ Through writing, the deaths of victims are humanized and rendered mournable by their presentation to a community of readers; at the same time, writing becomes a testament to the survival of both writer and community. In her early study of “the Beirut decentrists,” a phenomenon more than a coherent ‘group’ of women who produced literature based on their experience of the city’s disintegration, Miriam Cooke described writing the war as a survival technique and an affirmative act of conscientious political engagement:

To write is to assert responsibility, for in their expression despair and pessimism are mitigated. To write is also to shape one’s life, and to render it relevant as a myth whose reality transcends the particularity of the author. With the continuation of the war this life to be shaped had to be fitted into the contours of the war and of the new reality it had spawned.³⁶

³⁵ Meyer, Stefan G., *The Experimental Arabic Novel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) 117-18.

³⁶ Miriam Cooke, *War’s Other Voices*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1988) 38.

For Cooke, the compromised position of the patriarchal Lebanese state and society under the entropic influence of violence allowed women to enter their voices into public discourse in unprecedented numbers. Writing from the margins, these women disrupted the masculine monopoly on telling “the war story” by “shar[ing] Beirut as their home and the war as their experience.”³⁷ She maintains that war offers women opportunities to take political action and to challenge their traditional roles in society that are not readily available during the normal functioning of the state. In this sense, Cooke has approached war as a potential space of subject-formation for subaltern positions in society.

However, few subsequent critics have interpreted the war as a subjectivity-forming principle, focusing instead on its deleterious effect on the healthy psychological workings of the subject through the optic of trauma theory. Trauma theory explores the “complex dynamic between knowing and not-knowing” that results from “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events.”³⁸ Critics using trauma theory as an analytical tool, such as Dalia Said Mostafa in her approach to novels by Rabī‘ Jābir and Elias Khoury, have focused on the fictional representation of traumatic disorders, examining the impact manifestations such as such as “disorientation, nightmares, depression, and severe anxiety,” have on the sufferer’s memory and sense of identity.³⁹ This framework seems particularly appropriate for Khoury’s work, since the influence of trauma theory’s major themes, particularly the “delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena,” is manifest even in his editorial

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996) 3; 11.

³⁹ Dalia Said Mostafa, “Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khour and Rabī‘ Jābir,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 40 (2009) 208-236.

writings.⁴⁰ However, this thesis moves away from the prevalence of trauma theory in critical work on Lebanese war literature, based on a critique developed by Lauren Berlant. She observes that in its “[conventional focus] on shock and data loss” in the wake of catastrophe, trauma theory “implicitly [suggests] that subjects ordinarily archive the intensities neatly and efficiently with an eye toward easy access.”⁴¹ Against this discourse of exceptionalism, Berlant proposes a model of “crisis ordinariness” that attends to everyday affect and “optimistic” strategies for navigating a terrain of sustained crisis. Her approach seems congruous with Lebanese novelists’ overwhelming concern with managing “the dailiness of war,” as well as Seigneurie’s description of Lebanese literature as “a survival aesthetic for *ongoing* war”⁴²:

Crisis ordinariness is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a scene of embeddedness in it that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming... People tread water in the impasse; mainly, they do not drown. Even people whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least.⁴³

Following Berlant, I propose a theory of narrative as an instrument of internal self-control, a method of simulating the subject’s integrity and self-sovereignty that shores it up against potential disintegration or invasion by affective currents. Under crisis-ordinary conditions, the impulse toward narrative takes on a new urgency, not merely to bear witness, but to minimize impacts by maintaining the contours of the self in a recognizably human form.

⁴⁰ See Elias Khoury, “Do I See or Do I Remember?” *London Review of Books* 28.15 (3 August 2006) 5. Quoted text appears in Caruth.

⁴¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, forthcoming (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 11.

⁴² Cooke, *War’s Other Voices*, 3; Ken Seigneurie, “Introduction: A Survival Aesthetic for Ongoing War,” *Crisis and Memory: The Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative*, Ken Seigneurie, ed. (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2003) 11-29. Emphasis on “ongoing” mine.

⁴³ Berlant, 11.

According to Sheehan, narrative, defined as “language arranged meaningfully over time” forms a critical framework for human cognition.⁴⁴ Narrative allows the author to anthropomorphize the chaos and contingency of her experience by lending it order, arranging events in a linear fashion and tailoring them to a digestible, human size. Furthermore, when narrating events under the auspices of the first person, she also charts the temporal progress of the subject “I” who relates them, lending it consistency and cohesiveness. By blending together equal parts voice and generic convention, the author maintains the semblance of an authentic narrating presence, while combing out inconsistencies, thereby rendering that presence legible.⁴⁵

The three novels examined here, *Beirut Nightmares* by Ghādah Sammān, *Yalo* by Elias Khoury, and *The Tiller of Waters* by Hudá Barakāt, reflect explicitly on the act of narration itself—the scene of writing or storytelling—as one of *composure*. Adam Phillips describes composure as a defense mechanism for the ego, or “a paradoxical form of self-cure for the experience of traumatic excitement; or rather, the seduction of one’s own excitement.”⁴⁶ In psychoanalytic terms, as a strategy for coping with the vicissitudes of unpredictable mothering, the ego practices a form of compensatory self-mothering that aims at creating the appearance of autonomy and self-possession. This is accomplished by affecting a critical distance between the self and the world, thus projecting the semblance of an ego impervious to impact: “The mind creates a distance in the self—often in the form of an irony—from its own desire, from the

⁴⁴ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-13.

⁴⁶ Adam Phillips, “On Composure,” in *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 42.

affective core of the self and manages, by the same token, a distance from everybody else.”⁴⁷ Using this concept of composure to theorize the first-person war narrative allows us to move beyond the concept of an original outside trauma that produces disruptions in the otherwise seamless psychical workings of the unified subject. Instead, we face the prospect that the elements to be arranged, or rather the excitements and desires that must cordoned off from the thinking (intellectual) self in order to maintain its autonomy are at least partially internal, suggesting a suspicion that affect poses a threat of contagion.

Affects do not reside exclusively in either body or mind, but traverse the supposed boundary between them, wrapping both up simultaneously in a complex, non-linear causal relationship.⁴⁸ Pre-subjective but not pre-social, affect refers to the body’s capacity “to affect and be affected...to act, to engage, and to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, aliveness or vitality.”⁴⁹ Rather than viewing the subject as a sealed-off monad, affect theory sees human and world as inter-permeable, co-participating in “the complexity of open systems under far-from-equilibrium conditions.”⁵⁰ In these and other respects, affect theory radically undoes anthropocentric assumptions propagated by humanism; narrative therefore also struggles when presented with its complexity. As a result, Clough explains, “the narration of conscious states such as emotion” tends to deal with affect through subtraction, “but always with ‘a never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder.’”⁵¹ In the novels

⁴⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁴⁸ Michael Hardt, “Forward: What Affects are Good For,” in *The Affective Turn*, ix.

⁴⁹ Clough, 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

analyzed below, this excised remainder, the human's captivated affective core which participates in violent entanglements, is designated as the animal.

If we understand composure as the arrangement of unequal things, then this definition resonates with the Arabic word for author, *mu'allif*: "one who makes something familiar, one who gathers things together, or composes."⁵² Crucially, the verbal form of this word, of which 'author' is the active participle, yields *yu'allif*—to tame or domesticate an animal.⁵³ For the first-person protagonists of the novels, the organizing principles of narration serve as a mode of domestication, to insulate the affective core from the vagaries of circulating aggression. In this sense, to paraphrase Seignurie, narrative aesthetic truly becomes a tool for survival.

Human remainders

The novels engaged in this thesis dramatize both the active self-fashioning and invidious denaturation of the subject as it labors to process, and is processed by, the civil war-machine. My choice of novels here is somewhat eclectic, since their production at disparate junctures in the war's history entails considerable differences among them concerning the individual's relationship with loss and the continued cycle of violence. Ghādah Sammān, writing from within the war zone during the first year of hostilities, focuses on sheer survival and the possibility of sustaining an affirmative political engagement in the face of indiscriminate violence. Her novel, *Beirut Nightmares* [*Kawābīs Bayrūt*], reflects a leftist optimism in violence's capacity to effect revolutionary change; by destabilizing inherited forms of oppression, war presents an opportunity

⁵² Roger Allen, forward to *The Author and His Doubles* by Abdelfattah Kilito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985) ix.

⁵³ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, J Milton Cowan ed., 4th ed. (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994).

for society—and the subject—to be reconfigured along more equitable lines. The novels of Elias Khoury and Hudá Barakāt, however, were written from a post-Taif historical vantage point, and therefore contend with the sobering reality that the war's staggering losses would not be redeemed by any appreciable change in the status quo. After the modernist dream of achieving an ideal, egalitarian community through the war was foreclosed, these novelists rummage through the ruins of a dream of organic national belonging. They foreground the figure of the *minority*, whose exclusion from the Maronite ruling class reveals the contradictions of national belonging. In *Yalo*, published on the eve of the 2005 Cedar Revolution, Khoury examines the bankruptcy of justice in a post-war regime that has maintained all the structural inequalities of the ante bellum system. Barakāt's *Tiller of Waters* [*Hārith al-miyāh*] of 1998, the most profoundly psychological of the three, reflects on the metamorphosis of the city, and the loss of authenticity, myth, and historicity after the Republic of Merchants' transition to a post-industrial economy.

As first-person narratives, these novels are concerned with telling the story of the war, but perhaps more primarily with exploring the possibility (or impossibility) of recuperating the subject through the narrative act. In all three novels, the author physically locates the first-person narrator in a stable-home base—a beloved library, the single-cell of solitary confinement, or the cellar of the family shop in an abandoned souq. Although not entirely immune to mutation, the relative spatial stability of this home-base provides a physical apparatus, including the semblance of a distinct inside and outside, that mimics the self-containment of the monad. This domestic exoskeleton provides a sensory filter that allows the self to be re-assembled through narration. Again, there is a marked difference between pre- and post-Taif attitudes toward narration and the subject. For Sammān's protagonist, the act of writing is portrayed as unproblematic and overwhelmingly positive, perhaps because she is happily unshakable in her humanism, and values literature as a repository for an authentic authorial voice. The post-Taif writer's no longer enjoy

the luxury of such beliefs. Both appear to seriously question the authenticity of the speaking subject, thus entertaining the thought that ‘voice’ may constitute a hollow narrative core. Moreover, they also consider the possibility that by composing subjects and forcing experience to signify, narrative may entail a grievous act of epistemic violence.

Finally, comparison of these novels suggests a re-interrogation of what “survival” in the midst of catastrophe might mean. Sammān, writing at the beginning of the war and in the midst of the conflagration, subscribes largely to that Hobbesian vision of man as wolf for his fellow, but also as potential prey; all that is required to trigger the ghastly reversal in man’s humanistic civil nature is a crisis in the distribution of goods, coded here (but also literally experienced) as “hunger.” Despite her sympathy for the impoverished whose abjection pushes them to violence, in the end the imperative of self-preservation leads her to adhere a Humanistic calculus, whereby she determines *who* and *what* is human enough to be salvaged. The composed, writerly self is marked for preservation, whereas those shadowy others who have annexed the self, the stock of inherited knowledge coded as custom and tradition, as well as mementos and memories of loved ones lost, are to be excised. Novels written after Taif, however, show more sympathy for the animal, which comes to signify a vulnerable alterity, an other in terms of class and ethnicity, as well as in terms of the self—the *cogito*’s somatic double. More than this, both Khoury’s *Yalo* and Barakāt’s *Tiller of Waters* take a longer historical view on what has been lost in the course of the twentieth century, not only through the war, but in the heady and rapacious optimism of nation-building and Lebanon’s transition to late capitalism. For Khoury’s protagonist Yalo, an oppressive trans-generational haunting initiated by his grandfather’s childhood experience of massacre leads him to seek a viable form-of-life outside of logos—first by tapping into the youthful vitality of a Christian militia, and later by “hunting” for victims to rob and rape among the amorous visitors who wander, unawares, into the vicinity of the villa he guards. After being

immersed in the radically embodied experience of prosecuting the war, with its attendant psychological traumas, the experience of re-exposure and re-territorialization through the drafting of a criminal confession is experienced as an unbearable form of torture. Though Yalo remains the author of his repugnant crimes, Khoury nevertheless evokes sympathy and sadness for this hapless animal, in the bewilderment of his entrapment. In *The Tiller of Waters*, the advent of post-industrial capitalism effaces the foundational bond between man and nature, resulting in an ambiguous relationship between the animal and his former master, thereby highlighting that “man” and “animal” exist on a continuum where difference is articulated by a zone of undecidability. By the same token, the impossibility of locating within the novel a similar point of articulation, in this case the death of the narrator, challenges the supposed self-authenticity of voice. Irretrievable, yet already accomplished (grammatically plus-que-parfait), this un-locatable death of the narrator exposes the fiction of presence. Here, voice is figured as the body’s spectral and melancholic remainder, while the subject is constituted by the aural imprint of relationships lost.

A Useful Violence?

Ghādah Sammān—*Beirut Nightmares [Kawābīs Bayrūt]*

--I'm going to confess. I don't dare leave the hospital door. I've become terrified of the streets. This afternoon, they hung a sign in front of the hospital doors on which was written: Caution. A sniper welcomes you.

--What are you going to do?

--I'm going climb to the hospital roof and become a sniper. I'm as frightened as a little lamb. I won't be saved unless I change into a wolf.

A surgeon to his wife, "Telephone Conversation #3," *Kawābīs Bayrūt*

Political life in Lebanon has always involved a great deal of pageantry and spectacle. Electoral contests inspire remarkable exuberance from the candidates and their supporters, and it is not uncommon for the "mass mobilization and display of emotionalism" inspired by such events to result in real outbursts of violence.⁵⁴ These clashes certainly could have serious consequences; in 1958 a presidential contest snowballed into a crisis of international scope that nearly ended in civil war. But according to historian Samir Khalaf, prior to the protracted war begun in 1975 there remained "a discrepancy between the outward, often dramatic and stirring, rhetoric of war and the rather cautious and non-deadly form combat actually assumed on the ground"⁵⁵ These relatively benign displays of saber-rattling, however, steadily grew to a deadly earnestness in the years leading up to the war. A series of rapid, disorienting social transformations associated with Beirut's rise as a regional banking *entrepôt* exacerbated the gulf between rich and poor, creating widespread dissatisfaction with Lebanon's monopolistic political

⁵⁴ Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 110; 142-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

and economic structure, which was (and continues to be) dominated by select families of traditional power elites (*zu'ama*). Economic and social pressures affecting the lower and middle classes, such as skyrocketing prices and unemployment rates, uneven geographic development, unequal access to employment opportunities across the sects, and massive urban flight to the Beirut suburbs led to increased militancy in labor unions and student groups. By 1967, a general vogue for radical ideologies had mobilized Lebanese of every persuasion on the political spectrum, as growing numbers held strong, conflicting opinions about what this “mosaic” nation ought to be, and for whom. Whether acting on deep-seated political convictions, or enticed by the bravado and stylized machismo of the ubiquitous militias, a large segment of the Lebanese population enthusiastically participated in the first year of the war, before the conflict became blatantly uncontrollable and internationalized, when internal actors could still dream of steering the nation toward a more positive future.⁵⁶

Born of fire: violence and the post-colonial subject

For adherents of the political left, imbued in strains of Marxist thought and deeply influenced by the Palestinian anti-colonialist struggle, revolutionary violence was viewed as a liberating force of creative human vitality. As a final resort, the passions of the oppressed could be enlisted to unseat entrenched power interests, in this case the feudalistic *zu'ama* and the sectarian quota system, clearing the ground for the establishment of a secular political system.⁵⁷ More than that, the exercise of violence constituted a method of sloughing off a defeated subjectivity that had internalized the disciplinary apparatus of the older, oppressive system. According to Fanon, when a man has been “penned in,” and “reduced to the state of the animal,”

⁵⁶ Haugballe, 17.

⁵⁷ Traboulsi, 190-1.

violence represents a crucial step in restituting his humanity, whereby the radical self-assertion implicated in killing the oppressor allows for a new, liberated subjectivity to emerge.⁵⁸ Sartre, in support of Fanon's thesis, likens assassinating the oppressor to "killing two birds with one stone, eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free."⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, however, has bitterly criticized this glorification of useful violence, assessing this vision of violence as a proving ground from which "a new community together with a "new man" will arise" to be a lethally misplaced optimism.⁶⁰ Though vaunted as the only mechanism capable of destabilizing entrenched power elites, once ignited, violence has a tendency to defy the path proscribed by those who initiated it:

The danger of violence...will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic...The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.⁶¹

In her semi-autobiographical novel *Beirut Nightmares*, Sammān presents the dilemma of the leftist intellectual in the face of destructive chaos unleashed by the civil war. Much like Sammān herself, who was greatly influenced by French Existentialism and local Palestinian practitioners of resistance literature such as Ghassan Kanafani, the novel's unnamed protagonist views her literary activities as a vital part of revolutionary struggle, convinced that the "extreme importance of the cultural form of resistance is no less valuable than armed resistance itself."⁶²

⁵⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004) 7.

⁵⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, lv.

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1970) 69.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶² Kanafani, quoted in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 11.

Having wielded her pen as an ideological tool to kindle a revolutionary spirit among the downtrodden, she now finds herself and her community isolated in their respective apartments, collectively imprisoned by the indiscriminate bloodbath raging on the streets below. Rather than empowering the impoverished, docile beasts shouldering Lebanon's labor burden to adopt an upright, human posture, this violence disrupts the organizing principles of the community, thereby implicating everyone in a struggle for survival at the most basic nutritive level of life. Although the protagonist herself is undoubtedly victimized by the unruly vectors of this pervasive ambient destruction, the novel's ultimate verdict on violence is not an unqualified condemnation. While horrific on its face, violence institutes a kind of anarchic free space that allows for positive change at the level of the subject. It activates a survival instinct that pushes the pragmatic imprisoned subject to clean house, by jettisoning those affective attachments that constitute a barrier to personal vitality and freedom. Through a humanistic calculus, inner sources of inertia, such as melancholic memories cathected by the ego, or inherited comportments prescribed by tradition, are declared modes of bad faith that must be discarded in order to liberate herself from a physical and metaphorical prison. There is, therefore, a dramatic tension between two different natural vitalities: a healthy, generative principle enabling the exercise of self-reflexive sovereignty and productive change, and the rapacious, undisciplined play of animalistic violence.

Bearing witness

Ghādah Sammān was one of the first writers to respond to the civil war in novelistic form, producing two titles within the first two years of war.⁶³ Both are remarkably allegorical and zoological, teaming with animal figures enlisted to illustrate the human condition. Appearing

⁶³ A third novel, *Night of the First Million*, appearing in 1986, deals with the Lebanese exile community in Switzerland.

in 1975 and often said to have “predicted” the outbreak of hostilities, Sammān’s first novel *Beirut 75* contains scathing, unmitigated criticism of the social conditions prevailing in Beirut, which she depicts as a corrupt, hedonistic, and cannibalistic society headed on an irrevocable collision course with bloody cataclysm. The city, styled metaphorically as “jungle,” is home to a tribe of sophisticated sexual predators and vampire-like captains of industry, who suck the life-blood from a group of under-classed innocents from the Syrian hinterlands who had been lured to Beirut by its diamond-dust image. As Joseph Massad aptly put it: “for Ghādah Sammān, the Lebanese ruling class was literally a bunch of fuckers penetrating dreamy-eyed youth, destroying them in the process.”⁶⁴ Published a year later, *Beirut Nightmares* assembles a similar menagerie of blood-thirsty animalia, but this time the jungle has been re-cast as “zoo.” *Beirut Nightmares* chronicles the infamous “Battle of the Hotels” of October and November 1975, a conflagration which Ghādah herself witnessed at close-range, trapped in her apartment by the street-fighting waged below.

Although all of Sammān’s early works contain elements of auto-biography, *Beirut Nightmares* is explicitly self-referential, overtly inviting the reader to identify the novel’s protagonist with its author. The unnamed protagonist is not Ghādah Sammān, but the author deliberately weaves in a number of belabored coincidences to link the two: a fiercely independent woman and activist writer, the protagonist lives on the upper-story of an old Ottoman-style villa, nestled in the shadow of high-rise buildings in downtown Beirut. One morning, after spending a sleepless night to the staccato accompaniment of gunfire and explosions, she finds herself hemmed into her building by the battle lines of a contest between rival militias. While sniper-fire governs the open streets below, her semi-protected seclusion in

⁶⁴ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 2007) 321.

the apartment grows untenable, as the arteries of vital amenities such as water and gas are cut off, available food supply dwindles, and the vague threat that poverty-driven looters might invade the apartment grows urgently real. While negotiating her eventual rescue by an armored army vehicle, the protagonist channels her nervous energies into writing a war memoir to be published under the title *Beirut Nightmares*.

Given the eye-witness aspects of Sammān's account, as well as the healthy doses of social criticism loaded into the novel's structure, directed at nearly *every* source of social ill in Lebanese society, *Beirut Nightmares* has been described as an accurate rendering of the psychological experience of the absurdity and destructiveness of urban warfare. However, to characterize the novel as *only* that requires ignoring much of its eclectic content. Ostensibly a journal, many of the scenes comprised by the novel have a theatrical too-muchness about them, such that the novel's overall aesthetic could be described as horror-flick camp. Examples abound: one episode involves a world-weary Grim Reaper, burned out by the work load heaped on him by an overzealously death-crazed nation; in another Jesus Christ, resurrected, is roughed up by a Christian militia, who crucify him for his shabby appearance on the threshold of a fancy hotel. Even in the diegetic "real" world inhabited by the protagonist, it is difficult to digest neighbor Amin's she-monkey, caged in the back-yard to symbolize women's oppression. The surrealist-macabre aesthetic so manifest here is not an experiment for portraying war, but constitutes Sammān's authorial style, evident in the blood, vipers, and doped-up hospital zombies that populate her short stories pre-dating 1975. Given the sheer number of bizarrely allegorical interludes, there is clearly something more going on here than a straightly-delivered "bearing witness." While maintaining an overall tone of ironic disbelief vis-a-vis the wonton destruction, the optic of Sammān's novel revels in the thrills of these violent scenes, which amplify the allure of Beirut with the frisson of danger.

Structured to mimic the picaresque format of journal entries, the protagonist's quotidian is divided into units of "nightmares" that mark the passage of time as she waits for eventual rescue. Although this pretense toward the *yumiyāt* genre suggests a temporal structure divided into daily units, its content and pace are far more eclectic. The metronome keeping artistic pace accelerates as the sheer quantity of nightmare episodes overwhelms the two-week period portrayed in real-time, amassing a total of 206 nightmares punctuated by one final "dream". This parabolic proliferation suggests an invidious warping of time, something akin to Zeno's paradoxes, where the ceaseless divisions in a finite distance thwart the racer in his drive for the finish line. According to Miriam Cooke, Sammān filled the pages in a "trance-like" state as the Battle of the Hotels was waged outside, working "every day for two months, from 5 a.m. until 7 p.m."⁶⁵ Cooke's characterization of the underlying affective current driving the novel's production as "trance," however, would suggest a calloused numbness, steeling an over-battered subjectivity against further blows from her surrounding environment. However, the multiplication of events per minute may instead be read as a manic state of over-excitation precipitated by the ambient violence pervading the city block where the protagonist is held in thrall. In other words, part of the danger in patiently waiting things out is the protagonist's undeniable seduction by the violence, which may be read in the overwhelmingly visual aesthetic of the novel, suggestive of an unwillingness or inability to look away. As the protagonist explains, the visions of war resemble "something like a war film in its degree of exaggeration"; "as if the forces of nature had fled in madness."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Cooke, *War's Other Voices*, 6.

⁶⁶ Ghādah Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār al-Ādāb) 7. All quotes from the novel are translated by myself, except in a handful of instances where I have deferred to Roberts's translation. I have likewise retained her spelling of character's names, such as Amm Fu'ad.

Severed ties

Although the novel's premise undoubtedly reflects the conditions under which it was written, it also provides the ideal stage for an Existentialist psycho-drama. With its inescapable domestic prison-house, surrounded by streets awash in blood and anguished cries—the handiwork of a monstrous, hyper-vigilant sniper perched atop the Holiday Inn building—and the tediousness of isolation amplified by boorish but well-intentioned neighbors, the physical setting of *Beirut Nightmares* combines the quarantined, disease ridden Oran of *The Plague* with the distastefully-furnished sitting room of *No Exit*. The novel opens in a tone of communal solidarity as the first signs of violence flash up in the protagonist's neighborhood. While the hostilities are just beginning to impose themselves, mobility and communication allow for a collective response. In this brief window, the first person plural reigns, extending even to internal mental processes: “each of us looked at the other in shock: How did we stay alive? How were we delivered from that night?”⁶⁷ While the reader learns, on the following page, that this “we” refers to the closed circle of the protagonist and her brother, there is an intentional ambiguity allowing the reader to imagine the larger “we” of the neighborhood, the community. After the lines of combat solidify, however, the novel's psychical space retracts to the protagonist's claustrophobic subjectivity, spatially restricted to two floors of the villa.

Elaine Scarry has described the room as the most basic unit of civilization, an expression of “the most benign potential of human life”:

It keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world

⁶⁷ Ibid 7.

to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, civilization.⁶⁸

In *Beirut Nightmares*, each individual apartment overlooking the theater of battle forms a protective encasement, a relatively durable exoskeleton sheltering the immanently vulnerable human life sheltered behind its walls. Lines of contact extending outward from each flat act as artificial limbs—tools empowering the body to fulfill its vital need to assimilate objects from the outside world, and communicate with others. One by one, these vital lines of contact are severed, transforming these “neighbors,” linked to one another in a communal fabric, into isolated monads abandoned to themselves. Sammān dramatizes this process in a scene in which a neighbor woman attempts to procure nourishment by lowering a basket attached to a rope over her balcony to the street-level grocer. The hopes of the entire neighborhood are galvanized on this simple machine as the woman, maintaining her distance from the window, slowly reels the bread-filled basket up to her apartment. Rather than taking aim at the woman’s semi-concealed body, the sniper targets her artificial umbilical cord cast out into the open square. With a single shot, the rope is severed, hurling the bread, along with the community’s collective hopes, to be smashed on the sidewalk. After the failure of this make-shift link, other channels connecting the building to modern amenities fail in turn: the running water, electricity, and phone lines drift in and out of commission. Even when the phone is in working order, the conversations it carries further articulate the protagonist’s isolation—friends make impossibly trivial requests, a lawyer calls to say that her brother has been arrested on ludicrous charges, and army rescue missions confirm that they cannot broach her street due to its precariously exposed emplacement.

⁶⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 83.

Simple loaves of rustic flat-bread, a most basic and ubiquitous staple in the Levantine diet. Yet how many hands contribute their labor, coaxing the wheat from the earth, culling it, threshing it, milling the flour, shaping the loaves, firing the ovens, distributing loaves out to each neighborhood grocer before they finally appear on the host's table? It is no coincidence that the community should be smashed as the tether snaps free and the bread falls short of its destination. For Sammān, the root of this conflict lies in Lebanon's inequitable social structure. Her protagonist has dedicated her career to instilling a revolutionary consciousness in her reading public, exposing loyalties to religion and tribe as instances of false consciousness that deceive the disinherited to act contrary to their class interests. However, dissolving the erstwhile social bonds as an essential station towards midwifing a more equitable community leads to a complete breakdown in the *polis*, prying these humans' bare-life from the political form-of-life though which they had belonged to the greater political community. As a result, that bare form of nutritive life which forms the common foundation of all organisms—plants, animals, and the over-cerebral human animal—becomes the grounds of an open struggle for survival. Once the rules of civility have been over-turned by the siege, survival dictates that the protagonist traverse a moral minefield: she must steel her body against outside predations, but more problematically, she must sustain her life at a nutritive level by somehow obtaining food and water, the scarcity of which requires that she compete with others, and even to the extent of taking their lives. The collapse of community thus confronts her with the animal foundation of her species-being, the basic struggle over limited resources that had earlier been elided by her middle-class station, and the amenities of modern urban life.

The violence, while arbitrary, proves not entirely indiscriminate, but follows its own logic of play. Indeed, the figure of the sniper embodies a lethal jouissance. The protagonist imagines him as a Cyclops, with “one single eye in the middle of his forehead.” Swiveling on a

pivot to hone in on his prey from his rooftop position, he is likened to an owl for his uncanny vision which allows him to hunt at night.⁶⁹ So perfectly has body adapted to machine that the sniper becomes the unblinking eye of his rifle-sight, an embodiment of pure vision—our most abstracted sense. The sniper controls the neighborhood remotely, sending messages through the precision of his shots; he plays with his victims with a cat-like cruelty in lieu of instantaneous death. Strangely, while the sniper objectifies those luckless humans who traverse his cross-hairs, transforming them into lifeless, inert things, objects are animated, even anthropomorphized by his touch. Bullets enter the protagonist’s bedroom as intentional objects, ricocheting wildly in the domestic pinball machine before finally lodging in her shelves of books, thereby declaring the pistol’s timeless antagonism with the pen. Elsewhere, as lethal puns, they work according to visual homology, piercing through the ghosts of absent heads behind car windshields and baseball caps displayed for sale. A defunct car—presumably with its slain driver slumped over the horn—blares out in anguished protest before exhausting its battery and expiring in turn. There is a logic here to be learnt. Having seen “people carrying a white flag, or a bag of bread, or a child” gunned down without mercy, the protagonist counts on the sniper’s curiosity and sense of humor and sallies forth brandishing an antique sword.⁷⁰ She does not escape, but the gambit works, as the sniper prefers the idle entertainment of hemming her in with bullets, rather than snuffing out his amusing living prey. Improbably and across a great distance, something has been exchanged between protagonist and monster, coded in pattern and composition, from which she manages to wrench a momentary truce.

⁶⁹ Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, 47.

⁷⁰ Sammān 103.

War constitutes an impasse that imposes its own rhythm. It is portrayed as a usurpation of natural law, replacing the regular alternation of night and day with an irregular pattern of increased and decreased intensity. It interrupts the body's daily rhythms: bombs explode in surround-sound, shaking the buildings and throwing up dramatic light displays, rendering sleep impossible; water outages and blackouts prevent normal meal preparation and hygiene gestures. The journal's composition reflects this "dailiness without days" that charts the merging of lived experience into waking nightmare.⁷¹ The onset of pure reverie or dream (as opposed to fearful waking visions) is signaled by a lull in hostilities, a period of calm allowing the unconscious to spin a more extended narrative, announced by the words: "these bullets are few..."⁷²

Zoo/confinement

The protagonist's inner conflict between revolutionary aspirations for the future and the immediate task of self-preservation plays itself out figuratively in a repeated, hallucinatory scene involving a pet shop in an adjacent building. At night, in those eerie moments when the battle din diminishes and silence grows more terrifying than the lethal blare of ordnance, the protagonist perceives the collective cries of the animals, trapped inside their cages, bespeaking "fear, worry, anger, and confusion".⁷³ It is difficult to say whether these voices are real but usually camouflaged by noisy street circulation, or whether they are projections of the protagonist's inner turmoil. Whatever their source, it is difficult to miss the parallel drawn between these animals and Lebanon's disenfranchised. Recalling a visit she had made to the shop with a friend in more stable times, the protagonist describes the display area, shown to mainly foreign customers, as

⁷¹ This apt phrase is Miriam Cooke's, *War's Other Voices*, 43.

⁷² Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, 13.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 25.

“clean, beautiful, and organized, as if you were in a Swiss shop, will all the features of our consumer age.”⁷⁴ Meanwhile, in the stock room the cages are crushed together, evoking the crumbling honeycombed structure of a shantytown; the kittens, crammed in several to a cage and fed only just enough to stay alive, claw and bite each other in the misery of their conditions. These domesticated animals are mere commodities awaiting purchase, their own species-being completely subordinated to human customers’ desires. Upon purchase, the shop keeper, owner of living capital, processes the animal’s body, vaccinating it against illness, sterilizing it, and clipping its claws so it cannot put up any kind of defense. The obvious implication is that life in Lebanon, at even the biological level, has been refashioned to ensure the seamless operation of the capitalist machine. While control of these animal-commodities requires that they receive medical care, she imagines that elsewhere in the same city, far from these attractive high street displays, a refugee woman may be giving birth in the dirt, with no medical attention to speak of.

Feeling that she shares a common fate with these creatures, the animal voices summon her to the shop. For the protagonist, this descent under cover of night permits her to reconnect with a primal energy and dignity that had been lost through habituation to entrapment. Interestingly, this return to nature is combined with the reawakening of her rational capacities, enabling her to master her fear. Whereas sustained terror of wayward bullets had taught her to walk like a “monkey” in a humiliating hunchback posture, in the exhilaration of movement she is struck by a liberating new logic: since bullets are heard only upon impact, she would have no presentiment of the bullet that kills her; therefore there is no reason to cower from these sounds. She avails herself of memory to recall the emplacement of garden plants to avoid stumbling in the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41. “Swīra al-Sharq,” or the Switzerland of the East, was a popular slogan for promoting tourism in Lebanon.

dark, and problem-solving skills to open the window and lower herself into the shop, although she has no prior experience with such undertakings. Pressing herself up against a palm tree (a feminine noun in Arabic, “*nakhla*”) to take shelter while traversing the garden,

I buried myself in her naked breast and imagined that I heard her heartbeats...I heard the sap racing in her veins...I heard fear beat its drum in her wood...I press closer to her...we become two terrified trees...we became two terrified people...we became two terrified lives...but she will stay in her place until a bomb hits her or doesn't...she cannot take off running [lit. cast her knees to the wind] the way I can...I felt a kind of nobility because I'm female and not a tree, because I can run...⁷⁵

For Sammān, rationalism is that faculty which allows humans to identify their shackles and free themselves of them, so that they may enjoy life's natural sweetness. There is a common bond, then, between humans and other living things, but for the human there is also privilege—freedom of choice, action, movement—which carries an obligation to exercise these faculties as a responsible custodian. Upon arrival at the shop, she resolves to liberate the animals from their imprisonment, but they prefer to remain inside their cages as long as the shop keeper provides adequate food and water. After he disappears, the animals resort to hunting each other for food, each one sizing up the other to determine which one will manage to devour the other first.

Given the obvious similarities between this “jungle” scenario and her own situation, this ugly scene prompts the protagonist to reflect upon the difference between human existence and animal. Much like Nietzsche, she concludes that the difference lies in history. However, Sammān's conception of history entails progress—not as an inevitable upward trend, but as the consequence of a conscious effort: “if the animal's freedom is limited to geographic freedom, is not human freedom geographic and historical at the same time? To what degree do we share in

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80.

creating our fate and that of others?”⁷⁶ Moreover, a properly human life should have meaning, which inheres in moral choices. Sudden death, without preparation or struggle, is likened to the death of “sheep,” a “stupid” slaughter: “Human death in order to make the world more humanitarian is what distinguishes (murder) from (jihad) and (the victim) from (the martyr).”⁷⁷ In light of this logic, the protagonist’s determination to escape from the apartment building is not merely an attempt at self-preservation; rather her refusal to die meaninglessly is a struggle to preserve her humanity. The unexamined life, without the exercise of choice, is inhuman—a pig-headed resignation associated with animality but also with zombie-ism and death, a kind of living corpse. Through the war experience, she transforms from a woman who hoped for revolution but was “incapable of killing even a gnat, a fly, or an ant,” to someone willing to pull the trigger, even against another human being, in order to survive.

Reminders

Remarkably, in this time of pervasive death, the novel shows an almost shocking lack of sympathy towards the very human need to mourn loss. According to the protagonist’s survival calculus, once a body is no longer animated with life, it becomes a meaningless object that must literally be discarded, and the living must keep moving. At least, this is the lesson offered by the death of Amm Fu’ad, who passes away from quite natural causes on the couch in his home. In the protagonist’s uncharitable estimation, Am Fu’ad’s corpse existence differs very little from the manner in which he had conducted life in widowhood, shuffling about in an apartment laden with dust and valuable (but worthless) antiques, and saturated in affective resonances of his wife, who had passed away in this space, years ago. The lower level, though protected from sniper fire, is

⁷⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 112.

coded as a mausoleum—an ornate sanctuary housing a dynasty of the living dead. Though stodgy and possessive, the deceased’s son Amin seems unfairly treated in the episode of his father’s death. While still incredulous over his loss, the protagonist presses Amin to dispose of the body, rather callously explaining: “It isn’t your father anymore. It’s a corpse.”⁷⁸ Amin balks initially in the face of his unsavory burial options, but once decomposition sets in he agrees to dump the body into a rubbish bin in the yard. It is true that the exceptional nature of their siege situation calls for extreme measures and decisive action, while her neighbors’ persistence in seeking “peace” through inertia seems tantamount to a suicidal denial. Nevertheless, the protagonist directs an inordinate amount of contempt toward Amin and his family from the beginning of the novel, a rather thankless comportment given their concern for her wellbeing, and their offer of shelter in their unexposed apartment. Amin in particular is described in odious terms as a species of chatterbox corpse, rendering their shared life in the apartment a living hell. Death-in-life, or perhaps subhuman, he is someone to whom she feels “no more bond than you would to some locust in a nearby field.”⁷⁹

In the humanistic triage wrought by the protagonist, it is above all habit, in the form of custom, religion, tradition, or simply the pursuit of safety in numbers that prevents people from taking action and fully embracing their freedom. For Sammān, habit poses the problem of balancing voice and machine. In daily acts of maintenance, like keeping the journal, we glimpse the value of routine in its capacity to create a stable environment for the subject, a habitus that lends it consistency of form and allows it to regenerate. This process could be understood simply

⁷⁸ Ibid., 194.

⁷⁹ Ghādah Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares*, translated by Nancy N. Roberts (London: Quartet Books, 1997) 286.

as ‘staying sane.’ Nevertheless, the automatic, unexamined nature of habit poses a danger by promoting scripted actions which, at best, constitute a source of inertia, and at worst, an internalized form of discipline. The pet shop animals, for example, cleave to the familiarity of narrow cages rather than risking the unknown. Each night their mournful plaint rises up renewed, but they take no steps to improve their lot, “as if the nerve connecting pain to willpower had been severed a long time ago.”⁸⁰ Among the human dwellers in the Ottoman villa, habit reveals itself most often as the reflexive repetition of commonly-held cultural material, poetry or song, which surges up irresistibly at an inappropriate hour. Among the petty irritants that make life with the downstairs neighbors so intolerable is their habit of listening to pedestrian radio emissions that parrot out old, sentimental songs that are totally incongruent with current conditions. These songs of love, serenading Lebanon as a “land of tranquility,” are phony, infuriating, and comedic, “like false eyelashes on a blind eye.”⁸¹

And yet the protagonist herself is infected by this blight, inhabited by authorless fragments of cultural content that she finds herself reciting as an irresistible elegy when scenes of death appear outside the window. Though an ingrained mechanism, her lips rehearse mournful songs of Fairouz, or verses of lamentation for Andalusia—sad lyrics of the past that recall the loss of her boyfriend, Yousif. They were an inter-sectarian couple, but in the first year of the war Yousif fell victim to its quintessential crime: murdered at a roadblock by a Christian militia for the religion marked on his ID card. Having been present to witness this scene, the protagonist is doubly scarred by trauma and melancholia. Old sentimental songs bring the taste of “ashes and

⁸⁰ Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, 111.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

tears” to her mouth.⁸² In honor of his memory, she keeps his personal effects hidden away in her room along with the manuscript of her war memoir—her most precious possessions.

Yousif, it seems, was a progressive, egalitarian lover in a society portrayed as diseased by close-minded, patriarchal conservatism. Memories of their time together are imbued with a wholesome vitality, set in places of natural beauty, like the seaside. Yet, the protagonist’s melancholic retention of Yousif’s memory tends toward an unhealthy obsession with death, a form of *thanatos* clearly apparent in visions of his return triggered by the shocks of warfare. In these scenes, which the protagonist experiences quite viscerally in the liminal consciousness of drifting to sleep, her dead lover enters the room as a zombie, stiff-postured and covered in blood, with shards of glass protruding from his bare chest. Rushing to clasp him in a tight embrace, the glass pierces into her, lacing them together in a gruesome bodily reunion: “we cleave together in death and pain, and the glass blades become bridges, even shared veins of our bodies.”⁸³ In the midst of this fatal communion, while the ghost is fading out to nothing, the protagonist screams: “but I still love you!”⁸⁴ Thus, the haunting memory of Yousif becomes a parasite, leeching itself to her body, compromising her independence by suturing her to the past. Upon her rescue from the smoldering wreckage of the Ottoman house, the protagonist indeed makes good on her promise to carry with her both the memoir draft and Yousif’s affairs—photos, papers, and keepsakes of memories they forged together. Returning to the sea, which served as backdrop to the halcyon days of their couplehood, she quite literally assassinates those memories—shooting them with a pistol before casting them unceremoniously into the deep.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

Salvaging a literary humanism

Much of al- Sammān's message in the novel is conveyed by way of foils, sketching out digestible binary structures of good versus bad: the protagonist vs. her neighbor Amin, freedom vs. cage, action vs. inaction, future-orientation vs. tradition. The protagonist's exodus from the old Ottoman villa represents a new birth: her apartment, housing her beloved library, has been incinerated; the corpses of Amm Fu'ad and his servant litter the garden, no doubt soon to be joined by Amin, who suicidally refuses to leave the villa and abandon his treasured antiques. In this sense, the objects she chooses to carry out with her are highly symbolic: Yousif's belongings, a loaded pistol, and the manuscript of *Beirut Nightmares*. The memories of Yousif, as avatars of death, are marked for execution, presenting the protagonist with an occasion to express her triumph over personally and politically unproductive tendencies toward melancholia. Although at an earlier moment, the severing of an umbilical cord (attached to the bread basket) that symbolically announced the disintegration of communal bonds had plunged the neighborhood into a nightmare of chaos, here we see a parasitic bond with Yousif quite willfully severed. Whereas he had insinuated himself into her organism, tapping her lifeblood, she now cuts him out like a cancerous limb. The same could be said of Amin, who in their final days together, had to be staved off with a pistol to prevent him from consuming her share of their water rations. There is clearly a timely feminist message in the female protagonist's assertion of independence, disengaging herself from so-called male custodians who make territorial claims over her body, or attempt to curtail her movement. However, there is also undeniably a disturbing spirit of social engineering suggesting that not all elements of the erstwhile community are human enough—in a sovereign, autonomous, Promethean sense—to merit saving. The weak, the backward looking, physical wreckage and affective remainders have no place in Sammān's community to come.

The positive foil to Yousif's old documents then reveals itself in the memoir—a documentation of the self on the brink of disintegration, and a testament to its survival. Books occupy a pivotal position in the protagonist's life. As she worries over her library, she is not concerned with a material loss, but rather with live conversations with the authors recorded through notes in the margins. This notion of conversation clearly indexes the protagonist's faith in authorial presence, as if the author's authentic voice was housed in the book's pages, to be endlessly re-animated when approached by the reader-interlocutor. When the apartment is hit by some kind of ordnance and the library bursts into flames, her diary entry becomes an obituary to the works lost, listing each artist by name:

Along with the books, the flames had begun devouring paintings by Ghassan Kanafani, Rafi' Al-Nasiri and Farouq Al-Baquili. After consuming everything there was to consume on the first wall, it moved on to the other walls, where it proceeded to ravage works by Afif Saydawi, Na'im Isma'il and 'Arif Al-Rayyis. Then finally it migrated to the next room, where it swallowed up paintings by Nouri Al-Rawi, Lu'ay Kayali, Rafiq Sharaf, Nadhir Nab'ah, Mustafa Farroukh, Younis Al-Ibn, and, well, that's all I care to remember.⁸⁵

In listing of these names of Arab artists and authors, some contemporary at the time of writing, some already passed away, the protagonist gestures toward an alternate community to embrace and valorize—a creative federation of artists. This modernist concept of creativity rejects imitation by combining an inner vitality with the rational, thinking self, thereby breaking free from the trodden paths of habit and putting forth an authentic expression of self. By escaping destruction and yet refusing to abandon the land in exiling herself to Europe, the protagonist takes an affirmative stance, marking a victory for the survival of an authentically Arab republic of letters in the Levantine capital of culture. Thus, the novel opens with a dedication “to the

⁸⁵ Sammān, *Beirut Nightmares* (Roberts' translation) 311.

workers in the typesetting room” who persevere in their anonymous labor against the widespread destruction, and closes with an explicit reference to the conditions of its making, an appendix of 16 “plans for nightmares and remarks to be added or to draw on during the drafting of the novel.”⁸⁶ *Beirut Nightmare*’s self-referential nature is more than just a clever parlor-game or a wink in Andre Gide’s direction, but offers a concrete judgment on a constellation of moral dilemmas that plague the protagonist throughout her travail. Upon reading the novel, the physical token in the reader’s hands answers affirmatively in favor of a humanism of books and the literary community.

⁸⁶ Ibid., and Sammān, *Kawābīs Bayrūt*, 338.

Captured Outside

Elias Khoury—*Yalo*

The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.

--Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

In any case, there is... a unique plane of consistency or composition for the cephalopod and the vertebrate; for the vertebrate to become an Octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together into one of its extremities, like 'a clown who throws his head and shoulders back and walks on his head and hands.'

--Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

The war officially ended with the Taif Accord of September 1989. This "document of national understanding," called for the reinstatement of state sovereignty through the disbanding of all militias, who were required to surrender their weapons to the Lebanese Army. Additionally, it stipulated that Syrian forces remain in Lebanon for a tutelary period of two years to oversee the reconsolidation of power in the hands of the government, while Israel was to withdraw from Southern Lebanon in conformity with UN Resolution 425.⁸⁷ Although it successfully laid the foundation for an eventual peace, Taif also ushered in an uncomfortable return to the political status quo ante bellum, leaving the social grievances responsible for the outbreak of war largely unresolved. It reinstated a modified system of traditional sectarian elites

⁸⁷ Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 295.

by re-assembling the old guard of parliamentarians who were voted into office back in 1972, thereby excluding younger leaders who had risen to prominence through the militias.⁸⁸ Moreover, a law of general amnesty passed in 1991 pardoned all crimes committed previous to that date, with the exception of those against political or religious figures. The law was considered essential for a smooth transition to peace given that almost every recognized political leader, whose guidance and legitimacy would be crucial for rebuilding the nation, could be linked to civil war blood-shed. This also meant that figures responsible for notorious massacres, among them Elie Hobeiqa, Nabih Berri, and Walid Jumblatt, maintained their positions of power with impunity, such that “unconvicted war criminals still walked the streets of Beirut as well as the corridors of parliament.”⁸⁹ Rather than publically recognizing the victims of past crimes through a truth and reconciliation process, Lebanon’s return to peaceful rule was predicated on the importance of forgetting the past in order to attend to the pressing task of rebuilding a shattered nation. “Amnesty and amnesia were...conscious policies applied in the name of national reconciliation.”⁹⁰

In this sense, Taif reprised the familiar principle of “no victor, no vanquished”—a formula coined by President Chehab in the resolution to the 1958 conflict, but one that could characterize all attempts to defuse sectarian violence throughout the nation’s history. While such an ethic allowed all sects to maintain their stake in the national community, it also left critical points of friction intact, only to reignite at a later date.⁹¹ Moreover, it left uncomfortable

⁸⁸ Haugbolle, 39.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 69-70.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 71-2.

⁹¹ Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 150.

questions about who was to blame for the enormous death toll and unmitigated suffering inflicted during those 15 years unanswered. The logic of amnesty, which declared that only civil war crimes against *wujūh*, or prominent members of society, are punishable by law, effectively recognized a horrible truth that many implicitly understood: that during civil war, the citizen is relegated to the status of *homo sacer*—a bare life, separated from its political form and therefore also from legal protection, which may be summarily disposed of.⁹² Those so-called human rights, said to inhere in the human as an ethical form, were all too clearly revealed as protections guaranteed only by the state, so that in the event of the state’s collapse, the bare-life that had formerly been covered as a citizen became perilously exposed.

The werewolf and the refugee

As we have seen, Agamben’s reflections on sovereignty in regimes of contemporary biopower are driven by *homo sacer*, a figure of bare life that occupies the interstices where the two vectors of Foucaultian thought—“*political techniques*” that constitute the disciplinary apparatuses of the state, and “*technologies of the self*” that bind the individual to his identity and to external power through processes of subjectivization—converge.⁹³ Although the concept is based on a figure from Roman law, Agamben notes that this sacred man who “may be killed and yet not sacrificed” has assumed many forms in diverse trajectories of politico-judicial history, among them the bandit/outlaw and the refugee. The bandit, or *wargus* of ancient Germanic law, who was legally banned from the community and could therefore be killed by anyone, bore the name of “werewolf,” “a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and

⁹² Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5.

the city.”⁹⁴ Stripped of his civic protections, this indeterminate figure of both rapaciousness and immanent vulnerability represents the standing of all men in the Hobbesian state of nature, which Agamben maintains “is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the City, but a principle internal to the City,” that may therefore re-emerge with the dissolution of the state.⁹⁵

The refugee, on the other hand, he theorizes as a “limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state” since it exposes the original fiction of birth on which its sovereignty rests.⁹⁶ “Unity,” Ernest Renan famously commented “is always effected by means of brutality.”⁹⁷ Therefore, the violence of conquest that forges the nation must subsequently be forgotten, in order that all those born within its borders come to identify as national citizens, members of a homogenous people. The foundational violence that engendered the modern Lebanese state occurred in 1860, with the massacre of Maronite Christians at the hands of Druze tribesmen settled around Mount Lebanon. In this case, however, the victorious Druze were not driven by a nation-building project, and therefore this ‘conquest’ did not produce a state in their image. Rather, Lebanon was created through international intervention, in which the French negotiated a Christian province within the Ottoman Empire for the protection of this regional minority. Through their patronage of the French colonizer, Maronite identity became hegemonic in Lebanon. Nevertheless, and sometimes in spite of itself, this ‘refuge’ for Maronite Christians has provided shelter to other refugees, purged from adjacent newly established nations whose ethnic identity did not coincide with their own: Armenians fleeing the Turkish massacres,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” *Nation and Narration*, Bhaba ed., (London: Routledge, 1990) 11.

and Palestinians exiled from their erstwhile homeland with the inception of Israel, then violently ejected from Jordan in the events of Black September.

In his novel *Yalo*, Elias Khoury challenges the post-Taif doctrine of reconciliation through amnesia by foregrounding an uncomfortable figure elided by the conciliatory logic of “no victor and no vanquished”: the under-classed youth who filled the rank and file of militias that prosecuted the war. The eponymous protagonist, a child of uncertain paternity born to Beirut’s Assyrian community, had joined the Christian Lebanese Forces militia at the age of 18 with vague aspirations of becoming a hero for the nation. Ironically, however, the post-Taif consensus, driven by future-oriented goals of reconstruction and economic development, disowned these shattered militia men whose youthful vitality had been grist for the war. After 10 years of devastating thug-work with the LF, Yalo’s attempts to escape result in further thug-work after the war, hired to stand guard in the woods outside Ballouna with a Kalashnikov rifle, protecting the fortunes of an arms dealer. Yalo’s personal history then, which cannot be dissociated from his family’s pre-history beginning with his maternal grandfather, an Assyrian who immigrated to Lebanon after his parents disappeared in a minor Turkish massacre, traces the tragic trajectory of a lower-class minority’s persistently failed insertion into a Lebanese civic identity. Raised in the household of a naturalized refugee, this cultural misfit’s attempts at attaining the fullness of citizenship places him in another state of being “captured outside” the city: that of the bandit, or wolf-man. He pursues a line of light to escape the position of *homo sacer* that becomes circular, resulting in the same.

Procès verbal

Yalo is a recursive narrative that constructs, deconstructs, and edits the same core story in a series of re-tellings. Through strategic additions or omissions, the retraction of earlier statements or the elaboration of new interpretations, each version modifies the “truth” concerning

the circumstances of Yalo's crimes. The thread of causality, however, is so bound up in the civil war and the slow death of quiet familial tragedy that the narrative slips ineluctably back in time to absorb the life of Yalo's mother and grandfather. His mother, Gaby, was seduced as a teenager by her cowardly, married employer at the tailor shop where they both worked, then abandoned by her legal husband from a marriage presumably arranged to shield her and her father from a scandalous birth out of wedlock. This question of paternity, however, is not merely one of stability or honor; in Lebanon, nationality passes through the father, so that a bastard cannot enjoy full citizenship rights. Yalo is therefore registered with the state as his grandfather's son, a rigid disciplinarian and *cohno* in the Assyrian church. Both in pursuit of his personal ambition within the church hierarchy and to master life-long anxieties born of traumatic childhood memories, this grandfather binds his family into a claustrophobic trinity. He drives away his daughter's husband and lover with his authoritarian grip on the household, and pressures his grandson to learn the dying Syriac language and follow him into the priesthood. Yalo, then, is born into a nearly incestuous association of broken individuals, whose strategies for coping with catastrophe harmfully reverberates onto the others. The war, which brings its own attendant traumas, had provided Yalo an avenue of escape from the oppressive weight and excessive intimacy of a domestic life filled with palpable aging, remorse, and sadness. The traumas of his past, and those of his family members, have so proliferated and impacted on each other that their narrative lines intersect, forming an entanglement.

The novel opens *in medias res* with Yalo's interrogation at a police station in Jounieh, having been arrested on charges of rape and robbery. It is a beginning of sorts, though not an adequate one to account for the acts that Yalo has committed, or the crimes of which he now stands accused. The date, clearly stated in the opening paragraph, is Thursday morning, 22 Kanoun al-Awal, 1993—four years after the Taif Accords had been signed. His present

arraignment is for crimes allegedly committed ante-bellum, during his employ as a security guard at the villa of Michel Salloum, a rich lawyer who profited handsomely from the war-era munitions trade, and who hired Yalo to protect his pampered wife and vast property nestled at the foot of Mount Lebanon. This eminently respectable Salloum, who trades in justice while cashing in on the death industry, is just one of the novel's many indictments of the post-war system's cynicism, where the burden of guilt falls unevenly upon the vulnerable. In the secluded isolation of the villa's wooded grounds, Yalo committed several acts of armed robbery and sexual assault against a steady stream of paramours, who frequent the woods to make love unmolested in their cars. Again, Khoury presents these crimes with a thick layer of irony. Since sex is forbidden to unmarried couples by Lebanese public decency laws, these victims are also, properly speaking, committing a crime.⁹⁸ In a narrative riddled with uncertain truth claims, these are the undisputed facts of the case, acknowledged even by the accused himself.

However, the incident that triggered his arrest is anything but straight-forward, marked by aporia, silences, and misread signs. In part, this is because the novel is narrated largely in free indirect discourse, so it bears the distinct mark of Yalo's desire to win over the reader, his lacunae in memory, or exertions to shield his ego from guilt. Upon arriving at prison, Yalo is confronted by his accuser, one Shirin Raad, a pretty, bourgeois student at the American University of Beirut, whom he first encountered in the Ballouna woods. When Yalo cast the beam of his flashlight upon her lover's car and gestured with the muzzle of his rifle, Shirin interpreted this gesture as a sign to exit the vehicle, whereupon her lover, a married doctor who had performed an abortion for her several months earlier, sped away, abandoning the girl to her fate. Since he had raped in this

⁹⁸ Moreover, some were soliciting prostitutes, or may themselves have entered the forest with intent to rape, but these are claim's of Yalo's not entered into court proceeding.

manner before, it seems probable that this was Yalo's intent. But perhaps because of her weeping, or the smell of incense radiating from her white arms, he instead chaperones her down the mountain to his bungalow near the villa. There, in a kind of pantomime, in which Yalo fumbles to offer this trembling creature some form of hospitality, and Shirin gestures out something inchoate resembling fear, helplessness, or desire, the two make love at the bungalow. It is difficult to say to what degree coercion outweighed desire in the events that followed, however Shirin consents to see him afterward—at cafes, restaurants, a hotel in Jounieh—and a real love affair develops between them. The reader does not have adequate access to Shirin's thoughts to assess her motivations, but their relationship seems to work precisely to the extent that it stands outside social structure; nameless, anonymous, and disconnected to the elite Francophile society to which she belongs. Yalo caught her at a moment of haplessness, when she was struggling to find a partner to inhere in, repudiated for her pregnancy by the fiancé who knocked her up, and conducting a secret and unsatisfying affair with her abortion doctor. For his part, Yalo sought to alleviate the endless anomie of his exile in the forest, where his only activities were the perverse practice of “hunting” lovers in their cars, and pleasuring Randa, his employer's wife, at her command. He cleaves to timid Shirin, imagining that he loves her, and that they might one day marry.

However, these hiccups in Shirin's life narrative are resolved when her fiancé renews their engagement. Thereafter, the appeal of Yalo's popular, working-class Arab culture, which had seemed to Shirin so refreshingly simple and exotic at the beginning of their relationship, begins to wear thin. In this process of re-territorialization into their respective class identities, language plays a pivotal role. Shirin exploits European prestige languages that Yalo does not master to gain leverage as she cuts him out of her life, clearly implying that his lack of cultural capital disqualifies him from becoming a serious candidate for life partner. Again, this behavior

is manifestly hypocritical, since for her, Yalo's cultural difference had initially constituted much of his charm. Yalo, on the other hand, seems to embody Edward Said's insight regarding "man's unhappy historical insertion into a language game that he can barely understand."⁹⁹ Seeing himself free-falling in his beloved's esteem, he "loses control of his tongue and says things that destroy love," alternatively revealing too many sordid details about his past, then inventing a repugnant story of committing an honor killing to impress Shirin into staying.¹⁰⁰ This bizarre story, which could only inspire alarm in a would-be girlfriend, seems to be the sort of thing that might have impressed his old buddies in the militia. His resort to a tough-guy machismo reveals remaining resonances of his wartime persona, and his difficulty in striking the proper tenor for reinsertion into post-war public life. Thereafter, he resorts to stalking and menacing Shirin with his pistol; she to offering him bribe money to disappear.

As her coup de grace, Shirin frames Yalo for robbery and reports him to the police, rearranging crucial details in their relationship suggestive of consent, and ironing out the ambiguities so that their encounter reads as rape. In her narration to the police, she refashions their history according to a generic code, situating the sex act in the forest rather than at Yalo's bungalow ("the forest was better for rape"), and replacing the questionable old doctor with her repentant fiancé (an engineer holding a degree from AUB). The mesh of Shirin's fabrications spins itself only too easily from the coordinates of both plaintiff and defendant's socio-economic emplotments in Lebanese society, as the interrogator amplifies during interrogation sessions, screaming as Yalo is brutally beaten: "Do you know who you are, and who she is?"¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Quoted in Sheehan, *Modernity, Narrative, and Humanism*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Khoury, *Yalo*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Picador, 2009) 83.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

Moreover, in addition to the accusations brought forth by Shirin, the police add another, more fanciful accusation of crime against the state. They claim he is involved in an Israeli terrorist ring, for whom Yalo had allegedly cached explosives at his bungalow, and press him to confess and reveal the identities of the other members. This last count is revealed as the real reason the police are so keenly interested in Yalo's sordid case, perhaps explaining their liberal use of 'enhanced' interrogation methods.

Torture and confession: a language machine

For Yalo, who had proven so inept at manipulating the rhetorical code essential to persuasion in matters of love and law—and as arenas of personal failure, the two are inextricably intertwined—language is a trap. It is a system that alters lived experience by forcing it to signify, leaving an uncapturable excess outside of semantic meaning as a remainder. Upon his apprehension by the Lebanese criminal justice system, Yalo is entered into a narrative extraction machine that forces the accused to constitute himself discursively for the court. This process opens with rigorous interrogation sessions enhanced by torture, followed by an interminable stay in solitary confinement to pen a criminal confession. Each draft, however, is rejected by the authorities, who endlessly demand that it be revised, under the threat of further violence. The confession is devised as a particularly insidious kind of torture, and one which Khoury holds is faithful to current practice: “it is a bizarre technique, but it is, unfortunately, used in Arab prisons.”¹⁰² The end goal is to destroy the prisoner's psyche through forced introspection, used in alternation with physical pain. Though Yalo is not portrayed as an extraordinary intellect, he nonetheless perceives the stakes of this legalistic autobiography: it is both a rope with which to

¹⁰² Susannah Tarbush, “Two Arab novelists on the frontline in English,” *Saudi Gazette*, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.region&contentID=2009083148384>

hang himself, as well as his only instrument of hope. The confession that secures his conviction also promises to bring the interminable torture “parties” to an end.

In her meticulous exegesis of torture in *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry asserts that the over-arching object of torture is to amplify the regime’s spectacle of power by dramatizing its capacity to destroy the victim’s world. Scarry bases her thesis on a heideggerian concept of “world-making” as the process that defines being-human, wherein world/civilization is defined as “the created contents of consciousness.”¹⁰³ The production of being-human involves acts of self-extension through the crafting of objects, the construction of value systems, and critically, through language and voice. However, this Promethean creative faculty is not independent, but tied to a material body. When the body is subjected to pain, the person’s mental faculties are overwhelmed. Pain dazzles the mind and forestalls its capacity to compose the world, to make meaning by categorizing entities apprehended by the senses into a value system. The emanations of the ego retract into the body, such that “world, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost.”¹⁰⁴ Simply put, “Intense pain is world-destroying.”¹⁰⁵ It is on the basis of her definition of these world-making processes as being-human that Scarry locates the “inhumanity” particular to torture.

Because the prisoner’s “world” and values are plotted onto a semiotic grid, the pain inflicted by torture is accompanied by a language component. Therein lies the secret of its ubiquitous conjoining with interrogation. Rather than the reconnaissance of real information, the

¹⁰³ Scarry, 38.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

object of interrogation is to dramatize the destruction of the prisoner's world by forcing him to betray his value system—his family, comrades, or the political cause for which he struggles. Insofar as this world “unmaking” sets out to undo humanity both individually and collectively, acts of linguistic destruction must strike more expansively at civilization.¹⁰⁶ This is accomplished by transforming domestic objects into instruments of torture—for example, turning a “refrigerator into a bludgeon.”¹⁰⁷ “Made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them, the fact of civilization, are annihilated.”¹⁰⁸ There is also a matter of calling things by their wrong names, whereby specific torture techniques are identified by more benign, homely terms: “the telephone...the plane ride...the tea party.”¹⁰⁹

Scarry's semiotic structure of torture is everywhere apparent in the methods deployed by Yalo's tormentors. What Yalo experiences as “vague memories filled with blood, water, and fear” passes under the name of “bathtub”; a Coca-Cola bottle on a raised bench that he is made to sit on, piercing into his rectum, is christened “the throne.”¹¹⁰ However, Scarry's thesis imagines the prisoner to inhabit a world, both linguistic and material, that conforms to a normatively humanistic conception of “civilization”; one that bears all the overtones of nobility and ethical purpose inherited from humanist tradition. Yalo's world, however, is quite marginal to Scarry's august “civilization”. When the police verbally abuse him with standard Arabic invectives such as “dog,” or “animal,” the irony is that these insults—deployed precisely to de-humanize the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 44.

¹¹⁰ Khoury, *Yalo*, 109; 267.

detainee—more accurately describe Yalo’s being-in-the-world than the self-possessed, fully-cognizant “I” of legal discourse. This existence in animalia goes beyond his status as Madame Randa’s guard-dog at the villa. Indeed, Yalo has spent much of his young life dodging entrapment in logos through processes of “becoming animal.”

Unnatural participations

According to the theorizations of Deleuze and Guttari, becoming-animal does not involve mimesis, as in those evocative animal similes woven into Makdisi’s memoir. Neither is it a matter of “a resemblance, an imitation, or...an identification;” not a fancy of the imagination, or behaving *as if*.¹¹¹ It also, critically, has nothing to do with a symbolic hierarchy of species, not a step forward or backward on a continuum of “progression-regression.”¹¹² Rather, becoming-animal describes an affective form of involution, “not a personal feeling...[but] the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel.”¹¹³ In the tyrannically logo-centric house of his grandfather, Yalo had dwelt in a terrifying subordinate relationship of a priori guilt towards the patriarch; he suffered from a “heavy tongue,” a stutter which left “words hanging in his throat.”¹¹⁴ With a view toward eluding the symbolic structure of religion and filiation, he makes a lateral move to join the war machine, integrating into the Billy Goat battalion of the LF militia, where he learned to “spit out” the words. Becoming-billy-goat is the first in a series of possible intensities that Yalo taps into, largely by means of sex or violence,

¹¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guttari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 237.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹¹⁴ Khoury, *Yalo*, 53.

when the vital current of his life risks falling slack. In lieu of simile, Khoury exploits the fifth vowel pattern as an ingenious device native to Arabic to convey the velocity of these involutions, running a noun through this self-reflexive pattern that denotes intensification or becoming. Thus, the frequency of pack-becoming as wolf or billy goat is rendered *tatha'aba* and *tatayyisa*, respectively, while sex with Madame Randa entails a becoming Randa, Randification: *tarannada*.

The problem with these vital insertions is that they always seem to be co-opted, exposing him to other forms of abjection (in war) and subordination (in sex). Thus Yalo's life narrative describes a chain of such lateral move, as each line of flight seems inevitably to dead end in some fresh impasse, leading him to search out a new exit route. Yalo's failed journey to France to escape the war represents the most extreme instance of this truth. Having collaborated with his French-speaking pal Tony in stealing a stash of money from the militia barracks, Tony disappears with the cash after their arrival, leaving Yalo bereft of both linguistic and monetary capital. Reduced to a "clochard" begging in the Metro with a handwritten sign in elegant Arabic script, Yalo is rescued by Salloum, who offers him employment as his wife's security guard as an apparent gesture of charity, re-routing him back to Lebanon. For Yalo, this misadventure reveals that there is no outside to this system. By virtue of his exclusive membership in the Arabic language community, Yalo is abandoned to his belonging to Lebanon. Most poignantly, his biggest regret after this episode is the loneliness he suffers in his old pal's absence.

The becoming-hawk that Yalo assumes while hunting in the Ballouna forest involves his participation in an elaborate material assemblage. The Hawk is a symbol of Arab nationalism often found on national or military insignia in the Middle East. Here, Yalo's adoption of a hawk persona indexes the persistence of post-war militarization, as well as the potent twinning of sexual and violent energies that characterized his experience of war. Hawk-ness coalesces in the

association between Yalo, a black trench-coat he acquired during the war, a Kalashnikov rifle, and a thin black flashlight with a cutting, lazer-like beam. Given that “becoming is the process of desire,” there is real pathos in Yalo’s confederation with these objects, as a young man of little means, for whom possessing a tiny bungalow constitutes an enormous luxury.¹¹⁵ The predatory posture of the Hawk’s sexual desire takes shape through a triangulated association between Yalo’s separate attractions toward these material objects of desire—the sleek texture of the lamp shaft whose beam cuts forth with surgical precision, the trench coat a dark mantle shielding him from the outside world, which he never takes off, even in summer. As for the lovers amorously engaged in their cars, they become “curvy fish swimming in...the oil of sex.”¹¹⁶ The palpable erotic current that they generate escapes the closed dyad of copulating individuals and permeates the forest, emitting “the odor of sex everywhere,” as they galvanize with their vehicles into their own machinic constructions.¹¹⁷ The cars become “animals constantly mating with one another,” and their powerful valence draws the awestruck Yalo in from the periphery. His immediate response is to masturbate on the barrel of his rifle, but once he has mastered the situation by assuming his hawk-ness, Yalo learns to seize the unified car-beast from its bower by ensnaring it in the piercing gaze of the flashlight. Thus spell-binding the animal, he can grab it by the bit, ward off the men with his rifle and insinuate himself into the sex-play with the women. Yalo’s binding with these hawk-objects attains such a level of gestalt that the bounds of the real are blurred, crossing over into the fantastic. For example, we remain uncertain of what happened the night of Shirin’s birthday, when he stood for hours outside her house. Yalo relates that his black

¹¹⁵ Deleuze and Guttari, 272.

¹¹⁶ Khoury, *Yalo*, 246.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

hawk eyes were bright, “ablaze with love” when he shone them on her bedroom window.¹¹⁸ A tall tale—yet Shirin maintains that there were *two* beams projected toward her window, whereas Yalo possesses only one flashlight.

The most poignant of these involutions occurs in the prison, after the hawk has been sussed out of concealment and exposed to the rational, white light of the interrogator’s truth. Habituated to deploying his weapons at a distance, like a sniper, the close-range prison beatings destroy the cartilaginous hawk, all brittle bone and feather; as he is stomped under foot, blood flows freely from his crushed beak. Unable to resist these beatings, Yalo locates an escape route by accelerating into the saline liquidity of blood and tears, becoming cuttlefish. An immanently vulnerable animal of delicate, gelatinous flesh, without exoskeleton or spinal column to lend form, for Yalo the cuttlefish assembles a complex cluster of personal resonances. In Arabic, the cuttlefish is known as al-Habbar, “maker of ink,” which Yalo describes as the archetype of the writer. It is thus associated with his grandfather the copyist, but also with fond memories of accompanying Shirin to a sea-side restaurant, where Yalo delighted his beloved by hand-feeding her octopus cooked in its own ink. Upon discovering at the prison this same woman had become his accuser, Shirin, on whom Yalo had pinned considerable hope for the future, is irrevocably lost, and thereafter constitutes a melancholic object. But rather than assimilating this lost object into his ego through an interior incorporation, Yalo’s becoming-cuttlefish allows for a dwelling-in-Shirin. Swimming in the warm flow of his own blood, the pain is instantly mitigated as he enters Shirin, the female cuttlefish in whose body he dances in the act of copulation. Writing his forced confession, excreting his defensive inks in which he will certainly be cooked, Yalo

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

initially fantasizes as a self-sacrifice for Shirin, at her hands and for her consumption: a lover's communion. However it also initiates a process of re-grounding into language as logos.

Reterritorialization

As we have seen earlier, Yalo had never been a man of words. His relationship to language is naively poetic, charmingly childlike, privileging the tactile and sonorous dimension of words over semantics. At least in part, this is a legacy of his diverse life experiences, traumatic and otherwise, such as his woodworking apprenticeship under a blind master, where he learned to appreciate the physical sensuousness of Arabic script. Likewise, during his abandonment in Paris, he experienced the opacity of French as a torture, the words striking him “like stones” cast at his person.¹¹⁹ However, the tactile relationship with words also seems to provide him a subtle mode of resistance and self-defense in prison. There is a dis-connect, a slowness to the uptake, or perhaps a willful, cunning stupidity in Yalo's inability to understand, and properly respond, to his captors' signifying practices in the carceral world he now inhabits. He is stupefied by the interrogator's use of common idiomatic expressions, like “took off running,” which in Arabic is expressed as “loosened his knees to the wind.” While distracted by a mental image of what that might literally mean, a revealing smile plays across his face. Likewise, the interrogator's demand that he write the story of his life, “from its beginning to its end” is subject to *misunderstanding* through a literal interpretation. Rather than complying with an exhaustive account of his criminal actions, Yalo begins his tale in childhood and even prior, and the causal chain of confession becomes a morass of entangled histories: the war, his mother's love affair, the Assyrian massacre at Ain Ward. He seems to suffer from his eagerness to

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 199.

perform, to the letter, what has been requested of him...or is it rather that *over*-faithfulness to the formula constitutes a kind of cunning?

With time, however, as the forms of torture become more invasive, Yalo changes his narrative tactics. Knowing he will have to satisfy the police in order to end the torture, Yalo is concerned only to avoid jeopardizing his Lebanese citizenship, and to lend the fabricated story of his involvement in the Israeli terrorist ring a convincing dose of verisimilitude. His first confession reflects a continued hope for at least partial exoneration by playing to the court's mercy, adding rhetorical touches to appear sufficiently repentant before God and state. When this ploy does not succeed, however, and Yalo begins to understand that no confession will please the police, he writes for himself—in order to understand his own history and to expose the “truth” sought out by this confession as fraud. He begins to perceive the unconquerable gap between language and experience, thus understanding *why*, in spite of his actions in the Ballouna forest, his position in the prison is so unjust, according to the following epiphanies:

1. No one is capable of writing his life.
2. Desires are in desires.
3. All ideas are stolen.¹²⁰

Armed with this wisdom, he proceeds to write again, but from a more authoritative footing, finding a voice to express his own truth. But even then, a latent self-pride prevents him from appreciating the limited extent of his agency. Wielding his pen with a controlled flourish, as if “smoking a cigarette,” Yalo now claims to be “an artist, a calligrapher, and educated—that is, an intellectual.”¹²¹ He similarly retains delusions about his relationship with Shirin, arrogantly

¹²⁰Ibid., 247.

¹²¹Ibid., 253.

asserting, “I am ready to turn over a new, clean leaf with her, and if she wants marriage, I have no objection.”¹²² Finally, he drops the confession game with the police concerning the terrorism accusation. Proclaiming his innocence, he gallantly offers to go along with this story as a personal “sacrifice for the sake of civil peace in Lebanon.”¹²³ The police response to Yalo’s newly dignified human posture is to break him on the “throne,” a Coca-Cola bottle he is made to drink before sitting upon it, penetrating his rectum. As a result of this latest humiliation, he undergoes a schizophrenic split. Yalo-the-Hero parts ways with Daniel-the-Writer, resting high on his throne while his counterpart plunges back into his narrative labors with new sincerity, relinquishing the defensive cuttlefish ruse and writing only to let “[his] soul..flow” onto the page.¹²⁴ Strangely, this split is also a conjoining, allowing “Daniel” to finally settle into a stably human subjectivity and adopt the first person “I.” Events at the trial appear to make this split permanent—not due to Yalo’s conviction, which had been inevitable from the beginning, but because of the confession’s devastating erasure. After the terrorist ring has been otherwise apprehended, both Yalo and his confession become eminently expendable. The interrogator casts the pages, unread, into a putrid puddle, dissolving into a composition of “water, ink, and a bleeding story.”¹²⁵ Yalo-the-Hero wordlessly slips from the courtroom, while abject Daniel, writer and criminal, is taken back to jail.

Yalo’s processing in prison had aimed at re-grounding an outlaw, produced by the exceptional state of civil war, back into the re-asserted logos of the Lebanese state—but ironically

¹²² Ibid., 253.

¹²³ Ibid., 254.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 298.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 348.

only in order that he may be sacrificed as an enemy of that state. The carnivalesque system of torture that parallels the solemn processes of law finally succeeds in forcing the accused to call things by their proper names, beginning with himself. Not Yalo, but Daniel Abel Abayd learns to call himself a criminal. Those groping encounters in the forest, born out of misread gestures and loaded with a heady mix of fear and lust, he learns to affirm as rape. This encompasses his fateful meeting with Shirin, who perhaps offered her consent to have sex in the bungalow, but at a time when terror had broken her voice, and she had no consent to give. Serving his sentence, Yalo yearns only for writing implements to continue scripting this story that has become so vital, eclipsing his own life. However he is no longer interested in salvaging any personal narrative of innocence or masculine heroism. Instead, these self-serving ambitions are replaced by the anguished hope of retrieving his forgotten mother Gaby through his writing: “with her *kokina* and her long golden hair before the sea, and her love for the tailor, her father the *cohno*, and her son who wasted his life.”¹²⁶

Voice and the subaltern

If there is a positive aspect to Yalo’s humiliating re-grounding in language through the mechanism of legalistic autobiography, it stems not from any notion of empowerment in finding his voice, but rather from his recognition of the other who had so often been the grounds of his delirious animalistic flights: women. Not just hapless Shirin, who could not fully give herself to the man who had broken her voice, but also Gaby, the abandoned mother, who had loved and suffered in equal measure as the ground over which men had asserted their sovereign desires. Too late, Yalo realizes how profoundly he had failed her by fleeing to war when she felt herself losing her personhood in age and loneliness. The self-absorbed young man somehow lacked the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 359.

capacity for *response* when the contours of her visage began to dissolve, to allow her to shelter in his person. In a patriarchal society consumed by desires for domination, Gaby and Yalo are twinned, in a sense, as the abjected, bodily remains of the civil war, with no place in a nation without victors or vanquished. In prison, Yalo's earlier non-response haunts him as the blank figure of a woman "walking alone through the city streets, tripping over her shadow."¹²⁷

As for the animal-becomings, Khoury's skillful deployment of this trope allows the reader to feel sympathy for the militia member, to find compassion in his vulnerability, beyond his despicable persona of masculine aggression. But in spite of this sympathy, it must be recognized that each surrender to animalistic intensities in turn produces another victim. Much like the wild cat with which Yalo is tortured as they are tied together in a sack, vital aggressions born of lust or terror find an outlet in another exposed body, fueling the circulation of violent affect and contributing to a cycle whereby victimization creates a new generation of aggressors. Thus the victimization inflicted at Ain Ward is not fully absorbed in the grandfather, but spreads trans-generationally, creating fresh victims of both Gaby and her son—although the women do suffer disproportionately, as Lebanon's patriarchal structure leaves very few avenues of escape at their disposal. Yalo's own animal involutions that accelerate him into violence must be understood as the individuation of public feeling after the conclusion of an intimate and brutalizing war that was never truly resolved. In that sense, the reader comes to understand that his susceptibility to participating in violence stems not from an innate predilection, but from a childlike naiveté manifested as an inability to steel himself against affective currents—not for moral reasons, nor for his own good. This is not to say that this anti-hero is not properly the author of his crimes, nor that he deserves exoneration. However, if we subscribe to the second of

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 360.

Yalo's epiphanies, that "desires are in desires," it seems scandalously hypocritical that the subaltern is subject to brutal punishments for tapping into ambient currents of violence or sex from the periphery, while those hegemonic subjects whose illegal actions initiated those currents remain blissfully immune.

Finally, many of the reviews heralding *Yalo's* release in English found that the novel does offer redemption for the protagonist in the form of self-knowledge and the discovery of his authentic voice. Here, I believe, we must proceed with caution. In his reading of another vulnerable beast ensnared by the legal justice system—18th century French parricide Pierre Rivère—Michel Foucault posits violence as the only historical condition in which the subaltern's voice may be heard.¹²⁸ In a powerful rejoinder, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak instead maintains that "for the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself;" therefore an elite generally fills the breach, constructing the subaltern as subject and speaking in her place.¹²⁹ *Yalo* would tend to support Spivak's conclusion. Earlier in this thesis, following Sheehan, we noted that narrative combines a "voice" of supposed authorial presence, and a "machine"—generic aspects that render the narrative legible. At the beginning of the novel, Yalo has such a poetic relationship to language that he consistently miscommunicates: his speech is almost pure voice. The truths he seems to learn in the prison concern the generic construction of narrative, and the difference between truth and verisimilitude; he adopts the mechanical aspects of narrative in order to render his voice legible. However, not only is his confession not received by the authorities, but the process of

¹²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Moi, Pierre Rivère, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur, et mon frère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).

¹²⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 80.

adopting this voice enacts an epistemic violence. A part of Yalo's ego cannot be subsumed in this voice and is split off as a remainder. "Words," Yalo learns, "do not express things—they cover them over."¹³⁰ Indeed, the novel exhorts us to compassion by urging us to attend to these mute remainders, to attune ourselves to the eloquent silences elided by speech.

¹³⁰ Khoury, *Yalo*, 285.

An Inoperative Community: Mourning the Nation of Merchants

Hudá Barakāt—*The Tiller of waters* [Ḥārith al-miyāh]

Beirut is a fragmented city, best defined by its contradictions of substance. It is at once cohesive and detachable. Its substantial distinction is the fragment, the lump, the volatile aggregate, as if division occurred only to produce another irreducible cohesion. It is no longer a city where any hierarchy between its elements is clearly apparent...The unified image of Beirut is lost in a maze of boundaries carving through it.

--Maya Yahya, "Reconstructing Space: The aberration of the Urban in Beirut."

It is not possible to pose the problem in terms of the choice between subject and citizen if this choice only balances between the appropriative violence of the subject and the abstract spatiality of citizenship.

--Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

The human cost of war cannot be assessed solely through a count of casualties. In a war zone that coincides with domestic space, loss may also be felt as a series of dislocations that decimates a sense of community—an identity that inheres in the locality and, by extension, finds its bearings in the nation. One of the lasting and problematic legacies of urban warfare in Beirut has been the impact of new spatial arrangements imposed by the destruction of infrastructure and forced migration. Distinctly sectarian urban enclaves born of re-awakened religious identities calcified along the fault lines of inter-confessional violence, as survivors understandably sought security among family and co-religionists. Beirut's physical structure was further transformed through improvised housing practices, such as squatting in abandoned buildings, or the construction of informal settlements through "pre-industrial" means, so that the countryside

seemed to encroach on the ruins and progressively reclaim the city.¹³¹ Together, these phenomena effected a total “redrawing of Lebanon’s social landscape,” which obliterated the formerly heterogeneous fabric of communities.¹³² Lebanon’s once celebrated cosmopolitan identity as the erstwhile “Nation of Merchants” became an object of nostalgia.

At the war’s end, urban planning took center stage in Lebanon’s reconstruction discourse, no doubt because this future-oriented task could be attended to without bogging participants down in war-era grievances and animosities.¹³³ At the center of this debate was the reconstruction of Beirut’s historic downtown, a site that presented something of a *tabula rasa* since it had been totally decimated during the war. What had been known to all as a dangerous and uninhabitable no man’s land was reclaimed as a plot of neutral ground, free of the sectarian territorial valences that divided the rest of the city. While “the old city center was not understood to be symbolic of the Lebanese state before the war,” the post-war reconstruction projects consciously saturated downtown Beirut with the nostalgic symbolism of national identity.¹³⁴ As development company Solidère’s slogan for the reconstruction, “Beirut—ancient city for the future,” announces forthright, the project willfully elides the immediate past by opting for an airbrushed classicism, channeling forms from earlier historical periods, such as the mandate-era city, or the invented tradition of Phoenician and Roman forbearers.¹³⁵ Sune Haugbolle observes

¹³¹ Maya Yahya, “Reconstructing Space: The Abberation of the Urban in Beirut,” *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction*, eds. Samir Kalaf and Philip S. Khoury (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 141.

¹³² Samir Khalaf and Philip S. Khoury, Preface of *Recovering Beirut*, XII.

¹³³ Jad Tabet, “Towards a Master Plan for Post-war Lebanon,” *Recovering Beirut*, 82.

¹³⁴ Hashim Sarkis, “Territorial Claims,” *Recovering Beirut*, 103; Haugbolle 84-89.

¹³⁵ Haugbolle, 86.

that Solidère's strategy was to craft a cogent cultural heritage "for the purpose of creating a name brand for Beirut," in order to vector capital investment and tourist traffic toward the city. Ironically, then, the demolition that was begun by the war would be completed through reconstruction, which sacrificed salvageable historic constructions like the Ottoman souks to a "bulldozing' mentality," making way for a stylized simulacra of a uniform Lebanese authenticity.¹³⁶

Critics of this project to pave over the city's scars in exchange for a sanguine and profitable culture industry warned against the potential dangers of salvific amnesia. The erasure of all traces that violence had etched on Beirut's downtown structures had an uncanny effect, for "the war happened downtown if anywhere, but it was there if anywhere that the war was rendered invisible."¹³⁷ This willful elimination of the scene of national trauma left a lacuna in collective memory, making it difficult to situate the present within a historical continuum. Without a physical locus in which to ground themselves, painful recollections take on a nomadic, dream-like quality, as if the war had been nothing more than a film reel of absurdist visions, signifying nothing. Moreover, the exuberant capitalist spectacle of downtown real estate speculation overlaying the collective aimlessness and fractured quality of the body politic served to underscore the *inoperativeness* of the post-war Lebanese community. It is not without reason, then, that Hudá Barakāt chose the old Ottoman souk district to stage her novelistic reflections on the break-down of the national community's dream of immanent self-production. Tracing the history of Lebanon's insertion into global capitalism through the fortunes of the silk industry, Barakāt charts the itinerary of an appropriative desire for possession and consumption that

¹³⁶ Tabet, 92-3.

¹³⁷ Haugbolle, 88.

undergirds life as an insatiable sexual drive. This vital force for unity in consummation galvanized Lebanon together as a Nation of Merchants, but on an exploitative basis. It fueled desires for appropriative violence, leading to an almost inevitable entropy and disintegration.

Death and the community

It is perhaps not proper to speak of the “advent” of the inoperative community; this would amount to recounting the familiar story of The Fall, which teaches that an authentically organic community had been historically available earlier, and subsequently lost. Rather, the inoperativeness of community reveals itself when the dream of attaining a millennial totality is finally perceived as impossible, a fantasy horizon that once animated the twentieth century’s political ideologies, but now appears irrevocably out of reach. Jean-Luc Nancy describes the lost community, mourned as a casualty of modernity’s shock, as more than just an “intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence”:

It is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community.¹³⁸

Metaphysics finds solace in the thought of organic community because it fills the emptiness of human finitude with meaning. The specter of death’s absurdity as an “unmasterable excess of finitude” is thereby transformed into a more glorious union with an eternal collectivity, “the infinite fulfillment of an immanent life.”¹³⁹ However, in Nancy’s estimation, if this longed-for communal immanence of man-to-man were ever truly accomplished, its immediate product would itself be a work of death. Community cannot become a “project” of absolute

¹³⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Peter Connor and others, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 9.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

immanence—either the fascist communion of blood and soil, or the communist dream of a human collective producing its own essence as community—since such a perfect union would destroy the singularity, or difference, of the individual. The only immanence death can promise is decomposition, whereby “everything returns to the ground and becomes part of the cycle.”¹⁴⁰ The “communal fusion” of immanence, which nostalgia teaches us to mourn, in fact signifies the demise of community, the suppression of communication between singularities which constitutes community’s *Mitsein*, or ‘being-with.’¹⁴¹

Death, for Nancy, is “obstinately” meaningless.¹⁴² It does not *operate*; it cannot be made into a work. However, community is revealed in the presentation of one member’s death to the others.¹⁴³ What does this mean for the death that goes un-witnessed, un-mourned? Without the hope of acceding to the hypostasis of an infinite national or religious community, what redemption can be imagined for the anonymous death, far from the view of others? Such a lonely death at an unknown hour marks the denouement of Barakāt’s *The Tiller of Waters*. In this melancholic tale of a textile merchant’s only son, war is at once peripheral and totalizing, taking shape as a set of geographic features that demarcate the insulated burrow where he makes his home. Cut off from the patriarchal community of merchants that governed his childhood, Niqula escapes the war by retreating into memory, where his father provided a reassuring masculine anchor for his existence. In the present, space-time is myopic and distended. Space has been rearranged by the tectonic shifts in the city’s terrain, while events unfold under the sign

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴² Ibid., 14.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 14-15

of a radical uncertainty, which is only fully disclosed in the novel's final pages when the protagonist, Niqula, calls out in bewilderment: "Father, who killed me?":

Who killed me? For I did not die a natural death. I did not see death coming so that I would recognize it and be able to meet it.¹⁴⁴

This disembodied voice, ringing out beyond the irreversible closure of its finitude, presents the reader with a paradox. Upon taking cognizance of its death, the voice calls out to an other to bear witness to the unexpected blow, which occurred too suddenly to be comprehended, so that death is experienced as a failure of sight, an inability to recognize the hour's approach and adopt an appropriate posture: to properly respond. For Nancy, death belies the conventional fiction of the personal pronoun "I" because it exceeds a metaphysics of the subject. After all, "if *I* cannot say it is dead, if *I* disappears effectively in *its* death, in that death which is precisely what belongs to it the most...it is because *I* is something other than a subject."¹⁴⁵ Given that the being that calls itself "I" reaches its unsurpassable limit in death, how can we understand a narrator that persists in proclaiming his subjectivity even after he has been definitively cut off from the language community to which "I" belongs? What are these subject effects, this psychical remainder that lingers to voice its complaint to a father, who in any case long preceded Niqula in death? I read this puzzling persistence of the protagonist, after his demise, as emblematic of the Lebanese post-war experience, after the eclipse of a hegemonic national identity. The civil war worked to hollow out the myth of the Nation of Merchants, replacing its reassuring cognitive map of semantic meaning with a more uncertain affective regime of sense. Although removing strictures of a "pure" national essence frees humans up to associate with a plurality of beings, the

¹⁴⁴ Hudá Barakāt, *The Tiller of Waters*, Marilyn Booth, tran. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 14.

fluid space of sense proves difficult to navigate, suggesting that a new regime of meaning will be imposed, with perhaps equally disastrous consequences.

Millennial time at ground zero

The novel is constructed on multiple temporal planes that fluctuate between an indeterminate present and the fullness of the past, bathed in the nostalgia and regret of Niqula's memory. The present, which advances through the 1980s towards that final post-war scene announcing the protagonist's death, presents a variation on *Robinson Crusoe*, a tale of primitive accumulation and husbandry from the devastated landscape of Beirut's Souk district. After sheltering with a friend during the 1975-77 "Two Year War," Niqula returns home to discover it has been requisitioned by an unknown squatter, a pregnant woman heavy with child. He cedes the house, and without any clear alternative, is drawn like a somnambulist back to his family's abandoned fabric shop in Souk Tawile.

In her analysis of the novel's tensions between realism and the fantastic, Sobhi Boustani highlights the precision with which Barakāt recreates the old city. Barakāt records the landmarks and street names Niqula passes on his errands in minute detail, allowing readers familiar with the area to pinpoint his movement through this lost geography. Boustani contends that this scrupulous attention to cartographic detail provides an anchor for the narrative's emergent elements of the fantastic, lending them verisimilitude. These include both the impossibly utopic aspects of the lush bower Niqula constructs in the family shop, as well as the intrusion of dystopic elements, such as the appearance of vicious street dogs and progressive distortions in space-time.¹⁴⁶ Beyond the threshold of Niqula's shop, the war is registered on downtown's coherent

¹⁴⁶ Sobhi Boustani, "Realisme et fantastique dans le roman *Hārith al-miyāh* de Hodá Barakāt" *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6.2 (July 2003) 225-235.

modernist grid through a warping of the landscape into a shifting rhizomatic structure. The historically ordered sediment of architectural layers is destabilized, giving way to secret chambers and subterranean passageways. Linking these phenomena with tales told by Niquila's grandfather of Beirut's periodic rise and fall suggests that the city is entering a historic cycle of purifying destruction. Indeed, Beirut seems to have churned itself, swallowing up the august high streets and housing stock built by past generations, sloughing off its inhabitants so that they "may leave and new people assume the tending of it."¹⁴⁷ Paradoxically, although these shifting tectonics and militarized border-zones expose Niquila to a plurality of possible deaths, the city's emptiness allows him to sustain a key fantasy: that of asserting mastery over his domain as a human birthright. This implicates him in an eerie process of self-essentializing, as he imagines himself as a sultan of yore, Harun al-Rashid surveying his palace. Sovereign in his solitude, he luxuriates in the shop's stock of fine fabrics, shedding his clothes and rolling up his naked body in a different bolt each night. By day, he enjoys the quiet satisfaction of cultivating plants and scavenging for food and other treasures in the abandoned alleyways of Souk Tawile.

The spatial uncertainty of the city is matched by its temporal framework. Oblique references to historical events allow the reader to orient the novel's action with respect to real time. The Two Year War belongs to the recollected past, whereas details in the present—i.e. the presence of Hebrew-speaking soldiers, an American warship off the Mediterranean coast, or a Fairouz concert in Martyr's Square—appear like cairns charting our progress from 1982, 1984, and 1994, respectively. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to say with precision when the historic present began, or at what rate time progresses between these cryptic markers. So much of this novel is overwhelmed by the sensorium, ruled by the flux between body and world and the

¹⁴⁷ Barakāt, 25.

mutual exchanges they negotiate, across orifices and the permeable membrane of skin, that time is felt as both immanent and disembodied. It is a still time, eerily quiet, in part, because the most significant people in Niqula's life, who form the relational coordinates of his being, have been evacuated. Both his mother and father have died and Shamsa, the Kurdish maid with whom he cultivated a love affair, has departed. In spite of their absence, Niqula imagines his isolated sovereignty as the culmination of the family's collective desires, the historical accomplishment of a dynasty: "it is as if all of our longings, our aspirations—my grandfather's, my father's, and mine, and perhaps even my mother's—have come to fruition, embodied in my present life."¹⁴⁸ The tension between two opposite poles of the fantastic, utopia and dystopia, create a nagging suggestion of death's advent well before its final disclosure. The lower level of the shop, containing its stock of precious natural fabrics, was sealed up in fire by melted synthetic products on the ground floor, leaving the chamber in such a perfect state that it might be called an embalming. Meanwhile, Niqula's body undergoes a panoply of distortions that increasingly resemble decomposition. Here in this millenarian cradle of perfect equilibrium, which can only be understood as the end of history, Niqula finds the "time and leisure" to review the lessons of his beloved father, who died before fully imparting all the knowledge of his trade to his son.

Myth and the Storyteller

As Greek Orthodox Christians settled in the traditionally Jewish neighborhood of Abu Jmil, Niqula's family represent a style of Levantine multiculturalism that characterized Lebanon's fabled Golden Era before the war. Theirs is a community not of faith, but of traditional commerce organized around kinship networks and face-to-face transactions. Niqula's memories take on a dialogic form, in which traditional wisdom is imparted through storytelling. His

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

repertoire of stories is the legacy of apprenticeship, and long hours spent in the intimately masculine space of the family shop. Benjamin describes storytelling as “an artisan form of communication” that naturally thrives in the slow and steady work rhythms of a pre-modern craftsman milieu.¹⁴⁹ Bygone forms of communal labor, such as “spinning and weaving,” demand long hours and repetition; the ensuing boredom becomes the handmaiden of imagination, encouraging the easy exchange of experience and local lore:

The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled.¹⁵⁰

In *The Tiller of Waters*, storytelling serves as a vehicle for transmitting a familial essence across generations, guaranteeing the continuity of tradition and homogeneity of forms. As Niquila’s father speaks, his grandfather is also interpellated, “[summoning] back his father’s words...as though he wanted to command his father’s presence in our conversations.”¹⁵¹ This trans-generational nesting of voices leads Niquila to identify so strongly with his father that a kind of twinning takes place, so that their respective identities overlap. It is as if the male lineage shares one soul and fate, which survives as a narrative inheritance through the life of the child. Perhaps this is why Niquila did not mourn his father’s passing, experiencing it if a split had occurred, separating his father from “that Jirjis Mitri who had just died.”¹⁵² While instilling a cultural

¹⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 91.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵¹ Barakāt, 8.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

identity in the child, these stories chronicle the history of civilization through the development of textile markets and weaving techniques. They provide a cognitive map that facilitates the reading of history, cosmology, the contemporary milieu, as well as man's place within it.

If myth is “the transcendental autofiguration—or the autoimagination—of nature as humanity and of humanity as nature” then cloth, for this lineage of merchants, is myth.¹⁵³ It is the point at which nature and history unite, pressing close to make contact with the skin. For the merchant, meaning may be appraised by the senses because it tangibly inheres in the material as quality. Quality is also associated with purity, so that cloth of natural fiber is valued over cheaper synthetic imitations. Through his trade, the merchant masters a diverse body of knowledge, which demands a minute training of the sensorium. He learns to recognize the quality of cloth at a touch, to identify its make and weave by the gleam that captures the eye, or the audible rustle as one surface grazes past another. Knowledge of the fabric's provenance maps out a detailed geography; the merchant learns where the fibers are cultivated and how the diverse techniques of weaving were pioneered, opening up vast domains of history. In this mythic paradigm, weaving is the common thread that organizes the course of civilization:

The techniques that go into clothmaking are in essence like the planning and construction of a city. It began when human beings plaited tree branches to mark out the space of their dominion against the surrounding land, and then wove those branches as a roof for the home ... later the maker of traps erected woven structures to enclose animals he had subdued and domesticated, thus bringing them under his authority... The home grew by accumulation, its outer margins expanding like the thread that spirals around the spindle's heart, circle upon circle. Around the column, the columnar memory of the grandfather, expand the rings made by the homes of children and grandchildren, always held within the magnetic field of kinship and inheritance.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 54.

¹⁵⁴ Barakāt, 131-2.

This remarkable passage figures man's coming into being through *techne*, emerging from a uniform backdrop of nature by fashioning his world through a primal act of weaving. The sequence of his conquests echoes the stable *scala natura* of Aristotelian order, wherein man finds himself at the head of a hierarchy of species, with plants occupying the lowliest position, and various animals populating the medial ranks.¹⁵⁵ This understanding of the world is remarkably anthropocentric, placing man at the epicenter while civilization radiates out as his handiwork. Language likewise conspires in this myth. "Weaving," as Niqula explains, is related to "telling a tale," in Arabic, since the two words are derived from a common three letter radical. Thus, "the weaver is the one who 'makes' speech, and a person 'wears' his words," thereby permitting both to cover up their original nakedness.¹⁵⁶ From the nucleus of the first man, a "grandfather," or "priest," the mythic secret is shared through a patriarchal lineage, and a spinal column-like order formally links the generations.

Yet no act of creation, however divinely sanctioned, is benign. The erect taproot pattern of mastery described by Niqula's father is subverted by an undercurrent of violence, which destabilizes notions of human sovereignty as a benevolent form of shepherding in which "civilization" presumes to be founded. Man's generative energies are shown to possess two faces, Apollonian and Dionysian; one in which sovereignty is expressed through creation, and the other in destruction. But the division between them is razor-thin, an imperceptibly delicate equilibrium sustains civilization's progress. In the passage quoted above, fabrication is clearly a mode of conquest, and over the course of history parochial acts of domestication are steadily amplified to an imperial scope. Niqula's stories reveal the development of international trade as a

¹⁵⁵ Sheehan, *Modernity, Narrative, and Humanism*, 25.

¹⁵⁶ Barakāt, 128.

history of rapaciousness and exploitation spurred on by commodity desire—the irresistible pursuit of an exquisite texture or optical effect that sparks betrayal at court, or mobilizes soldiers for war. Though man may be the author of these conquests, it is by no means clear that his acts are measured through self-mastery. Rather, he appears animated by a murky profusion of bodily drives, a lust for power no doubt, as sovereignty itself may act as an intoxicant, but also for sexual possession. The ambiguity of cloth suggests that it plays an active role in this subterfuge by commanding the gaze; when cloth is draped over a woman’s flesh, the net effect of combination is greater than the sum of their parts. Men are enraptured before them, grasped, as it were, by the bit—the *res extensa*, it seems, has its own potency and affect.

Colonial Capitalism and the Secret Life of *Res Extensa*

What then, is the nature of human sovereignty, if the true protagonist of this story is silk? Its tactile properties, its texture and weave; the way it drapes across the body or catches the eye, light refracted in a multi-color dazzle from its smooth surface sheen, or absorbed into the rich density of its nap. An animal secretion of pure protein, silk is described as the pinnacle of cloth, unlike any other textile in the merchant’s repertoire. It carries a pulse, a voice; it is not fabric, as Niqula’s father points out, since it is not *fabricated* of human hands:

It is the only filament that we do not fabricate, that is born complete, perfect, pure, offered up exactly as it is, emerging from pure, living protein that does not die. We do not make it; we do not extract it, neither spinning it nor pulling it from plant fibers.¹⁵⁷

Whereas velvet befits a subservient femininity, silk maintains its own graceful sovereignty and needs nothing besides itself. It is a filament of pure desire, whose insatiable genesis demands that difference be obliterated, and assimilated into its sublime homogeny: “for a thing of beauty to

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 162.

attain plenitude requires the destruction of everything outside of itself.”¹⁵⁸ Silk manufacture requires the merciless sacrifice of a body—that of a worm engaged in hidden machinations of self-production, striving toward metamorphosis: “the thread [comes] off the suffocated corpse...before it is crushed between huge marble slabs to bring out its luster.”¹⁵⁹ Thus the life energy of a productive body is extracted, before the empty husk is discarded. This macabre underbelly of civilization, however, is kept hidden as an industry secret, only to be revealed to the initiated. In fact, there are quite simply truths that Niqula prefers *not* to recognize, particularly those that interrupt the family’s harmony, such as his mother’s adultery with her music teacher. As Niqula’s mother remarks in a manner that might refer to both husband and son: “he sees nothing but what he wants to see.”¹⁶⁰ Throughout the novel, Barakāt sustains an altogether uneasy homology between sexual jouissance and thanatos, which combine in silk as a seamless alloy. As the pinnacle of purity, silk embodies that moment before the scales of civilization tip ineluctably toward decadence, seducing one closer to ecstatic oblivion. Indeed, violence and destruction offer their own ecstasy, providing a sharp corrective to those who would believe in the edifying moral quality of human nature: “whoever does not disclose that killing offers a fierce pleasure has guiled us...whoever has not taught us the pleasure of the kill has slain us in his compassion for us and in his scorn for the entirety of our being.”¹⁶¹

Here, Barakāt foregrounds Lebanon’s historical entanglements with silk as the commodity that spearheaded the nation’s insertion into a colonial modernity. The development

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 167.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 134.

of commerce, finance, and artisan production clustered around sericulture was intimately linked to the rise of the Christian merchant class, and was a precursor to the banking activity that the nation thrived on in the Golden fifties and sixties.¹⁶² Silk was also decisive for Beirut's establishment as capital city, since it galvanized the mountainous hinterlands around export activity in its port. However, this lucrative product was far from an unqualified boon, as its success attracted the imperial eye of both Egypt and France. Egyptian general Ibrahim Pasha's covetousness for silk lands provoked the first instance of sectarian bloodshed around Mount Lebanon, as he armed the region's Christians in revolt against the Druze.¹⁶³ Later, France's appetites for silk transformed the post-1860 *Mutasarrifiya* into "an enclave of monoculture and monoproduction" establishing a trend of foreign dependency for foodstuffs and manufactured goods, and a shortage in salable land that triggered massive emigration.¹⁶⁴ The delicate secretion of an indifferent worm, silk produced modern Lebanon almost as a byproduct, giving rise to capitalism but in the colonial orbit of imperial France, generating personal fortunes and miseries.

Niqula's nostalgia for the past under his father's reassuring authority belies that fact that, in the larger historical scope of the family fortunes, it already constituted an age of decline. With the introduction of rayon, or "synthetic silk" into the global market, the industry of luxuriously tangible fabrics that built the "Merchant State" collapsed, shifting the nation's material basis to a service economy, primarily "product-less" banking activities.¹⁶⁵ Thus, the tragedy of Niqula's family pre-dates the civil war, with Lebanon's transition to late capitalism. The infiltration of

¹⁶² Trabulsi, 59

¹⁶³ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁵ Khalaf, 153.

cheap industrial fibers precipitates a decline in the cultural currency of purity and tradition. Synthetic cloth is a simulacrum, bearing names intended to elide the original, for example “atlaz” in lieu of “atlas, which is true silk.”¹⁶⁶ While these fabrics free up female bodies from the time consuming upkeep of traditional fibers, contact with the skin results in a monstrous alchemy, offensive to the more intimate animalistic senses:

New, odious smells, and new skin diseases that come with new fabrics. Eczema, dermatitis, spreading pustules and festering ulceration, surreptitiously oozing beneath the electricity of the threads. Then an acid perspiration, a sour stickiness. Secretions of the base multitude, forced into close proximity.¹⁶⁷

Rebecca Dyer has argued, quite rightly, that Niqula’s father’s disgust for impurity and mixing in textiles extends to rather disturbing beliefs about purity of blood. She astutely observes that in denouncing his wife’s intentions of lining a silk garment with a synthetic, Niqula’s father cites religious injunctions against “mongrel blends” in animals, and the yoking of “an ox and a donkey” together at the till.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, in teaching his son the horrors of the “Age of Diolen,” his disgust manifests itself in an inappropriately intimate probing of lower class bodies. The section quoted above regarding skin diseases aggravated by synthetics strays also onto sexual territory, imagining how “a woman wearing nylon underwear carries herself, how she walks and speaks.”¹⁶⁹ Significantly, this woman is imagined as a foreigner from populous Egypt, whoring herself out to the “Arab Gulf tourists and the seasonal merchants from Upper Egypt. Can you

¹⁶⁶ Barakāt, 13.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁶⁸ Rebecca Dyer, “Representations of the Migrant Domestic Worker in Hoda Barakat’s *Harith al-Miya* and Danielle Arbid’s *Maarek Hob*,” 19.

¹⁶⁹ Barakāt, 141.

imagine what smell the beds in those rooms give off?”¹⁷⁰ For Dyer, these pronouncements ominously suggest what this xenophobic father’s reaction may have been to Niqula’s tryst with Shamsa, the Kurdish maid, given that their coupling transgresses boundaries of age, class, religion, ethnicity, and worker/employer. The father’s alliance with Madame Rahme, the mother’s French-trained tailor, in maintaining a rigid purity of style clearly indicates that it is the hegemony of a Christian, Francophile elite that must be reinforced, in spite of his political affinities for Nasserist Pan-Arabism.

In the teachings of Niqula’s father, decadence manifests itself as a lack of discernment. For him, the mass economy of synthetic fabric is a democratizing force, but in a negative sense, leveling social hierarchies to a base inter-changeability: “everyone must have access to all” in an age of “mass bodies” “mass sizes” and “mass tastes.”¹⁷¹ In Agamben and Nancy’s writings, the advent of mass culture renders the metaphysical belief in an authentic individual identity untenable.¹⁷² The self-sufficient atomistic individual, thought to possess its own coherent identity, is exchanged for a “whatever” singularity, whose “being with” proceeds any notion of its own discreet being. While this pronouncement may appear nihilistic, for Nancy it is precisely the abandonment of identity that allows us to perceive community in *in-operation*. Outside of signification, singularities cohere not through their common identity, but through their *clinamen*, an unpredictable swerve at no fixed place in time that characterizes the minimal indeterminacy of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷² See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, and Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* and *The Sense of the World*.

atoms in motion.¹⁷³ Subjectivity, it seems, is another victim of the “lost” community’s shipwreck.

A Lover’s Communion

For Nancy, the exclusive society of lovers provides a form of compensation for the lost community of human immanence. In the union they seek in each other, lovers hope to find “a refuge” against the “immense failure of the politico-religious.”¹⁷⁴ This pronouncement seems to aptly describe the nature of Niqula’s tryst with Shamsa, his elderly mother’s Kurdish maid and care-taker. A recent immigrant who has not yet assimilated into Beirut’s cosmopolitan urbanity, Shamsa too inhabits a world of myth as the heritage of her nomadic Kurdish culture. Her rite of passage into womanhood is marked by a graduation from loose cotton garments to fine linen and velvet items from her bride’s trousseau, inherited from her maternal grandmother. On the holiday marking her coming of age, Shamsa’s appearance before Niqula in these colorfully exotic clothes rouses him from indifference, activating his sexuality. He deploys his father’s stories as a seduction device to woo Shamsa into staying overnight, engaging her in their weave so that he may fold them both into acts of lovemaking. Certainly, many taboos are broken in this relationship; in addition those cited above and the violation of the girl’s virginity, the secret contained in the stories themselves are intended for transmission to a male initiate. However, in this twilight hour of the merchant’s world, Niqula lacks a descendant in whom to impart his knowledge—perhaps precisely because of his inability to adjust to modernity. Engaging the girl’s excitement over both her new clothes and her youthful, blossoming body, Niqula recites his father’s tales of cloth, but in a way that allows him to lure her close, deploying words that caress

¹⁷³Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

her contours as they trace out a stitch or hemline. These enchanting tales plunge through historical depths, wrapping the wearer up in a royal lineage, working an alchemical magic between fiber and fleur du peau that disarms the auditor to give her body more freely. While this relationship is manifestly built on a power imbalance, Barakāt does not appear interested in emphasizing its exploitative dimensions. Even if Niqula initiated the affair, it is Shamsa who ultimately takes the reins.¹⁷⁵ In this manner, Niqula accompanies Shamsa through a Gnostic progression, which establishes a material hierarchy in an economy of desire. Beginning with linen, he lures her with ever more enticing fabrics, proceeding to velvet, to lace, and finally to silk.

These storytelling sessions with Shamsa aim at more than just courtship or sex; Niqula yearns for a complete bodily communion. With each lesson, they disrobe and wrap themselves together in fine cloth, “pore against pore, tissue to tissue.”¹⁷⁶ His desire is not content with exploring the surface of her body through touch, which merely articulates the mutual closure and finality of their two bodies. Rather he yearns to consume her, to incorporate her wholesale into his ego. Shamsa’s ample body is portrayed through food metaphors, her flesh a “blessed dough” that stimulates the flow of saliva at Niqula’s mouth, which is constantly “hungry and thirsty and panting.”¹⁷⁷ While Niqula’s lessons speak of clothing, urbanity, and empire, Shamsa has her own lessons to impart from the Kurdish tribal experience on the open steppe that seem to strike to the heart of organic being. As the vessel of her mother’s stories of wandering and migration, Shamsa speaks of a bond with the earth and a longing for homeland—but also of the body’s metabolism

¹⁷⁵ Dyer, 21.

¹⁷⁶ Barakāt, 94.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

and hidden rhizomatic metamorphoses. She teaches Niqula sexual union through consumption, showing him how a morsel of fat may be shared between their two mouths, so that they may eat as a single organism:

We will eat together as if we have a single mouth...turn out the light and come, let us eat each other. Come, we will eat each other. Eat of my body.¹⁷⁸

And yet even this communion fails to achieve the sought-after fusion since, following Bataille, “the sovereignty of lovers is no doubt nothing other than the ecstasy of the instant.” It produces nothing besides ecstasy itself, which cannot be sustained; even within that fleeting moment of climax, “each one ends up being engulfed alone in its own ecstasy.”¹⁷⁹ In a devastating irony, Niqula progressively destroys the object of his desire through the lessons that constitute their courtship, which initiate her on a Hegelian path of becoming-subject through the resolution of difference. Steadily, ineluctably, she is transforming, assuming the authority of her own desire with the passage of each Gnostic link in the chain of fabric knowledge, leaving behind the handsome earthiness of the Kurdish steppe and becoming, like Niqula’s mercurial mother, “a woman of silk.”

Silk, in its terrible sovereignty, is also marked as the vehicle for a particularly female disease, a strain of fatal sexual attraction to the cloth. This erotic madness, which claims both Niqula’s exquisite mother and his own beloved Shamsa, is feared by the men in their lives because it appears to be a mode of feminine sexual self-sufficiency; men are entirely disposable to its logic. However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the disease obliterates gender difference. Making love to silks, the woman is caught up in a becoming-butterfly, absorbed into

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 90-1.

¹⁷⁹ Nancy, *The Coming Community*, 37; 36.

herself while simultaneously destroying what she once was. The result is a kind of corpse-like androgyny. Shamsa emerges from the silk cocoon having shed her former corpulence, a svelte vampire silhouette of waxen skin “like old, tarnished gold,” “bilious” green eyes, and a “blood-filled bruise” for a mouth.¹⁸⁰

Niqula’s own predilection for cocooning in bolts of silk alerts the reader to the gradual undoing of his own gender identity, one of many symptoms of his body’s deteriorating physical integrity. His normally thin and sickly frame grows bloated; he acquires pendulous breasts, while his belly swells, concealing his sex. Barakāt draws a pregnant homology between the body’s metabolic fires, and the decomposition of a corpse, making it difficult to determine which is responsible for these invidious changes. Indeed, Niqula himself grows steadily consumed by a strange and furious metabolism of multiple symptoms and significations. He is gnawed by an insatiable hunger which Barakāt charts through detailed lists of the items he ingests. Delicate meals of fruit, bird’s eggs and roquette give way to “plants or crawling things that cross the floor...almost nothing repels [him].”¹⁸¹ He is also frequently overtaken by a fever associated with sexual longings for Shamsa, whose absent body “bears down” on him, filling “every organ,” but which also resonates with a sickness he suffered as a child. On one particular occasion, Niqula wraps himself up in linen to soothe his burning head, a fabric with curative properties also used as “the shroud of the dead.”¹⁸² The signifiers attached to his underground sanctuary shift, initially termed a “palace” whose walls Niqula drapes in silk, but which later becomes his

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 153.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 138.

¹⁸² Ibid., 58.

“burrow,” and finally, “the hole.” The apex of human sovereignty slips imperceptibly into the animal as a way-station toward death.

Co-presence

In the wartime city, meaning, as a system permitting the readability of experience, is liquidated. Without the benefit of this cognitive map, an uncertain co-presence is thrust to the foreground. Nancy describes co-presence as our mutual presentation to each other, a co-existence that precedes subjective existence. There is no a priori meaning for humanity, no respect for man’s sovereignty can taken for granted. However, that is not to say that the narrative descends into nihilistic absurdity. Rather, emergent scenes compose themselves, “*something* throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable.”¹⁸³ The human animal makes sense of his terrain by tapping into affective currents; relationships with other beings that come into view must be renegotiated with each new configuration in his company or environment, when things snap into place and momentarily cohere. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Niqula’s interactions with the dogs that inhabit his area, non-humans that are nonetheless his closest peers.

The downtown district where Niqula makes his burrow is nearly devoid of human presence. In fact, humanity, albeit in a dehumanized, military form, makes up the un-traversable boundaries of his territory. The appearance of other people generally means he has strayed dangerously outside his bounds. The jittery snap-judgments that govern the war mean that these humans are unapproachable, and are perceived more like machinic elements or architectural facts than potential interlocutors. Niqula finds himself blissfully without peer, with the exception of

¹⁸³ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 1.

another set of scavengers: a pack of street dogs. He first encounters them unexpectedly as he is hunting for food; perceived on the periphery, they are howling and aggressive. Travelling at speed in a churning, amorphous mass, much of the blinding terror these beasts inspire stems from Niqula's uncertainty about them. He cannot "make out [their] number," and their species is indeterminate. Whereas in strength they seem comparable to two giant lions, the noise they emit resembles the lowing of bulls; their movements through the streets are "choreographed like a school of fish, as if something—an electric wave—had shot through the air and hit them all at once."¹⁸⁴ Are they wolves, or merely domestic dogs, gone feral in the war zone? Engaged in some manner of dreadful dog-battle, the biggest emerges dragging "an indistinct mass with his jaws" which they tear apart rapaciously. What appears to be a dog-corpse, "fallen in battle," Niqula perceives at a second glance, to be a human head.¹⁸⁵ Did they track somebody through the abandoned streets, bringing down their human prey? Or do these dogs only devour cadavers?

Significantly the dogs are referred to as "*hum*" a collective plural normally reserved for humans, sometimes referred to as intelligent (*'aqlī*) plurals. Use of the human plural indicates Niqula's mental individuation of these canine adversaries, and his acute apprehension over their intelligence as he tries to anticipate their actions. Mastering his terror, Niqula resolves to communicate with them in order to negotiate an "accord, a possible symbolic code by which we could begin our coexistence peacefully in this, God's wide world."¹⁸⁶ But again, it is unclear what kind of semiotic system might be common to both man and beast on this non-anthropomorphized terrain. As the avatar of a radical alterity, the animal's reaction toward the

¹⁸⁴ Barakāt, 103.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 50

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 102.

human is uncertain. Niqula's deliberations hinge on the question of savagery versus domestication. If they are ordinary dogs, as opposed to savage wolves, perhaps an understanding of human order might linger as a relic of their former domestication: "in some corner of their memory must linger a residue of images that remind them of humans' undoubted dominion over them, images of their submission and obedience to us."¹⁸⁷ Ironically, his desire to assert human mastery leads him to adopt the dogs' territorial practices. He pisses out along the periphery of his area to mark his domain, and drops onto all fours, sniffing for the scent of urine to see if the lead dog had marked Niqula's home as part of his turf.

For Deleuze and Guattari, every pack has its point of entry in "an exceptional individual" on the edge of the multitude, and "it is with that individual that an alliance must be made in order to become animal."¹⁸⁸ This anomalous creature is described as "neither an individual nor a species...but a phenomenon of bordering."¹⁸⁹ Rather than fully subjectivized, personal feelings, this relationship with the anomalous is ruled by a pre-subjective affect. In this case, it is the head of the pack, a particular white dog that begins to appear in the vicinity of Niqula's shop alone, who distinguishes himself as the anomalous. The first sightings of this dog, who seems to be tracking Niqula, lying in wait, inspires blind terror, an irresistible impulse toward flight. His uncanny presence comes into view at those moments when Niqula is most secure, blithely planning his outings, or rapt in erotic daydreams of Shamsa. The dog is portrayed through an ominous ambiguity, at times merely as "*hua*"—him—and later "the beast." Upon further confrontations, however, Niqula asserts himself, and the relationship evolves. As the two stand

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 243.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 245.

together in a tense face-off, Niqula suddenly intuits that this shadowy beast is merely a “bad dog,” and therefore may be mastered according to human logic. After belting out a powerful howl to frighten him off, he reverts back to language, calling him a “son of a bitch.”¹⁹⁰

Then, utterly without warning, upon this dog’s next appearance the relationship has become fully subjectivized according to a hierarchical order between master and pet. This change is marked by a near-death event, in which Niqula apparently survives a mass execution. He awakes to find this dog licking his face, identifying Niqula from beneath a pile of corpses. In place of “him” or “the beast” the dog is abruptly introduced with a name Niqula has selected for him, Thalj. Thalj, it turns out, is motivated by his own memories, and a need for companionship:

He longed for a sociability that would resemble whatever had disappeared, one day, behind the roadblocks. Perhaps it was a longing for that owner who had abandoned him on one particular day, or had died and left him grudgingly. In me he found a creature who reminded him of the one who had gone off without saying goodbye.¹⁹¹

As this passage makes clear, humans are not the only socialized animals who crave companionship. Much like humans, dogs also demonstrate a degree of “play” on the sliding scale between the beastly and the divine, capable of predatory behavior, but also seemingly desirous of co-existence beside an other. Just as remarkably, although Niqula takes possession of Thalj through the symbolic act of naming, in this instance it is the dog who has effectively chosen the man from among a sea of corpses, and in doing so restored him to life.

Indeed, in spite of initial appearances, this new hierarchy reveals itself as merely the most recent aggregation of an ever-shifting pack. From “he” and “I,” Barakāt introduces a new shift to

¹⁹⁰Barakāt, 107.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 119.

the pronoun “we.” Here, Niqula and Thalj move together as an expression of joint vitality, running and jumping through the streets, drawing strength from their mutual expenditure of energy. They are drawn together in a powerful affect, Thalj taking the lead, “as if he binds me to his own body with a strong rope.”¹⁹² While these sessions are initiated by Niqula’s call, they are more animal than human, “like a pair of mad dogs,” howling together, and lapping up fresh water at the end of the race. However, the dynamics of this relationship must be actively maintained by force, suggesting that Niqula’s position vis-à-vis the dog is not that of an uncontested human master, he is instead the alpha male, the most powerful among peers in a pack. Thus, when Niqula’s endurance wanes and Thalj displays signs of a “showy aggression,” the underdog must be quickly disciplined with a sharp slap to the skull, lest he turn violent and usurp Niqula’s place.

Barakat has often used the figure of the dog in her novels to describe hierarchical pack-like tendencies in human society which became such a prominent feature of the war, promoting security and a sense of belonging through affiliation with an alpha male. Certainly this resonance is present in *The Tiller of Waters* as well, but I believe it would be reductive to claim that Niqula and Thalj’s relationship must be read as “symbolic” in only this manner. What I think is more essential, here, is the fluidity of co-presence. This relationship demonstrates that there is no one static tenor of association for persons among other beings—human or otherwise—based on an essential human identity.

Tilling the waters

In her commentary on the elements of fantastic in *The Tiller of Waters*, Sobhi Boustani reads the novel’s conclusion as an expression of “the anguish of a generation that powerlessly

¹⁹² Ibid., 136.

watched the disappearance of a capital and the contradictions of an elusive city that was always an enigma.” She remarks that “the future remains totally unknown, and we do not know what Beirut’s future looks like.”¹⁹³ In light of the nostalgia industry driving downtown’s reconstruction at the time the novel was written, however, this assessment appears much too cautious. Although *The Tiller of Waters* is both subtle and beguiling, I believe it nevertheless contains a powerful political message. Returning to the passage we began with, the revelation of Niqula’s death, we note that death is not experienced as oblivion, but an awakening. Rising from sleep, Niqula leaps out of his hole to find that all traces of the city have completely disappeared, replaced by a *tabula rasa*: “a horizontal expanse, leveled and paved over, its even surface unmarred by any stray objects or protrusions.”¹⁹⁴ Disoriented by this baffling vacuity, he attempts to regain his bearings by marching to the sea. On his way, he stumbles upon a massive concert venue, where a stage has been erected for Fairouz, a singer whose voice and likeness are synonymous with Lebanon. This concert, held in September 1994 to commemorate the rebirth of the downtown district, was all the more symbolic because it was the first performance Fairouz had given in Lebanon since the outbreak of the war. Though empty, the uniform arrangement of chairs, which “numbered in the tens of thousands” appear like the “block formations of infantry.”¹⁹⁵ Caught in the beam of a spotlight that suddenly illuminates, Niqula sits in one of the chairs, waiting for the show to begin. Periodically he perceives “a calm layer of water

¹⁹³ Boustani, 234. Translation mine.

¹⁹⁴ Barakāt, 174.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

submerging this entire paved expanse” which fills him with a powerful urge to rise and “run in all directions, to till it well.”¹⁹⁶

This symbolically pregnant passage clearly relates to the novel’s title, and also to the Borges quote with which the novel opens, which speaks of a poet’s hymn to lost Phoenicia;

I chanted the purple of Tyre, our mother. I chanted the works of those who discovered the alphabet and tilled the waters. I chanted the burnt sacrifice of the renowned queen. I chanted the masts and oars...

and the piercing agonies...¹⁹⁷

Picking up on the exploitation of labor contained in this passage, Dyer reads this tilling in relation to marginalized workers like Shamsa, whose performance of painful, unrecognized menial labor provides the material basis for civilizational glories. I do not dispute this reading, but would like to elaborate an alternative interpretation that Dyer gestures towards, but does not develop, “the possibility of widespread human delusion.”¹⁹⁸ As we noted earlier, in Niqula’s stories, the world-inaugurating activity of weaving has a linguistic dimension, such that the storyteller is understood as a weaver of words. Likewise, in the same passage, Niqula defines “planting and tilling” as “the weaving of life, the coming and going, like the movements of a loom.”¹⁹⁹ Weaving, tilling, and storytelling all come to be seen as cognates in relation to the production of meaning. The concert, though empty, is awaiting a vast audience, “they must be celebrating,” Niqula thinks, as

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 175.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., v.

¹⁹⁸ Dyer, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Barakāt, 128.

he is seated.²⁰⁰ This stage, with its disciplined rows of seats, combines powerful valences of militarism, nationalism, and capitalism, while the spotlight apparatus captures the audience before the spectacle, blinding them against the rising sea. In the urge to till the smooth water, we see the powerful human drive to erect systems of meaning, in the guise of religion or nation, in order to navigate life's uncertain terrain—even after such categories have been exposed as dangerous figures of an empty formalism. Thus, in lieu of opening the nation to a community of singularities capable of embracing the difference of an outsider like Shamsa, post-war Lebanon retained reified identities, such as confessional categories, as a definitive aspect of civic life. As for the nostalgic spectacle of downtown Beirut, the “branded” authenticity showcased in this district is exposed as a new configuration of the same capitalist and nationalist forces that produced the civil war in the first place.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 175.

Conclusion: Towards a politics of compassion

In the foregoing pages, we have been concerned with exposing the constructedness of the Humanist “human” by examining how this figure is arranged by narrative, and how it may also be compromised, or undone, when the structural conditions for that arrangement are dissolved. Because our examination has been undertaken through the analysis of novels produced both within, and in response to the context of a notoriously absurd, vicious, and wasteful civil war, it becomes all the more urgent that we address the question of a possible ethics in the absence of the “human.” Perhaps the best point of departure would be to ask how to speak of this animal formerly understood as “human” in the absence of an ontology or moral prescription.

When speaking in the most generic sense, people refer to themselves as “human beings.” And yet, as Steven Connor remarks, “no human being can simply be, and leave it at that.”²⁰¹ Rather, humans engage with their world, and the nature of their engagement is largely determinate of their being. This is what Agamben has identified as the human’s distinguishing feature—whereas other animals can only fulfill “their specific potentiality” the human stands before a plurality of potentialities, including its own “impotentiality.”²⁰² It might therefore be more appropriate, Connor continues, to refer to humans as “becomings.”²⁰³ As a becoming, the human is always caught up in a process of development, a continually unfolding change on-going in the present, yet directed toward the future. However, insofar as “becoming” denotes “a development that is taking place in as well as from me,” its evolving destinations are determined

²⁰¹ Steven Connor, “Forward: Coming to Be” *Becoming Human*, Sheehan ed. (London: Praeger, 2003) ix.

²⁰² Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality” *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 182.

²⁰³ Connor, x.

by a combination of conscious volition and other elements, subconscious or pre-subjective, that play their role undetected by the conscious self.²⁰⁴ For Sheehan, humanness is performative rather than essential, thereby implying that there are other “becomings” that one might adopt. Indeed, the Lebanese war novels we have considered here suggest that the Humanist ‘human’ represents only a narrow sliver on a wide spectrum of possible modes of becoming.²⁰⁵ And yet, if there is truly nothing necessary about the human animal, does that mean an ethical engagement with the world becomes radically unavailable?

At this point, I must show my hand and acknowledge Ken Seigneurie as my undeclared interlocutor all along. His extensive work on the Lebanese civil war novel shares many of the concerns of this thesis—an interest in stylistic innovation in the war context and its impact on subjectivity; in abjection, ruins and remainders; and crucially, in the potential within aesthetic works to effect a meaningful ethical intervention. However, our analytical assumptions sharply diverge over the question of humanism.²⁰⁶ On the basis of his belief that anti-humanism and ethical commitment are antithetical, Seigneurie maintains that Lebanese authors of the civil war and post-war period retained their commitment to “universal human dignity,” which he defines as

²⁰⁴ Ibid., ix-xi.

²⁰⁵ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, 192.

²⁰⁶ Part of our differences, however, are no doubt semantic since Seigneurie only admits the most radical refusal of non-contingent value as “consistent anti-humanism,” while the rest is “disingenuous” (see footnote 10., p. 52). Compare Terry Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*: “It is quite clear that one can be a humanist in some...senses and not in others. Almost nobody is anti-humanist in the sense of urging that other people should be boiled alive, though quite a lot of people are anti-humanist in the sense of considering that human agents are best seen as the products of social systems rather than as the producers of them...” On the other hand, Seigneurie does not hold his working conception of “humanism” to the same all-or-nothing constraints. As his argument develops, it appears that the “humanism” of his authors may be quite minimal indeed.

“an effect of self-autonomy and self-responsibility.”²⁰⁷ Although obviously these two supposed qualities were undermined, if not decimated during the war, he claims that the authors nonetheless continued to look to human dignity as “a normative concept...vision of what was or ought to be.”²⁰⁸ However, in counterdistinction to their Western counterparts, these Arab humanists refrained from claiming an ontology for man. Seigneurie attributes this distinction to Arab humanism’s distinctive roots in the ‘Abassid court, where it was understood as “*Adab*,” meaning “refined manners” and encompassing “correct demeanor, comportment, and diction,” a matter of culture rather than essence.²⁰⁹

Never mind the apparent inconsistencies in Seigneurie’s argument here, which locates “an essential human dignity” in a humanness that he then defines as performative. What makes this claim truly incongruous with my readings, particularly of Khoury and Barakāt, is the fact that by defining the human meritorious of dignity as the “well-mannered” *Adab* subject, Seigneurie locates it within a narrow margin of culturally-determined dictates, especially in regards to logos. Jāhīz, one of the most prolific and widely-read exponents of classical *Adab*, identifies language as the distinguishing feature of the human animal, describing it as an “eloquent” (*faṣīḥ*) animal, or one that uses clear language, as opposed to other “mute” (*ā’jam*) species, a word that also means one who speaks Arabic incorrectly, or a foreigner.²¹⁰ Ghādah Sammān’s protagonist certainly might identify with this literary humanism, as evidenced by her overriding concern for preserving authentic voices contained in libraries and manuscripts—although, here again I would argue that

²⁰⁷ Seigneurie, “Annoiting with Rubble: Ruins in the Lebanese War Novel” 51-2.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²¹⁰ Jāhīz, *Al-Hayawān*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1969) 31.

she views these voices as more essential than performative. However, she would reject the notion of maintaining “good manners” in order to retain her humanity. Rather, she maintains that moral conventions ought to be forsaken when survival is at stake, and indeed manners may prevent the subject from attaining the fullness of its freedom. As for Khoury and Barakāt, are more explicitly engaged in eliciting compassion for precisely what appears to be *inhuman* according to *Adab*: the subaltern subject not fully in possession of/possessed by logos, or not at all. This figure’s speech is minoritarian, incomprehensible, or ‘expressed’ as a pregnant silence. For example, Yalo’s vulnerability addresses us precisely to the degree that it stutters, leaves sentences unfinished, or crafts its idiosyncratic poetry. Eloquence requires induction into the language of the hegemon, necessarily enacting a violence that either destroys the subject, as in the case of Shamsa, or leaves behind an inassimilable remainder.

Affect theory does not comment much on human dignity; rather, it is concerned with the consequences of potentialities, human and non-human, and with receptivity. For Spinoza, the capacity for action stands in direction relation to the capacity to be affected: “the mind’s power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body’s power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies.”²¹¹ Engagement and agency, in this model, cannot be thought without an openness that also critically implies vulnerability. For Al-Sammān’s protagonist, acceding to an animalistic embodied state allows her to embrace a kind of self-empowering vitalism, finding the courage to take action in spite of the war’s vicissitudes. In effect, she goes beyond the confines of her merely human self, the self bound to habit and beholden to social strictures, but in a Nietzschean manner that is romantically self-affirmative.²¹² Unfortunately, if

²¹¹ Michael Hardt, Forward to *The Affective Turn*, x.

²¹² Paul Harrison, “Corporeal remains: vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world,” *Environment and Planning A* 40(2008) 427.

man is viewed as something that ought to be overcome, this leaves very little tolerance for failures, incapacities, and weakness.

Barakāt and Khoury, on the other hand, take an opposite route, attending to the hapless or vulnerable subject, and exhorting the reader to care for this subject and extend it some form of compassion. Although we find both Yalo and Niqula in the midst of murky moral existences, they are yet lovable because of their vulnerability, which exposes them precisely to the degree that they engage in the world. In this engagement they open themselves up to affective contagion; as the aperture of that opening grows too wide, the information received by the sensorium becomes impossible for it master. This systems overload causes these subjects to become perilously permeable, unable to control the rate of exchange between organism and world. In Paul Harrison's words, these authors attend to "times when this synthetic activity [of meaning and signification does] not happen, and when the everyday flow and exchange of meaning stutters and abates and actions go awry."²¹³ In other words, experience exceeds the capacity of the subject to absorb what is happening, forestalling the critical process of composing both self and world into a legible narrative, productive of meaning. For Yalo, in spite of all the turbulence and traumas he has lived through, it is the unexpectedly stupefying experience of love that throws him most powerfully into this state of haplessness, a love that penetrates and undoes him from within, making him feel "as if [his] spinal column were coming apart."²¹⁴ Just as he is affected, so too he affects Shirin, who finds herself able, for a brief moment, to engage in a relationship that quite simply does not make sense for a woman of her social milieu. Likewise, in *The Tiller of Waters*, it is Shamsa's presentation of her sexual maturity to Niqula, through the

²¹³ Ibid., 425.

²¹⁴ Khoury, *Yalo* 20.

display of a new and exotic style of dress, that unveils his sexuality, drawing it open. In this moment, she activates within him a fierce metabolism of hunger and sexual longings which, after the beloved's departure, becomes a form of obliteration; the incandescent body smoldering into ash.

When describing a field of ethics in the break-down of regimes of meaning, Harrison, building on Levinas, asserts:

In describing the corporeal existent as always already open or exposed in some way beyond its will and intentions, vulnerability describes a thoroughly social body; however, and crucially, this is a sociality antecedent to any identity and recognition. It is rather a sociality of proximity.²¹⁵

In proximity or co-presence, each being shares the border of its finitude with alterity, such that its being is determined by not by an essence, but a being-together. Not in a fixed binary relationship, but through a sharedness or co-presence that is always open to re-configuration and change. There is an indeterminacy, then, along that border, which Nancy calls its *clinamen*, the unpredictable motion between finite beings. It is along this limit that each one is presented to an other, forming not a homogenous community, but as an assembly of singularities. Sense, rather than meaning, can have its own profound significance. Far from a morally bankrupt nihilism, this is a mode of ethics that lies beyond the optic of Humanism, and perhaps one with far more compassion and tolerance of difference than what has been built under the aegis of Humanism.

²¹⁵ Harrison, 425.

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This thesis was typed by the author.