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Subjects of the Global:
An Aesthetic and Historical Inquiry into Neoliberal Change in Palestine, Israel and France 1945-
2010

By

Kfir Cohen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2014

Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

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Professor Daniel Boyarin, Co-Chair

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The dissertation proposes a new historical understanding of Palestinian, Israeli and French-Algerian (Beur) literary imagination beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. This line of thought concentrates on the relationship between literary production and state formation, and in so doing contests and at times rejects the historical and aesthetic categories of post-Zionism and postcolonial studies, which privilege nationalism and its ideological content. Taking a new direction, the dissertation advances two claims. First, I argue that to understand changes in literary form, as well as the conditions for the emergence of aesthetic autonomy we need to account for the changing conjuncture of global capital, national political forms and the entry of immigrant population into civil society. I maintain that as economic liberalization processes separate the categories of the personal and the political, whether in a nationalist or ethnicized communities, civil society, as the site of the private, emerges as a semiautonomous third term, providing the ground and forms of literary imagination. My inquiry is then attentive to the consequences of privatization - establishment of NGOs in Palestine after the 1993 Oslo Accords, liberalization in Israel beginning in 1985, and the shift of the Algerian community from immigrants to citizens in France in the early 1980s - and understands them as moments of historical and aesthetic transformation. Second, as the sphere of private life (civil society) is separated from the sphere of the political (state), the conditions for “aesthetic autonomy” in Immanuel Kant’s sense of an aesthetic activity lacking a concept emerge. For if in the first historical moment the immediacy of the “the political” provided the determinate concept, or universal, for the literary work, in the second moment the social separation of the “political” from the “private” allows for the indeterminate relation between the particular and the universal, akin to reflective (aesthetic) judgments in Kant’s sense.

In Palestine (Ch. 1), I trace the changes in literary political imagination as Palestine enters the global network of foreign capital flows. Such changes are associated with the creation of proto-state institutions such as the Palestinian National Authority (PA), but more importantly with the constitution of a professional civil society in the form of foreign funded NGOs. Such changes initiated a symbolic separation between the political and civil spheres and correspondingly reoriented the literary gaze. As a civil activity, separated from the Palestinian national struggle, now novels not only imagine Palestine through the

individual lives of private citizens gazing into the political as a separate sphere, they are also written *for* a global rather than a Palestinian readership. Comparing between Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns (al-Subar, 1976)* and the 21st century works of Adania Shibli, I demonstrate how the latter develops figures of "inwardness" - diaries, letters, perception - that re-imagine the relation between the subject of civil society and the sphere of the political.

In Israel (Ch. 2, 3), I trace the shift from Zionist-centric to a neoliberal imagination through readings in Shimon Ballas's trilogy *Tel-Aviv East*, written in installments between 1950s and the 1990s. Following new globalization studies on Israel, I show that since 1985 the liberalization of the Israeli economy altered the statist model and brought about the autonomization of civil society in which private interests began operating separately from the state. Drawing from these studies, I argue that such a structural transition concomitantly altered both social subjectivities and the manner in which Israeli society is imagined. In Ballas's first and second installments, *The Transit Camp* and *Tel-Aviv East* (1950s; 1960s) we see how the struggle between the Zionist state and the Mizrahi subaltern constitutes the spatio-temporal dimensions of the world such that the outcome of the struggle is bound up with the fate of the novelistic world and its space-time. In comparison, the third installment, *Outsiders* (1990s), imagines a world where characters meet each other not as political subjects but as private producers and distributors of texts on the grounds of a cultural industry allegorized as the Israeli society as a whole. With the evacuation of the temporality of political organization, the novel takes a synchronic temporality, a spatial urban mapping based on the principle of paradigmatic equivalence where all characters meet each other as equivalent identities.

In France (Ch. 4, 5), I argue that the shift of the Algerian immigration from the category of "migrant labor" devoid of political rights to the category of "citizen" in the 1980s concomitantly altered the nature of their literary production. If the post-1945 generation was exclusively inscribed in the category of labor and in the aesthetic category of "testimony" in which no separation exists between the body of the immigrant and his speech, then with the entry into the French state and the separation of the private from the political, work from culture, intellectual from manual labor, the conditions for the autonomy of the signifier emerged. This change is most evident in the generic shift from Mehdi Charef's picaresque novel *Tea in the Harem (Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed, 1983)* to Azouz Begag's bildungsroman *Shantytown Kid (Le gone du Chaâba, 1986)*.

Subjects of the Global:

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Kfir Cohen

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Introduction

Two Claims

In *Subjects of the Global* I propose a new aesthetic and historical understanding of Palestinian, Israeli, and French-Algerian (Beur) literature written in the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century. To be sure, such an understanding does not aim to provide a full literary history of these literatures, but rather the historical concept and aesthetic categories for such a history.¹ In the broadest terms, I advance the argument that to understand changes in literary form, as well as in the conditions for the emergence of aesthetic autonomy we need to account for the changing configuration of global capital, state forms, and the entry of immigrant population into civil society. At the heart of this inquiry, developed most explicitly in Chapters 1, 3, and 4, lies the first and historical claim, grounded in the work of social scientists in Palestine, Israel, and France,² that global processes, post-1973, redefine the relation between the private and public spheres.³ These changes bring about the emergence of new autonomous civic and private relations, which affect the manner subjects imagine their worlds, and specifically their relation to public life. Such an inquiry is then centered accordingly around specific and delimited historical moments of civic autonomization and is attentive to the manner in which the establishment of NGOs in Palestine after the 1993 Oslo Accords, liberalization in Israel beginning in 1985, and the transformation of the Algerian community from immigrants to citizens in France in the wake of the financial crisis of 1973 all alter the division between political (i.e., concerning the state/national movement) and private relations. Philosophically and politically, I understand this new division as the historical emergence of not only new forms of “particularity,” but also of an indeterminate relation between particularity and universality, i.e., private and political life. By “indeterminacy” I mean that civic and private life are no longer directly determined or subsumed by political relations and can give themselves, very much like the modern artwork, the law of their life or form. This line of thought shifts the object of inquiry from the nation to the state and in so doing contests and at times rejects the historical and

¹ Here I follow Fredric Jameson’s own attempt at developing such a “concept” for European literature. See his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*, 1981, p.12.

² In Israel, see especially Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled (eds.) *The New Israel: Peacemaking and Liberalization*, 2000; Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem*, 2010. In Palestine, see Rema Hammami, “NGOs: The Professionalization of Politics.” *Race and Class* 37.2 (1995): 51-63, “Palestinian NGOs Since Oslo: From NGO Politics to Social Movements?” *Middle East Report* 214 (Spring 2000): 16-48; Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, International Organizations and Local NGOs*, 2005; Benoît Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society: Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and to Exclude*, 2009. In France, see Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs: Chronique d’un mouvement avorté*, 1992; Mogniss H. Abdallah and Le Réseau No Pasaran. *J’y suis, J’y reste! Les luttes de l’immigration en France depuis les années soixante*, 2000; Catherine Withol de Wenden and Rémi Leveau, *La bourgeoisie*, 2007.

³ I here allude to Fredric Jameson’s essay “Third World Literature in the Time of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88. If Jameson argues generally that in third world countries the private and the public spheres overlap, I propose that this fits the condition of Israelis, Palestinians, and Beurs only until the 1980s, and the 1990s, after which we see the development of a symbolic separation between the spheres. Jameson’s argument was contested by Aijaz Ahmed in the case of India, but I find its general proposal suitable to the literatures studied here. Further, it is important to remember that as much as we should be cautious about generalizing Jameson’s claim so also cannot Ahmad’s argument for India be taken to be a general objection. See Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory.’” In *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures*. Verso: New York, 1992, pp. 95–122.

aesthetic categories of post-Zionism and postcolonial studies, which privilege nationalism and its ideological content.⁴

The second intertwining claim thinks this historical change in aesthetic categories and literary forms. Here I argue that the new indeterminate political relation between Palestinians, Israelis, and Beurs and their respective states has an affinity with the concepts of the aesthetic and reflective judgment in Immanuel Kant's understanding, an indeterminacy that procures the autonomy of aesthetic objects and their distinction from conceptual and practical language.⁵ Thus, I propose that in the same manner that subjects achieve autonomy from direct, or determinate political *relations*, an autonomy that fundamentally alters their world, so also literature achieves autonomy from direct, or determinant political *meaning*, which alters the imaginary worlds we encounter in literary texts. Although I develop fully this line of argument only in the Palestinian Chapter (Ch.1), I see in the historic emergence of autonomous forms of civil life in Palestine, Israel, and France (for Beurs) the condition of possibility, again in Kant's sense, for aesthetic autonomy and new imaginary worlds.⁶ Put most explicitly, in this inquiry, aesthetic autonomy is not a property of the artwork as it is for Theodor Adorno, for example, but of historical political conditions, which is to say of historico-political time.⁷ And it is this time that also conditions the time of the artwork, as I specifically show in Chapter 3.⁸ I call this shift in aesthetic categories a shift from heteronomy to autonomy. To be sure, heteronomous conditions (political or economic) persist but they appear as an "other" *within* autonomy and autonomous worlds, and it is this new contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy that underlies new imaginary worlds.

Correspondingly, such a historical shift in aesthetic categories brings about new literary forms, which in their most abstract, i.e., in terms of space and time, constitute what I call imaginary worlds. Here the historical and theoretical levels of this inquiry find their significance and import on the level of literary form, and especially in types of omniscience, narrative structure, and spatio-temporal categories. As I explain in Chapters 1, 3, and 5 two key characteristics of globalization and civic autonomy are the textualization of time and social life, and the displacement of political antagonism from a constitutive condition *of* the world to a local (fetishized) figure *in* the world, which in its most profound shifts universality from time to language. The emphasis on "imaginary

⁴ This is especially true for Israeli literary studies. See Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*, 2002; *Ha-sipur veba-leom* [*The Story and the Nation*], 2007; Hannan Hever, Yehouda Shenhav and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (eds.) *Mizrahim be-Yisra'el: 'iyun bikorti mebudash* [*Mizrahim in Israel: A New Critical Study*], 2002.

⁵ To a certain degree, I follow here Terry Eagleton's account of the emergence of the concept of the Aesthetic in 18th century Germany. See his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 1990. See also, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 2000.

⁶ To be sure, these conditions are not transcendental but historical. On this matter see Kant's definition of critique as an inquiry into the "ground" of judgments. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1998, pp. 436; 507.

⁷ Adorno identifies the emergence of aesthetic autonomy with the emergence of the division of manual and intellectual labor, finding its earliest manifestation in Greek antiquity. Such a conception pervades Adorno's major and minor writings, but see his explicit formulation of aesthetic autonomy in his *In Search of Wagner*, 2005, pp. 71-2. Only with such an ahistorical conception can Adorno and Max Horkheimer find aesthetic autonomy in their famous reading of the Sirens scene in the *Odyssey*. See their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002, pp. 35-62. See my discussion of Adorno's conception of aesthetic autonomy in Chapter 3. For a short discussion of the implausibility of aesthetic autonomy in ancient Greece see Simon Goldhill, "Literary History without Literature: Reading Practices in the Ancient World," in Christopher Prendergast (ed.) *Debating World Literature*, 2004, pp. 175-196.

⁸ Further, unlike Adorno for whom autonomy is achieved *once and for all* with the division of labor, I contend that as much as autonomy emerges it can also be lost when the conditions procuring it change. Having no recourse to non-Capitalist or non-European contexts, it could be said that Adorno's conception of art is ill-suited for understanding the literature discussed here in the pre-globalization moment. For this reason I turn to Walter Benjamin's conception of the storyteller, which proposes what I call a *heteronomous* aesthetic, although I do not adopt his conclusion that such modes of narration are lost in modernity. Rather, as long as heteronomous conditions continue into modernity (here, mainly political conditions) such modes of narration continue as well.

world” is meant as a complement to “literary style” and allows thinking history and literature together without collapsing one into the other, understanding the former as a condition (in Kant’s sense) or limit (in Hegel’s) and the latter as an imaginary world presupposing such a condition without however representing it as such.⁹ With a few important modifications, such an inquiry is continuous with those of Pierre Macherey, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek and specifically with their critical, non-positivist conception of the relation between conditions of possibility and social and aesthetic phenomena.¹⁰

⁹ For Kant see footnote 6 above. For Hegel’s conception of limit see *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 2010, p. 147.

¹⁰ See Pierre Macherey, *Theory of Literary Production*, 2006; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 1981; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989.

Historical Change

1. *Globalization, Neoliberalism and a New Configuration of Private and Public Spheres*

Scholars using the term “globalization” mean, in the broadest sense possible, a shift in the political, economic, and social structures of the world, as well as technological developments, especially in media, which in turn bring about a similar shift in categories of thought and imagination. Thus, “globalization” designates a reciprocal or dialectical relation between a new historical reality (object) and new ways of thinking and feeling (subject). There is an ongoing debate as to whether globalization is new or not, but those who insist on its novelty date it to the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the cold war.¹¹ Continuous to some extent with development studies and systems theory of the 1960s and 1970s, studies about globalization in the social sciences rose during the 1990s.¹² Social scientists critiqued previous social theory grounded in the notion of closed systems, internal development, and center-periphery relations and developed more lateral, but always uneven, concepts of economic, social and cultural reciprocity.¹³ In literature, debates over globalization are continuous, albeit in a different modality, with discussions over postmodernism and postcolonial studies predicated on the shift from fordism to post-fordism, colonization and decolonization respectively.¹⁴ Advancing conceptions of circulation and international and global interdependence, scholars contest the autonomy and unity of national culture, but at the same time qualify notions of cultural standardization by developing concepts of articulation and hybridity.¹⁵ Scholars also emphasize the emergence of non-national social subjects, especially immigrants and subaltern communities both as a global phenomenon and as one that challenges local national

¹¹ See for example, David Held and Anthony McGrew “The Great Globalization Debate: An Introduction,” in David Held and Anthony McGrew (eds.) *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* 2nd Edition, 2003, pp. 1-50; Fredric Jameson, “Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *Valences of the Dialectic*, 2009, pp. 435-455. Neil Larsen, “Theory Risk: Reflections on ‘Globalization Theory’ and the Crisis in Argentina,” *The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 23-40; Imre Szeman, “Globalization, Postmodernism and (Autonomous) Criticism,” in Petra Rethmann, Imre Szeman and William D. Coleman (eds.) *Cultural Autonomy: Frictions and Connections*, 2010, pp. 66-85.

¹² See early attempts to think globalization in Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment.” *Monthly Review* 18.4 (September 1966): 17-31; Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16.4 (September, 1974): 387-415.

¹³ See, for example, Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 1991; Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, 1992; Roland Robertson (ed.) *Global Modernities*, 1995; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 1996.

¹⁴ For postmodernism see, for example, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, 1991; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991. For postcolonial studies see, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 2006; Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims.” *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn, 1988): 1-35.

¹⁵ See for, example, Emily Apter, *Continental Drift: From National Character to Virtual Subjects*, 1999; Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, (eds) *The Cultures of Globalization*, 1998; Franco Moretti, “Conjunctures on World Literature,” in Christopher Prendergast (ed.) *Debating World Literature*, 148-162; Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, 1996. Immanuel Wallerstein, “The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?” in Anthony D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, 2011, pp. 91-106.

identity.¹⁶ Globalization is then a relatively new approach to social and cultural life and as such its concepts, scope, and claims are still being tested and contested.

My inquiry is written in the horizon of these expansive debates, accepting their principal tenet which maintains that since local phenomena, whether textual or social (e.g., national literature and film production; social, economic, and political relations) are tied to global occurrences, aesthetic objects can no longer be understood solely in relation to local conditions. This is why nationalism as an explanatory category is the object of critique in some of the chapters, especially in the Israeli ones (Chapters 2, 3) for it is by definition a local phenomenon that imposes local conceptual frameworks (the ideological content of Zionism, for example), while social life and cultural production is no longer intelligible in these terms alone.

However, “Globalization” designates not only the integration of the world and new theories of such integration. It also stands in as a euphemism for a pervasive capitalist/scientific ideology and a set of political and economic practices, tightly tied to the 1973 oil crisis and the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and England, maintaining that all natural and social life can and should be understood in economic market values and quantitative terms. Neoliberalism appears in the late 1970s but by the 1990s its political and economic aspects are “subsumed,” as David Harvey and others acknowledge, under the more encompassing term “globalization.”¹⁷ Although economic in nature, neoliberal practices affect political relations and redraw and redefine the sphere and role of the state and thus the very meaning of “politics”—a new configuration which, as I will show, has direct consequences for cultural production and literary criticism in Palestine, Israel and France. Harvey explains this historical configuration as a new relation between the state and capitalism:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices... Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum... Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common.¹⁸

[...]

The process of neoliberalization has... entailed much ‘creative destruction,’ not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers (even challenging traditional forms of state sovereignty) but also of divisions of labour, social relations... ways of life and thought... and habits of the heart.¹⁹

¹⁶ See, for example, Sylvie Durmelat, *Fictions de l'intégration: du mot beur à la politique de la mémoire*, 2008; Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Community in France*, 1997; Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in Anthony D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, 19-40.

¹⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2007, p.3. On this new configuration see also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical and Democratic Politics*, 2001, pp. 171-175. Naomi Klein discusses a similar subordination of public interest to economic private interest in her analysis of the Bush administration. See her *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 2007, especially 308-322. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all agree that globalization and neoliberalism designate the same critical object.

¹⁸ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 2-3.

¹⁹ Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 3.

The key term in Harvey's account which are most operative for this inquiry is "privatization," and the emergence of new forms of private life. While such forms of life can be said to emerge with capitalist modernization, perhaps in the most pronounced way in 19th century Western Europe, and are thus nothing new, what is here being stressed is not privatization *per se* but rather its new configuration with the political or public sphere. To be sure, due to different historical conditions, Palestinians, Israelis and Beurs experience globalization differently than Americans and Europeans, and I attend to this difference below. Thus, it is "globalization" as a new configuration of the political and the economic, state and market, private and public spheres that I take to be the new historical *condition of possibility* of cultural production, bringing about not only new literary forms but new aesthetic categories.

If globalization, especially in cultural and literary studies, has been associated with the concept of circulation, i.e., the circulation of styles, genres and themes and their local domestication, I am here upending the terms and thinking of the global circulation of political and economic *practices* and their local domestication, which in turn change the very ways of life and thus literature and imagination. Before moving to the specific details of globalization in Palestine, Israel and France, it is crucial to grasp the fundamental difference between the circulation of literary forms and of political and economic practices. If the 19th century novel and 20th century modernism, for example, could be conceived as what could be called "worldly forms," traveling from one place to the other and in turn allow those writers using them to leave their local states and turn worldly, now, with the traveling of worldly political and economic practices, it is the states themselves (the "local" itself) that turn worldly. In other words, globalization is not simply the entry of the "world" (and not simply the United States) into the "periphery" in the guise of commodities and cultural forms. Rather, globalization, in its neoliberal aspects, profoundly changes the meaning of the local and the world itself such that Israel, for example, can now be imagined as the world itself. This will entail in turn a new understanding of "circulation," for it presupposes a movement between discrete and different localities, while globalization erases such localities and produces new ones.

2. *Globalization and Neoliberalism in Palestine, Israel and France*

The effects of neoliberalism and globalization on cultural production in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia have received much attention in American and European academia, and my purpose here is not to import such accounts, but rather argue for the specificity or articulation of these global practices with local conditions in Palestine, Israel and France (for Beurs) which were mostly absent from literary studies. It is for this reason that each of the Parts discusses the moment before and the moment after globalization, offering a vertical and diachronic account, as it were, rather than translating neoliberalism into its aesthetic values and themes, an approach which would have posited a synchronic account.

Neoliberalism in the United States and Western Europe and the cases studies here can be said to be experienced in an obverse manner. For while in the former, neoliberalism is experienced unambiguously as a threat to the public sphere, a privatization of the state and its promise of generality, in the latter neoliberalism is ironically the enabler of a new civil sphere (allowing it separation from the state/national movement), which is being privatized at the same time. This is the reason why neoliberalism in the 1990s in Israel and Palestine was experienced as liberation from older forms of politics, enabling new political possibilities, while at the close of the first decade of the 21st century it is regarded justly as a threat to political and public life. This is specifically true

about Israel and Palestine, but needs to be more nuanced for Beurs. For in France neoliberalism follows the pattern of Western Europe, while Beurs only enter such a sphere with the accession to citizenship and new modes of work.

While “civil society” is a term that deserves a broader discussion, I here discuss it only in so far as it is the site of private relations. While I agree with a Marxist conception that the enabling condition of civil society as a site of private life is economic, I am more concerned here with the political aspect of such private lives, with the social world such a life inhabits, and the literary worlds it imagines. To anticipate the discussion below, although I understand “equivalence” as the underlying philosophical content of private life, I emphasize its political and imaginary significance rather than its economic ones. The equivalence inhering in civil society is then not only a matter of capitalist relations (for indeed Israel, Palestine and France were inscribed in such relations whether locally or globally even before the neoliberal change²⁰), but rather of the broader historical relation between capitalism and the state.

Palestine:

The Shift from a National Movement to Proto-State Institutions and International NGOs, 1948-1993 / 1993-

After the 1948 war between Israel and a few of its neighboring Arab states, Palestinian society was fragmented into several communities, most of which are still living in refugee camps.²¹ Historians describing this period talk about processes of disintegration and slow gradual rehabilitation, changing the nature of Palestine’s political, social and economic life.²² Within a decade there emerged a new national movement that, conjoined with other economic and social changes, redrew social spheres and revolutionized older social relations. In the early stages, this national movement was assimilated to pan-Arabist movements such as the Arab Nationalist Movement, but towards the end of the 1950s it crystallized into Palestinian organizations proper such as the Palestine National Liberation Movement.²³ Historian Ilan Pappé explains that only a few thousands Palestinian refugees engaged in armed struggle, but this popular development “revolutioniz[ed] the social structure of Palestinian society.... The young generation now took precedence over the older, patriarchal one; women began playing a more central role on the public stage; and the clans lost their dominance almost totally and were gradually replaced by the nuclear family.”²⁴

²⁰ To make this clear, there is no dispute today that Zionism was a movement enabled by European capital in the late 19th century, and that Zionists, even if racially biased, established capitalist relations in mandatory Palestine. This was simply centrist or statist capitalism, as I explain below. Similarly, although the local mode of production in Palestine was based on agriculture until the 1970s, Palestine has been a part of global capital probably since the entry of the British Empire into the Middle East in the mid-19th century. For a short historical discussion see Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*, 1996.

²¹ Of the 1.4 million Palestinians living in what was mandatory Palestine in 1948, 160,000 Palestinians remained in Israel while over 750,000-800,000 were displaced and have been living as refugees in TransJordan, the Gaza strip, Syria and Lebanon. See Samih K. Farsoun and Naseer H. Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History*, 2006, pp. 105-143.

²² See Ilan Pappé, *A History Of Palestine: One Land, Two People*, 2004, pp. 142-161; Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 2010, pp. 177-186; Naseer and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 105-122.

²³ Spelled *Fatab* in reverse to mean “victory” in Arabic.

²⁴ Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 152. For commentary on the transformation of social structures, see also Naseer and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 105-142; 175-206.

As I explain in Chapter 1, this revolution in “traditional” forms of socialization and political organization could not be understood simply as politics in the way we understand the work of political parties or even popular mobilization in democratic civil societies. Given the absence of stable state structures that erect durable symbolic divisions between social spheres, and the liminal conditions of Palestinians as refugees, such changes in political structures not only affect a longitudinal transformation, crossing diverse social spheres, they also make the very solidity of social boundaries more porous, potentially endowing every sphere with a public and political significance. This historical condition could be made clearer if, for heuristic purposes only, we appeal to Hegel’s conception of the modern state.

As is well known, in the third part of his *Philosophy of Right*, entitled Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*) Hegel divides the modern state into three spheres: the family, civil society, and the state proper, each with its own unique social relations and philosophical content.²⁵ For the sake of the discussion below, I translate these terms into the corresponding categories: personal, civic and political respectively. Now, in the family one is a “member,” and the relation to one’s family is one of immediate and undifferentiated totality. Here the ethical relation is constituted through obligation to other family members. Civil society is where such ethical obligation and immediacy are dissolved, and we arrive at the site of difference and particularity. Here there is an aggregate of pure private interests that still cannot recognize the interdependence of particulars, which exists only implicitly (in-itself). And finally, the state is the site on earth of the universal, of a universality that is aware of itself as such (for itself), as law and concept, towards which the ethical relation is again constituted rationally.

If we consider this theory, it could be said that between 1948 and the 1990s, Palestinian society is not comprised of three spheres, but of two, and that the absence of an autonomous civil society allows for a direct overlap of the personal and the political, of family and national movement. This historical condition is confirmed by Middle Eastern and European social scientists who conceive of Palestine as a “political society.”²⁶

I have already mentioned that I designate this period as a heteronomy in which life is directly influenced by political association. Correspondingly, aesthetic production is heteronomous as well, and is at odds with conceptions of art as an autonomous activity (sometimes associated with the West), receiving its most pronounced definition in Kant’s third Critique. I elaborate on this aesthetic category below.

After the 1993 Oslo Accords, Palestine enters into global networks of foreign capital investment. As Rema Hammami, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar explain, this period saw the creation of proto-state institutions such as the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), but more importantly the establishment of professional, foreign-funded NGOs, which initiated what could be called a symbolic separation between the political and civil spheres.²⁷ Now, it is important to acknowledge briefly the history of NGOs in Palestine. As Benoît Challand explains, “NGOs,” or mass-based voluntarist organizations existed in Palestine since the early 20th century, and were significantly increased in number after the 1967 war and occupation. To be sure, it is doubtful whether these associations can be called NGOs, as they lack a primary condition for one, which is the “G.” That is to say, in the absence of a government in Palestine, it is somewhat questionable whether such organizations functioned in the manner we understand NGOs today. However, the more pertinent point is that, according to Challand, such associations were not autonomous but rather

²⁵ G.W.F Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, 2008.

²⁶ See footnote 3 for bibliographical details.

²⁷ See footnote 3 for bibliographical details.

“subordinated to political parties.”²⁸ What has changed after 1993, especially in secular, left leaning NGOs is the source of funding, which now originates less in Arab countries and more in the international, or global community (including the World Bank, the US and Europe). This community, consonant with the neoliberal tendency mentioned by Harvey, promotes short term relief and development, curbing the role of political parties. Rema Hammami has described this process as the “depoliticization and professionalization” of NGOs.²⁹ As I show in Chapter 1, one such NGO, the A.M Qattan foundation, has been active in funding civic activities in Palestine, including the publication of several novels, including one by Adania Shibli, *Touch (Masaas)*. For purposes of comparison, I read this 2003 novel together with Sahar Khalifeh’s 1976 *Wild Thorns (al-Subar)* and discuss their aesthetic and formal differences in imagining the world.

To return to Hegel’s model’s it will be possible to say that after 1993 an autonomous or semi-autonomous civil sphere begins to emerge, and although it is always contested and threatened it acts as what could be called a *mediary* private space between the individual and the state, the personal and the political. This new “particularity” establishes precisely an *indeterminate* relation between the particular and the universal, in both the political and the aesthetic sense, and is then the social manifestation of the Kantian “reflective judgment” not in thought but in the world. Thus, in this period we see a shift in aesthetic categories – a shift from heteronomous to autonomous aesthetics which alters the imaginary worlds we encounter in Palestinian literature and, correspondingly, the location of Palestinian literature in the global distribution of aesthetic production. To be sure, this change does not mean that now all Palestinian novels are written in the same manner. On the contrary, there is still a fracture in aesthetic production, but its contours have now changed. The change in aesthetic categories is not a blanket term, but rather a shift in dominance, where an autonomous aesthetic now takes precedence over the heteronomous one.

Israel:

The Shift from Statism to Neoliberalism, 1948-1990 / 1990-

The social sciences in Israel today are mostly in agreement that the 1980s and especially 1985 that saw the implementation of the Emergency Plan for Economic Stabilization, were the years during which the social structure of Israel dramatically changed, opening a new age in the history of the state.³⁰ The first period, stretching from 1948 to the late 1980s, called the modern period, and the subsequent period called global, or neoliberal are distinguished by the different relation between state forms and civil society. Leading Israeli social scientists today, such as Gershon Shafir, Yoav Peled, Uri Ram and Michael Shalev, describe the first period, heir to the collectivist history of the Zionist movement, as “statist” (in French *étatisme*) in which political institutions, especially parties, are imbricated with economic ones, and thus limit the freedom and autonomy of civil society and its cultural production. The nature of the political here means that political space was divided rigidly by party lines; each party controlled not only the narrow domain of party life, but also a domain of cultural and economic life. One cannot exaggerate the importance of this condition to every aspect of life in Israel during this period. Here the high value of literature is tightly tied to the state through

²⁸ Benoît Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society*, 62.

²⁹ See footnote 3 for bibliographical details.

³⁰ See footnote 3 for details.

school curricula, party affiliated publishing houses, and many leading writers who are associated directly or indirectly with political forces.

As with Palestine, I designate this period as heteronomous for life itself is directly influenced by political association. Here, too, there is a tight overlap between the spheres of the personal and the political, the family and the state. Correspondingly, aesthetic production is heteronomous as well, that is, directly political (which should not be confused with “party-based politics,” as I explain below). This widely acknowledged fact would begin to suggest that since all literature written in this period, whether by so-called Mizrahi or Ashkenazi writers, writers critical or supportive of the Israeli state (and not simply of Zionism) is political almost by default the attribute “political” is insufficient to explain the difference between novels and their imaginary worlds. The problem lies in the abstraction of the meaning of the “political” and its reduction to political content, even if poetic. To understand this tendency, I note first that the tendency to attribute the adjective “political” to literary works themselves (rather than taking it as an attribute of historical time) is itself a consequence of the late 1980s privatization when such literary readings began to emerge. The privatization of literary criticism itself, now exercised on the grounds of a civil society, apart from direct political affiliation, projects its own relation to life on the history that preceded it. Thus, although such criticism is political, we have here two concepts of politics, the elaboration of which follows below. The more consequential difference is then not between political and non-political novels, Zionist and non-Zionist, but rather between critical or non-critical novels, in the Kantian sense of the term. If critique designates the conceptual operation that examines the conditions of phenomenal experience, literary texts bring to the phenomenal surface of their imaginary world the very conditions that constitute it.

Thus, the “political” during the first period simply means that the collective fate is directly present to individual life. Here I follow Fredric Jameson’s insight.³¹ However, the direct presence of collectivity does not necessarily mean that such novels are critical. Affirmative Zionist novels such as those of Moshe Shamir, one of the most well-known writers in the 1950s of Israel, are thoroughly political and collective and yet they cast what might be justly called an imaginary world mostly in conformity with the Zionist colonial project.

The second period begins in the late 1980s. Due in part to an inflation crisis, the government implemented in 1985 an Emergency Plan for Economic Stabilization through which aggressive longitudinal processes of privatization were carried out, releasing parts of the economy from state control and effectively separating the state from civil society. This change revolutionized Israeli society in almost every possible respect. Specifically, for the purposes of this inquiry, it had far reaching consequences for the production of culture, which saw a rise in new privately owned media, newspapers, and publishing houses, all of which were now acting not on the ground of the state, but on that of the market. Here we also see the decline in the value of literature, its trivialization in school curricula and the concomitant rise in the importance of film and film production. One cannot understand the recent efforts of the Israeli state to reproduce the nation, what is sometimes called neo-Zionism, without understanding that it is competing with the market and its economic values. Thus, if in the first moment the literary field was constituted *within* the political field, oscillating between support and critique, since the late 1980s, with the separation of the state from civil society, it is effectively moved to the market and the tensions within it are between commercial and non-commercial literature, rather than between Zionist and non-Zionist literary production. The significance of this transformation exceeds the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli nationalism as explanatory categories of literary forms, which have been the principal and almost exclusive focus of post-Zionist literary criticism.

³¹ See footnote 2 for details.

Here then it is possible to see the emergence of a sphere of private life that enters as a mediary term between the individual and the state, constituting an indeterminate relation between particularity and universality. As a consequence of this shift, we see the emergence of new imaginary worlds and especially new kinds of narrative temporalities. I demonstrate this aesthetic and historical change through Shimon Ballas' trilogy *The Transit Camp* (*Ha-ma'abara*) whose three installments were written in 1955, the 1960s and the late 1990s.³²

Algerians in France:

A Shift from Immigration to Citizenship, Loubards to Beurs, 1962-1986 / 1986-

The beginning of Algerian labor migration to France is customarily dated to the end of the 19th century, growing extensively after World War II due to the large-scale reconstruction of France.³³ After the end of the Algerian War in 1962 and until 1981 Algerian immigrants were mostly devoid of political rights, existing, as sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad argues, in a double isolation from Algeria and France.³⁴ Such a condition has bound their language to referentiality, relegating them to the categories of nature, subalternity, and testimony, which I call heteronomy.

In the course of time the temporary labor migration turned into permanent immigration and by 1968, a third of the Algerian community were living in France for some thirteen years, and their children, now educated in French schools, were designated as “La deuxième génération issue de l’immigration” (here: “second generation”).³⁵ This generation comes of age in the 1970s, at the end of the prosperous fordist post-war period (“Les trente glorieuses”) when France enters what some call the “postindustrial era,” neoliberalism, and the onset of a new stage of globalization.³⁶ As their parents were employed in those industries heavily impacted by the 1973 oil crisis and the ensuing processes of de-industrialization, immigrants and their families were experiencing a high rate of

³² The reason for the general indication “1960s” and “1990s” is due to the fact that the date of publication does not correspond to the date in which the manuscripts were completed.

³³ Georges Tapinos, *L’immigration Étrangère en France 1946-1973*. Travaux et Documents 71 (1974).

³⁴ Abdelmalek Sayad, “Les trois ‘âges’ de l’émigration algérienne en France.” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15 (June 1997): 59-79

³⁵ Sayad, “Les trois ‘âges’ de l’émigration algérienne.” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15 (June 1997): 59-79; Ahsène Zehraoui, *Les Travailleurs algériens en France: Etude sociologique de quelques aspects de la vie familiale*, 1976.

³⁶ French sociologist Alain Touraine was probably the first to use the term “post-industrial society.” “I believe that we are entering into a type of social situation defined by the growing ability of collectives to act upon themselves, especially in those places where power no longer resides in the imposition of forms of work but primarily, and mostly, in the setting of a way of life, forms of behavior, and needs. One could speak of a hyper-industrial society in the sense that large organizations, beyond the realm of production, slowly assert their domination over nearly all aspects of social life... If this hypothesis is correct, we must expect the emergence of new actors and new social conflicts everywhere.” Alain Touraine, *The Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Postindustrial Society*, 1988, p. 25. The book was published in French in 1984 and had direct influence on the conceptualization of the Beur movement by sociologist Adil Jazouli. Compare, however, Ernest Mandel: “This new period was characterized, among other things, by the fact that alongside machine-made industrial consumer goods (as from the early 19th century) and machine-made machines (as from the mid-19th century) we now find machine-produced raw materials and foodstuffs. *Late capitalism, far from representing a ‘post-industrial society,’ thus appears as the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time;* to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation... and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure. *Late Capitalism*, 1978, pp. 190-1, emphasis in original; cited in Fredric Jameson, “Foreword,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, p. xiv.

unemployment.³⁷ The reality of the immigrant population reaches a crisis with the rise of the nationalist agenda of the *Front National*, recurring deportations, and police violence. In the summer of 1981, this xenophobic atmosphere led into one the first spectacular episodes of urban violence post-1945, dubbed the “rodéos of Minguettes,” during which *banlieue* youth, Arab and non-Arab, burned 250 cars in greater Lyon. The youth were named *loubards*, *voyous*, *lascars* – hooligans and rogues. In October of that year, when such violence was in the background, a law was passed that allowed foreigners to form and join associations, a veritable step towards the political inclusion of Arabs in the French state, enabling what sociologist Saïd Bouamama called a shift from “Arabes en France” to “Arabes de France.”³⁸ Concomitantly, mostly in Paris, the “second generation” comes to be known as Beurs, which is said to be a double verlan inversion (arabe – rebeu – beur). “Beurs” gained national and historic significance thanks to the 1983 “Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racism” (“Marche des Beurs”).³⁹

Once such a shift into civil society occurs, we see also a shift into the categories subjectivity, autonomy and fiction. The shift from testimony to fiction is first discernible in the different journal culture of the generations. If the Algerian workers’ journals of the early and late 1970, such as *The Storm*, and *The Voice of the Algerian Workers* (Al-‘Ašifa; Şawt al-‘Umal al-Jazā’ryyn) were written in both French and Arabic and tended to prefer collective typical voices, then in the early 1980s “second generation” journals such as *Sans Frontière* and *Cosmopolis*, were written exclusively in French and saw the emergence of Beur subjectivity in the idiom of literary interiority. In fiction, I specifically discuss the emergence of Beur literary autonomy between 1983 and 1986 with the shift from Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archy Ahmed* cast as a picaresque novel featuring an illiterate band of subaltern rogues to Azouz Begag’s *Le gone du Chaâba*, cast as a Bildungsroman, and featuring a single literate Subject. To be sure, the shift from subalternity to subjectivity, testimony to fiction, is never complete, but rather projected into Beur fiction such that the autonomy and subjectivity of Beur characters arise out of the negation of immigrant and *loubard* heteronomy. I argue that such texts and tensions cannot be understood solely as a response to French nationalism or French identity, as is customary with current readings of Beur literature, but needs to be understood with reference to the shifts in the category of the subject and its relation to the state. Here it is possible to notice the persistence of heteronomous aesthetics in testimonies of the *sans-papiers* movement.

3. The Configuration of the Private and Public Spheres as Historical Condition of Possibility for Literary Production

³⁷ For studies of the history of immigrant labor see Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 1990, pp.221-243; Maryse Tripier, *L’immigration dans le classe-ouvrière en France*, 1990, pp.84-102 ; For sociological studies of the “second generation,” or Beurs see Maria Llaument, *La Détermination sociale de l’échec : les jeunes issus de l’immigration face à l’école et au travail*, 1985 ; Adil Jazouli, *L’action collective des jeunes maghrébins de France*, 1986; Adil Jazouli, *Les Années banlieues*, 1992; François Dubet, *La Galère: jeunes en survie*, 1987 ; For accounts of activists see, Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs: Chronique d’un mouvement avorté*, 1994; Mogniss H. Abdallah et Le Réseau No Pasaran, *J’y suis, J’y reste! Les luttes de l’immigration en France depuis les années soixante*, 2000; Saïd Bouamama, Hadjila Sad-Saoud and Mokhtar Djerdoubi, *Contribution à la mémoire des banlieues*, 1994; For more journalistic accounts see Ahmed Boubeker and Nicolas Beau, *Chroniques métissées: L’histoire de France des jeunes arabes*, 1986; Farid Aichoune, *Nés en banlieue*, 1991; For political and legal aspects see Catherine Withol de Wenden and Rémy Leveau, *La Beurgoisie*, 2007. For a short history of the designation ‘Beur’ and literary analysis see Sylvie Durmelat, *Fictions de l’intégration: Du mot Beur à la politique de la mémoire*, 2008; Alec G. Hargraves, “Immigration and Identity,” in *Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Community in France*, 1997.

³⁸ For the history and significance of the law see de Wenden and Leveau, *La bourgeoisie*.

³⁹ See Bouzid, *La marche: Traversée de la France profonde*, 1984. (No personal name is given)

Having outlined above the historical shift in the configuration of private and public spheres, I would like now to map this shift onto concepts so as to explain why this historical narrative is so important. Consonant with my first claim, I propose understanding the historical configuration of each period as the condition of possibility and/or limit of literary production. To explain what I mean by “condition” and “limit” I turn briefly to Kant’s first Critique and Hegel’s *Logic*.

Differently from the methods of his contemporaries, Kant’s critical philosophy sought to account for the *a-priori* conditions of knowledge or experience in general, or in other words, to account for the faculty of reason as such. The radical aspect of Kant’s critical philosophy is then given in the fact that it displaces the inquiry from the object (be it sensible or intelligible) to its conditions of possibility (be they logical, or ontological). In this way, as he explains, Kant seeks to avoid the dogmatic and skeptic approaches that quarrel over the object of this or that statement, and cut directly to what he calls its “ground,” on which both sides must agree irrespective of their differences. As he puts it, the critical method “does not consider the question objectively at all [i.e., whether a statement is true or not], but instead asks about the foundations of the cognition [i.e., the presuppositions] on which it is grounded.”⁴⁰

I argue that the historical configuration of private and public spheres, in the three contexts studied here, is such a condition or ground shared by writers irrespective of their stylistic differences. To be sure, while for Kant this ground is transcendental and conceptual, here it is historical and social. Following Kant’s displacement from object to conditions, and mapping “philosophical statements” on imaginary worlds, this would mean that the historical configuration should not be sought in the phenomenal world of novels (their object), but rather in the condition that they *presuppose* and due to which they spring to life in the manner that they do. The reason I use “manner” and not the more obvious “form” stems from my attempt to differentiate the stylistic and formal aspects of novels (the object of literary *criticism*) from their conceptual conditions (the object of literary *critique*). To be sure, these two are always connected, but they should not be conflated.

Before translating this condition into aesthetic and conceptual terms, and in order to avoid the transcendental aspect of Kant’s critique, I would like to stress the non-positive and immanent nature of the “historical condition” by turning to Hegel’s definition of “limit:”

Something is what it is only *within* its limit and *due to* its limit. Hence one must not regard the limit a something that is merely external to existence; rather it permeates existence as a whole. The construal of the limit as a merely external determination of existence is due to the conflation of the quantitative with the qualitative limit.⁴¹

The “limit” then is not posited outside phenomenon, but rather pervades it through and through without however appearing as such. In a way, the “limit” is the very meaning and identity of phenomenon rather than being outside of it. Here it is possible to map Hegel’s conception of the relation of limit to existence on the relation between historical configuration and literary production, respectively.

I would like now to introduce one further complication. If followed to its logical conclusion, the above discussion would seem to suggest two provisional and problematic conclusions: first, in each historical configuration there is only *one* limit or condition. Second, in a synchronic inquiry, looking at history as if from above, all historical conditions, irrespective of their content, are in principle *equivalent* to one another. These provisional conclusions, however elegant, are inaccurate.

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 507 (A484/B512).

⁴¹ G.W.F., Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 2010, p. 147, emphasis in original.

The fundamental problem with this kind of conceptual and historical theory is that it fails to historicize the change in the nature of the condition itself. Let us look closely at this conceptual attempt. By separating condition from phenomenon, this account posits two conceptual axes. Avoiding the structuralist or transcendental confusion, it subjects both condition and phenomenon to historical change, which here can take social or literary content. However, despite such a historical approach the two axes are a-symmetrical and this a-symmetry could be given in the couplet heterogeneity and homogeneity. It is quite clear that while we can have a plethora of styles and forms on the side of phenomenon (heterogeneity), we have unity in the condition (homogeneity). This means that the *concept* of condition as condition is not subject to historical change. In other words, such an approach historicizes the content of the condition (the configuration) but fails to account for the manner the content changes the concept itself. To correct this mistake, I propose that the change in the historical configuration of public and private spheres (a change in the world) changes the concept of condition (a change in historical categories).

Thus, I propose that the shift from a two-sphere society to a three-sphere society, as it were, is not an equivalent shift in conditions, but rather an unequal one. The qualitative difference between the first and second period is located in the heterogeneity of the condition. If in the first period there was one limit or condition to which all subjects and literary production were subjected, in the second we have two. If in the first period heteronomy was the condition underlying social and cultural life, in the second, although autonomy substitutes heteronomy as the dominant condition, heteronomy still lingers on and it is the *tension* between the two that defines this period. In more concrete terms, taking Israel as an example, if in the first period the state dominated social and cultural life, in the second we see the emergence of a constitutive tension between civil society and other heteronomous forms of life, the state itself being one of them. Thus, we see here two spheres of cultural production, one autonomous, the other heteronomous, but it is important to remember that the two are not positioned in an additive relation to one another. Rather, the autonomous sphere entered the default (dominant) position, and the heteronomous one competes with it and is seen as an anomaly and as something of the past. This has important consequences for cultural production, the concept of time and the position of Israeli literary production in the world, as I show below.

4. *Inequality and Equivalence as the Corresponding Concepts of Heteronomy and Autonomy*

In this section, I propose mediary concepts between the historical conditions outlined above and semantic conditions. I argue that the overlap between the personal and the political sphere, i.e., the determination of society by the state directly from above generates a field of unequal social relations, an inequality experienced as such and as absolute. This “state of mind” (in the double meaning of situation and the state) introduces then an absolute difference between Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, Algerians and French. This condition imposes the binary “Us vs. Them,” which, lacking a mediary third term, generates direct antagonisms and their corresponding concept of time, which finds its most elemental manifestation in the event.⁴² Now, before moving on, it is important to acknowledge how poststructuralist and postcolonial theory conceive of this absolute difference.

⁴² For a sustained discussion of antagonism and time, see Fredric Jameson, “The Valences of History,” in *The Valences of the Dialectic*, 2009, pp. 475-612.

Working with a model of linguistic difference, poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists (exemplified in Jacques Derrida and Homi Bhabha) conceive of this absolute difference as a mistake, or as a misrecognition on the part of the Subject.⁴³ Since they presuppose that difference is not fixed and lacking an origin, it is therefore, in their understanding, differential and relative (either in the closed system of Saussurian linguistics or in the open one of Derridean iterativity). The misrecognition of these theories is that they conceive of language and the sign in the abstract, away from social conditions, and in so doing, impose the field of abstract thought on the field of practical life. This can quickly be seen when we consider the contradiction between the fact that while poststructuralists constantly tell us that there is no such thing as man in general, gender in general, experience in general, modernity in general etc., they still presuppose “sign/language in general.” The simple retort, using poststructuralist thought against itself, is that there can be no such thing as the “sign/language in general,” the very foundation of poststructuralist thought, and that the nature of the sign changes according to the historical conditions to which it is subjected. This does not mean that the sign is not iterative, it simply means that it becomes so, i.e., as such (Hegel would say “for itself”) under certain historical conditions which procure iterativity in some social sphere (here it is designated as “civil society”). That is to say that textuality, or the capacity to think the sign “as such” is a particular historical development, which have everything to do with a historical removal of a certain point of fixity (having direct affinity with heavenly and earthly providence, “God” and the “state” as well as with “work” as a form of necessity). As we shall see, detaching thought from conditions, the preliminary conceptual condition securing the possibility of its claims, deconstruction accomplishes this removal in thought, and thus appears to itself and presenting itself to others as liberating, ushering us to a free world of infinite iterativity. But in fact it is simply a repetition of the same social process, here designated as neoliberalism, which by removing the state appears to itself and to the world as a liberator, ushering us into the free realm of infinite exchange, based on political and economic relations of equivalence.

Alfred Sohn-Rethel has called this process “real abstraction,” a concept grounded in Marx’s understanding of the division of manual and intellectual labor.⁴⁴ For once becoming autonomous, intellectual labor comes to imprint its logic on work from the outside as its law and rule, a condition that can be associated with what Adorno and Horkheimer once called instrumental reason.⁴⁵ One can say that the same thing happened with poststructuralist theory whose conception of the “sign in general” was predicated on the prior separation of theory from any point of fixity, any social condition, in the 1970s (mainly political commitments, and work). It is for this reason that Slavoj Žižek has claimed vigorously that “the problem with deconstruction... is that its position is ‘too theoretical’ (in a sense of a theory which *excludes the truth-dimension*; that is, [it is a theory] which does not affect the place from which we speak).”⁴⁶ Žižek’s popularization and simplification of Lacan’s concept of the Real is then conceived as a correction to poststructuralist thought and an attempt to conceive of language and social life in relation to non-positive forms of necessity, which here I designated as “conditions.”⁴⁷

Returning now to the earlier discussion, heteronomy is then a historical political situation that, lacking a mediary third sphere, imposes absolute social inequality and is characterized by semantic conditions of absolute difference. This historical situation is not limited to the third world

⁴³ See especially, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1976; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2004.

⁴⁴ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, 1977; Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in Eugene Kamenka (Ed.) *The Portable Karl Marx*, 175.

⁴⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989, p. 174, my emphasis.

⁴⁷ Adorno develops such a notion of necessity with the concept of “suffering” and the “somatic,” but it is in essence an ethical concept, derived from the human in general.

or to the state, but characterizes historical periods in the “West,” as well as religious relations. Here it is important to introduce briefly the two forms of politics in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.⁴⁸

Laclau and Mouffe propose a conception of political relations which recasts Marxism in a Lacanian idiom. Arguing that Marx’s conception of class struggle as the most elemental form of social force is a positivist conception, they advance the concept of social antagonism as Real, a negative, non-Symbolic condition that precedes democratic antagonisms, without however occupying a transcendental sphere distinct from these antagonisms. My own relation to their study has to do less with its theoretical claim and more with its historical conditions of possibility. For although they valorize the radical democratic form of politics, Laclau and Mouffe explain that only after 1848 in Europe, historical conditions emerge that prepared the way for this form of politics. Prior to this moment, a different form of politics existed, not “democratic,” but “popular,” predicated on absolute difference, on two mutually exclusive camps such as the “*ancien régime*” and the “people” in France.⁴⁹ In their cautious language they acknowledge that such historical moments do not fit their negative Lacanian model, but rather a more positive one. As they argue “[t]he political space of the popular emerges in those situations where... a political logic *tends* to bridge the gap between political space and society as an empirical referent.”⁵⁰ They argue that such a form of politics is predicated on “extreme externalities” of power (such as colonization and frontier societies), and is indeed typical of third world politics, and less advanced capitalist societies.

I would like to tie between the political relation of direct determination and semantic conditions. To do so I use the religious metaphor of heavenly providence so as to bring to the foreground the basic displacement in deconstruction, as well as to explain the shift from the “subject of God” to “subject of the secular state,” operative in the transition of Muslim Algerians into the French state, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

Taking Israel as an example, I recall that the statist model was also a welfare state and in France and in French the welfare state is compared to providence, as they say, *L’état providence*. Comparison to heavenly providence is not without reason for in such societies the state casts a large and protective safety net beneath its citizens. If we understand the welfare state as providence then the shift to a more liberal model would mean the removal of providence from daily life such that citizens must now care for themselves, the family and the corporation being the main collective figures that replace it. Even more revealing is the affinity between the couple state providence/civil society and heavenly providence/sacred texts such as the Bible and the Quran. For it is precisely the removal of a heavenly providence, a heteronomous (external) principle of determination, that initiates processes of autonomization which make the sacred text into a literary text. To be more specific, if under heavenly providence the words in the Bible or the Quran are interpreted vertically, receiving their meaning from the outside, then the removal of providence shifts vertical exegesis to lateral interpretation, where all signs receive their meaning only from their inter-relations. This is the moment of textualization. Mapping this process onto social relations, whether in Israel, Palestine or France (for Beurs), it could be said that the removal of state providence leads to the textualization of civil society and its imaginary. It could also be said that the removal of the determinant “condition” brings about the constitution of the Imaginary relation as such, as a real social relation whose site is civil society.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical and Democratic Politics*, 2001.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 131-134.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 133, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ This will begin to historicize the Lacanian model that grasps all three relations - Imaginary, Symbolic and Real - as existing all at once. The reason for this has to do with the historical ground of Lacan’s thought, French civil society.

To see more clearly the relation between the removal of the determinant condition and the initiation of textualization, I turn briefly to anthropologist Saba Mahmood's account of the attempts to secularize and moderate Islam, advanced and encouraged by American think-tanks such as the Rand corporation.⁵² According to Mahmood, the motivation behind such attempts is to "civilize"⁵³ and turn more moderate and politically neutral "traditionalist" Muslims who, according to Rand, believe that "the Quran is the actual word of god."⁵⁴ Such "traditionalists" are perceived as fertile ground for fundamentalist indoctrination. Mahmood explains how such secularization attempts have recourse to a secular hermeneutics such as those of liberal Muslim thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Abu Zayd argues:

The Quran . . . [which is perceived to be] a fixed religious text from the standpoint of the literal wording . . . becomes a concept... once it has been subjected to human reason... which loses its fixedness as it moves and its meanings proliferate. . . . It is imperative here that we affirm that the state of the original sacred text is a metaphysical one about which we can know nothing except that which the text itself mentions and which always comes to us via a historically changing humanity.⁵⁵

My intention here is neither to comment on the secularization debate, nor on Mahmood's position but rather to note the general relation between the removal of the heteronomous condition and the shift to textuality. In short, what Mahmood describes here, rehearsing the historical moment of the Protestant Reformation, is a social process whereby the transformation of the social condition underlying the text (here establishing new and more moderate Islamic schools) is the condition of possibility of textuality.

And yet, when we come to examine the status of textuality and the absolute in deconstruction we discover a very different understanding. Here is Derrida:

As the face of pure intelligibility, [semiological or linguistic science] refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united. This absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity in mediaeval theology: the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God... The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. Its historical *closure* is, however, outlined.⁵⁶

Derrida acknowledges the dependency of the sign on the absolute, yet he takes this to be a misrecognition on the part of theology and semiology. Throughout the first part of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida keeps reiterating the historical narrative that he is at the gate of a new kind of thinking, one that eschews metaphysical presence, upending the relation between the signifier and the signified, taking now the former as the very condition of the latter:

⁵² Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 323-347.

⁵³ Ibid, 330.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 332.

⁵⁵ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-dini [Critique of Religious Discourse]*, 1995, p. 93 quoted in Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire." *Public Culture* 18.2 (2006): 337-338.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13-14, emphasis in original.

The exteriority of the signifier is the exteriority of writing in general, and I shall try to show later that there is no linguistic sign before writing. Without that exteriority, the very idea of the sign falls into decay.⁵⁷

However, this kind of upending of terms can take place only after a certain displacement has been secured. For it should be clear that Derrida has shifted the *social relation* to the absolute, secured by historical conditions, into the signified of theological/metaphysical *thought*. Only when this displacement of condition into thought has transpired, is it possible to sever the condition and the conditioned and reach the conclusion that the signifier has precedence over the signified “in general.” To see how Derrida severs “the exteriority of writing in general” from its condition of possibility, and takes it as a first principle, I turn to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Since deconstruction has often been likened to skepticism, Hegel’s account here is particularly illuminating. To make the following quotation more accessible, simply replace “nothingness” with Derrida’s “exteriority of writing in general:”

This is just the skepticism which only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that *from which it results*. For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result. In that case it is itself a *determinate* nothingness, one which has a *content*.⁵⁸

Hegel’s choice of skepticism as an example is not accidental for it is that extreme position doubting all statements, all phenomenal appearance, puncturing the pretense of truth and universal measure by showing it to be partial, false, contradictory, and so forth. If, the reasoning goes, even this position that is skeptical of All statements could itself be shown to be partial, inflected from a specific position, then Hegel’s method will implicate all other less radical positions. Hegel’s conceptual displacement is then quite remarkable for he suggests that even total negation, total nothingness (“exteriority in general”) should be grasped as a “particular nothing,” as it were, and our investigation should dismiss the false “immediacy” and “totality” of the statement, and be directed instead at that place “from which [exteriority] results.” In the argument advanced here I replace Hegel’s “content” with historical “condition,” which clears the possible confusion with any positive phenomenon. But as I have argued above, Derrida’s maneuver should not be regarded as a mistake. Rather, it is the theoretical corollary of a severing that has already happened in the real, and should be taken, as Žižek always reminds us, as “real fiction” which in the case of “textuality” characterizes civil society and equivalent exchange. Since the latter is not a mistake but a reality, we need not refute its imaginary relation, but rather inquire after the relation between its image *of* the world and its position *in* the world.

I would like now to make explicit the shift from inequality to equivalence. As I explained above, the two periods and the two concepts are not symmetrical. While in the first period, inequality, heteronomy, and absolute difference condition the entire field,⁵⁹ in the second, equivalence, autonomy, and textuality do not so much replace the former three concepts, as displace them, taking their position as what could be called the dominant condition. Hence, we have here a tension and a fracture between inequality and equivalence, autonomy and heteronomy. However, given that literature, in its modern sense, is a rarified cultural production, the heteronomous form of life (especially in Israel and for Beurs) no longer constitutes its own aesthetic category any more. And, since equivalence and autonomy accede to what could be called the “norm,” inequality and

⁵⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1977, p. 51, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ Although I propose further nuances below.

heteronomy are grasped only from the position of equivalence and as such they are constructed as “others,” belonging to the past. Put in the obverse manner, heteronomy and inequality now appear mostly *within* literary imaginary worlds. Throughout the five chapters that follow I show then how precisely the accession to autonomy, subjectivity and fiction is as much a problem as it is a solution, for the autonomous form of life constructs those who are still excluded from civil society (poor Palestinians, Mizrahi working class, Algerian immigrants and *loubards*) as their other, usually relegated to the category of “nature.” The exclusion of inequality is then not a matter of phenomenal content, of this or that character, but rather a more profound disavowal of the time of inequality, a temporal disavowal (Jameson’s unconscious) that structures the entire world of novels written in the second period. I show this especially in Chapters 2 and 3. Postcolonial studies of the literatures discussed here disregard this internal contradiction, seeing the accession to autonomous speech solely as a critique of Israeli or French nationalism. Again, this misrecognition on the part of the autonomous form of life is both fictional and real. Therefore, it is important to both resist this unevenness and insist on what anthropologist Johannes Fabian called “coevalness” and Ernest Bloch has described as “nonsynchronous synchronicity,”⁶⁰ but also to understand that this unevenness is not a mistake, and thus generates real literary and social symptoms.

⁶⁰ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2002; Ernest Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics.” *New German Review* 11 (Spring, 1977): 22-38. See also the discussion on Bloch’s concept in Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 97-102.

II

Change in Aesthetic Categories

1. *A Shift from Heteronomy to Autonomy as a Shift from Determinate to Indeterminate Relation between Particularity and Universality*

As I argued above, the historical configuration of the private and public spheres could be mapped onto Kant's distinction between determinate and reflective (indeterminate; aesthetic) judgment. These two relations can then be mapped upon two corresponding aesthetic categories: heteronomy and autonomy.

The difference between determinant and reflective judgment lies in the *relation* between universality and particularity, the concept/rule and its object. While in determinant judgment the concept directly subsumes its particular object, in reflective (indeterminate) judgment the concept is only implied, the particular only suggests it, as it were. Here is one of Kant's formulations that compares between the two relations in the context of art production:

Now art always has a determinate intention of producing something... If the intention were aimed at the production of a determinate object, then if it were achieved through art, the object would please only through concepts.... It would not please as beautiful but as mechanical art... beautiful art must be **regarded** as nature... A product of art appears as nature, however, if we find it to agree **punctiliously** but not **painstakingly** with rules in accordance with which alone the product can become what it ought to be, *without the academic form showing through* i.e., without showing any sign that the *rule* has hovered before the eyes of the artist and *fettered* his mental powers.⁶¹

I call the first relation "heteronomous aesthetic" because the object is directly determined from the outside such that the concept or rule is showing and acts, in Kant's words, as a "fetter" on the writer. I call the other "autonomous aesthetic" precisely because the art object seems to be giving the rule to itself rather than being determined from the outside. I argue, however, that these two relations are not limited to aesthetics but they are in fact two political and historical relations that presuppose such relations in the world, i.e., the relation between the state and civil society.

To see the affinity between Kant's two judgments and historical-political forms, I turn to Terry Eagleton's account of the emergence of the concept of the aesthetic in 18th century Germany, beginning most definitively with Alexander Baumgarten and Kant.⁶² Eagleton's principal insight was to propose that the concept of the aesthetic is in fact a new *imaginary* political relation between German absolutism and its citizens. Here is his description of the political relation:

The call for an aesthetics in eighteenth-century Germany is among other things a response to the problem of political absolutism. Germany in that period was a parcellized territory of feudal-absolutist states...Its princes imposed their imperious diktates through elaborate bureaucracies... Beneath this autocratic sway, an ineffectual bourgeoisie remained cramped

⁶¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 2000, pp. 185-186; emphasis in bold in original; emphasis in italics mine.

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 1990. In Palestine this determination by the state is compounded by the fact that the Israeli state controls the economy of Palestine, especially between 1967 and 1993.

by the nobility's mercantilist policies of state-controlled industry and tariff-protected trade, overwhelmed by the conspicuous power of the courts... and bereft of any corporate influence in national life.⁶³

Note that what Eagleton describes here is consonant with the condition I described above in Israel, i.e., a statist political form where civil society, and especially economic activity are *directly* controlled by the state, limiting the freedom of the bourgeoisie. To see how close this political condition is to Israel before 1985 here is how social scientists Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir describe the relation between the state and the economy:

[Until 1985] as long as the private sector remained dependent on government-allocated credit, it remained for all practical purposes another branch of government and could not attain autonomy. What seemed like a private sector was, in fact, tied to the state's apron strings. No autonomous business sector could emerge and business decisions were made in response to, or as a part of, political decisions.⁶⁴

Mapping this political relation on Kant's concept of Reason, Eagleton continues to suggest that we grasp the state as the concept or law, and the citizens as its sensuous particulars. We can then see that Kant's principal problem in reconciling the concept and its object, intelligibility and sensibility is in actuality a political problem of feudal absolutism that imposes the law from the outside, as it were, in a mechanical, external way, rather than in an inherent manner. It is in response to this direct state determination from above that the concepts of civil society and the aesthetic emerge. It is, as Eagleton explains, an idea "of a bold new model of social life as yet quite unachievable in reality."⁶⁵

From the depths of a benighted late feudal autocracy, a vision could be projected of a universal order of free, equal autonomous human subjects, obeying no laws but those they gave themselves... This bourgeois public sphere breaks decisively with the privilege of and particularism of the *ancien régime*, installing the middle class, in image if not in reality, as a truly universal subject... What is at stake here is nothing less than the production of a new kind of human subject – one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power. The liberated subject is the one who has appropriated the law as the very principle of its own autonomy...⁶⁶

Now, I would like to draw the two principal differences between Eagleton's account and the one advanced here. First, while Eagleton understands the aesthetic in 18th century Germany as an ideology, a wishful thinking fulfilled only in the limited autonomy of the press⁶⁷ (rather than in the relation between the state and the economy), in Israel, Palestine and France (for Beurs) the indeterminate *imaginary* relation between particularity and universality has taken place not simply as an ideology, but in *real* social conditions. I agree then with Eagleton that autonomy (both civil and

⁶³ Ibid, p.14.

⁶⁴ Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, *The New Israel*, 8.

⁶⁵ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid, passim. Eagleton continuously to invoke Antonio Gramsci who grasps this civil society as one that does not enter into conflict with "political society" and becomes an "organic complement" of the state. And indeed one can already see in Kant the affinity between the artwork, civil society and nature. Ibid, 19-20

⁶⁷ See, for example, the debate about the concept of Enlightenment in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* in 1783-1784 cited in James Schmidt (ed.), *What Is Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, 1996. See especially Kant's article, pp. 58-64.

aesthetic) is an imaginary relation, but it is a real one at the same time. This is why I am less concerned with exposing the determinations of autonomy as with accounting for its manner of imagining the world. Second, while for Eagleton the aesthetic is an ideological construct through and through, it should be clear that I do not confuse the *philosophical* discourse of aesthetics with the aesthetics properties of artworks, which are reducible to the former only in specific political historical conditions (here in the second period). As I demonstrate below, although I am as critical towards Kant's concept of the aesthetic, it is possible to return to an older concept, the Aristotelian one, which also offers a relation between particularity and universality, but one grounded not in the universality of the concept, but that of time.

2. *Aesthetic Heteronomy and Autonomy in Palestine, Israel and France*

The first period (Palestine 1948-1993; Israel 1948-1990s; France 1970s-1986) is then characterized by a form of politics that *a-priori* imposes a political relation on the citizen/immigrant and a political meaning on literature. To be sure, this is not a matter of *parti-pris*, or political bias, nor is it a matter of understanding literature according to a key of political parties or ideological positions. Rather, the overlap of the personal and the political is a non-positive condition through which citizens, immigrants, parties and literary texts are constituted. What typifies heteronomous aesthetics as a category and distinguishes it from the autonomous category is its explicit *practical* end, inscribing the individual within a larger historical narrative.⁶⁸ A paradigmatic account of such a relation can be found in Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller." Although I refer to Benjamin's essay in the individual chapters, I think it is important to quote it here so as to see more clearly how its logic inheres in the heteronomous category I am trying to advance.

In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers....⁶⁹

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, *traces of the storyteller cling to the story* the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ In this context see Jameson's discussion of the anagogical function in European medieval interpretation. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 29-32. In the context of national literatures, Jameson has termed this explicit relation a "conscious" aesthetic, and yet I would like to stress the point that the explicit practical end does not mean that such texts do not have an unconscious. As I show in Chapter 2, Shimon Ballas's novel *The Transit Camp* (*Ha-ma'abara* 1964 [1955]) can be understood as a conscious attempt to give a narrative figure to the historical encounter between Jewish immigrants from Arab and Muslim states (not yet Mizrahim) and the Zionist state, and yet I show that even such a text covers over, represses, a far more radical relation to the state. Similarly, although Palestinian novels such as those of Ghassan Kanafani are consciously engaged in imagining the antagonistic relation between Israel and Palestine, such portrayals do not necessarily attend to other antagonisms such as gender, for example, as Sahar Khalifeh makes clear in her own novel, *Wild Thorns* (*al-Subar*, 1976).

⁶⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* 1968, p. 86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 91-2, my emphasis.

I will comment on the porous relation between inside and outside so central to this form of storytelling in a moment, but first here are a few examples attesting to this practical relation in Palestinian, Israeli and Beur literature.

Palestinian writer Emile Habibi

First of all, I always want to give my reader something. Some new knowledge. I don't want it to be only fiction... I want to give information from our heritage to the new generations, in order that they respect it. I do this intentionally, cold-bloodedly... This I always do because I respect my reader.... I know for example, in our newspaper, everybody reads my article, I know all the young are reading my article and I want to help them add to their knowledge.⁷¹

Israeli writer Yizhar Smilanski (S. Yizhar)

We have now a second and a third generation reader of Hebrew in Israel. [We write] literature to satisfy him, to keep him company in his first steps for he has no alternative. It is a literature that establishes a simple [*pasbul*], natural [*tiw'i*] and self-evident [*muwan me-elav*] relation [to the reader]. It breaks the many barriers that separate the writer and its reader.⁷²

Before moving on to a Beur example, it is important not to confuse this practical *category* with a referential, naïve or indoctrinating *style*. Habibi is considered one of the most innovative Palestinian writers and Yizhar as one of the most critical writers of Zionism. Both write in intricate styles that have won them the highest literary praise in local and international literary circles.

Finding a Beur example is slightly more difficult, as this literature has a significantly shorter history, but it is possible to notice an echo of such statements in both the immigrant parents and the “second generation.” As Susan Ireland explains regarding the testimonies of the first generation:

Certain topics recur across the three categories of texts, and in all of them, individual stories are generally presented as representative of collective experience. The most common themes evoke various aspects of the typical immigrant trajectory, from recruitment in the home country to raising children in France: nostalgia and the desire to return "home," working conditions, the unpleasant accommodations available to workers and their families, racism and exclusion, and, for North Africans, the experience of living in France during the Algerian War... The literary narratives of first-generation immigration take their place alongside historical, economic, and political accounts of the same events. ⁷³

Beur writer Mehdi Charef

Les jeunes veulent parler, dire ce qu'ils ont sur le cœur, dialoguer. Pour eux, mon livre [*Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*], c'est normal... [On Radio Beur] Ils parlent, tous ces jeunes, ils chantent, ils expliquent leur problèmes, leur situations...⁷⁴

There is much more to be said of such statements, but I believe they suffice to attest to the centrality of the practical relation to literature.

⁷¹ “Literature and Politics: A Conversation with Emile Habibi - Interview conducted by Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas,” in *The Arabic Novel Since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews and Bibliography*, 1992, pp. 42-3.

⁷² S. Yizhar's speech in the 18th writers' convention delivered on 4.10.1958, cited in Gershon Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880-1980*, vol. 4 [*Hebrew Literature 1880-1980*], 1993, p. 348. My translation.

⁷³ Susan Ireland, “First Immigration Immigrant Narratives,” in Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (eds.) *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, 2001, p.24.

⁷⁴ Mehdi Charef, “La Nouvelle culture des migrants: d'abord ne pas oublier.” *La Croix* 3-4 (July 1983) [no pagination] cited in Alec Hargreaves, *Beur Fiction*, 27.

One preliminary conclusion to be drawn from the preceding discussion is that aesthetic heteronomy is not a characteristic of pre-modern literature, something that disappeared with modernity. Rather, as long as heteronomous social conditions remain (and they always do), aesthetic heteronomy remains with it. Second, the so-called disappearance of aesthetic heteronomy can now be understood to be an anachronistic historical narrative cast from the position of autonomy, which considers itself the end point of aesthetic development. This realization means that we need to amend Benjamin's narrative of the loss of storytelling in modernity. Although its styles might be said to belong to the past, the aesthetic category underlining it lives on, simply in forms of life excluded from civil society on the local and global levels such as, for example, immigrant communities (e.g., Mizrahi/Algerian), communities contesting the boundaries of state law (certain types of religious communities, *loubarids*) and what used to be called the Third world (here, Palestine). In fact, it could very plausibly be argued that until very recently most of the world's cultural production was heteronomous and only a tiny fraction of it was autonomous.

Now, if in the first period the literary production was *a-priori* public and heteronomous, in the second period (Palestine 1993- / Israel 1990s- / France (for Beurs) 1986-) it is *a-priori* private, and autonomous. In the heteronomous moment I discussed above, I began with Benjamin's conception of storytelling, so now I would like to begin with Adorno's conception of art:

Works of art owe their existence to *division of labor* in society, the separation of *physical* and *mental* labor. At the same time they have their own roots in existence. Their medium is not pure mind, but the mind that enters into reality, and by virtue of such movement, is able to maintain the unity of what is divided. It is this contradiction that forces works of art to make us forget that they have been made. The claim implicit in their existence, and hence, too, the claim, that existence has a meaning is the more convincing, *the less they continue to remind us that they have been made*, and that they owe their own existence to *something external to themselves*. Art that is no longer able to perpetrate this deception with good conscience, has implicitly destroyed the only element in which it can thrive... A contradiction of all works of Art is the *concealment of the labor that went into it*, but in high capitalism, with the complete hegemony of exchange value, and the contradictions arising out of that hegemony, autonomous art becomes both problematic and programmatic at the same time.⁷⁵

It is quite clear from this passage that Adorno and Benjamin have contradictory conceptions of literature, one rarely acknowledged if at all. Note how for Adorno the *a-priori* condition for art in general is the "division of labor" while Benjamin argues, on the contrary, that storytelling precedes this division. I recall his formulation "the storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of *work* – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an *artisan form of communication...*" Further, while Adorno predicated the very existence of art on the principle of concealment, on works of art making us forget that they were made, Benjamin tells us that "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience."⁷⁶ What to make of this contradiction? A clue lies in Adorno's abstract understanding of "works of art" *in general*, while Benjamin understands implicitly that this abstraction, that is, the becoming of the particular way of telling into abstract Literature (the novel) is a historical process. In 1951 Paul Oscar Kristeller reviewed the intellectual history of a similar but much broader process where the different and distinct fine arts

⁷⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 2005, pp. 71-2, my emphasis.

⁷⁶ See footnote 71 for details.

began not only shifting their meaning from crafts to pleasurable arts, but have also been united into one concept “Art,” a process of universalization, taking place in the early to mid-18th century in France, England and Germany.⁷⁷ In light of this process, it is now possible to see that by talking of “works of arts” in general Adorno projects the end concept of this very late transformation (where the distinct fine arts have been equalized and abstracted into Art in general) onto the history of art production and comes to the faulty twin conclusions that first, such a division of labor is almost as ancient as Greek civilization and second, that autonomy is threatened by capitalism, while, on the contrary, it is its very condition of possibility. It is then not only that aesthetic autonomy is the exception not the rule; it is dependent on historical conditions that most of the world did not even share until very recently. However, the conception of autonomy (presupposing Kant’s indeterminate relation) is abstracted from its conditions of possibility and literary critics, conceiving of themselves as part of an abstract world republic of letters, have imposed it on local literary works that have little to do with the historical conditions this concept presupposes. Thus, I note in passing that Foucauldians who believe we can trace the emergence of “aesthetic autonomy” in the Middle East simply by tracing the discourse of aesthetic autonomy without attending to the local, non-discursive conditions that underlie actual literary works are offering us a skewed account. Given the different travel velocities of historical conditions and discourse, we need to attend to the disparity, the “non-identity,” between discourse and conditions. In other words, tracing changes in discourse means little else than tracing changes in discourse.

And yet, as I mentioned above, such a conception is not simply an illusion. In the second moment of this historical narrative it is maintained precisely by the emergent autonomy of a new civil society such that now it is a real fiction of social life rather than an aesthetic ideology limited to literary circles (especially in Israel and France). The figure has become ground.

I attend to this transformation in the *Beur Part* (Ch. 5), and pay special attention to the manner *Beur* writers, such as Farida Belghoul, for example, mobilize aesthetic autonomy in order to enter civil society and stand on equivalent grounds with French writers. To complete this account, I will here give a few short examples of aesthetic autonomy for Palestinian writers.

One can notice the change in the writer’s relation to society in the comments of Palestinian writer Ahmad Rafik Awad on the “cultured man” (*al-muthaqaf*). During an interview in Arabic for Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, Awad was asked what does he mean by the term the “downfall (*suqut*) of the cultured man?” Awad explains that the cultured man no longer fulfills his role (*dwr*):

His role is to be intertwined (*yashtabek*) with the different powers; he should not hide, be too content, quiet, conforming; he needs to face his situation. Maybe I am using big words, but I think he needs to be a conscience (*damir*), truthfully, a social conscience; he needs to comment on the public (*jumhur*)... to have an interest (*maslaha*) in relation to the people and the land... the downfall of the cultured man was when culture became a job/profession (*wazifa*)... Cultural imaginative production is [instead] partial/takes part (*juzwi*), heated (*shu’uli*), passionate (*gharbi*)...affiliated (*intima*) with the people...⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics I.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.4 (October. 1951): 496-527; “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics II.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13.1 (January. 1952): 17-46. A similar history was proposed in a narrower and more materialist manner for literature in England by Raymond Williams in 1958, and for France by Pierre Bourdieu in 1966 and 1992. Today this process is pertinent to the work of Jacques Rancière. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, 1958; Pierre Bourdieu *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 1996; “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur.” *Les Temps Modernes* 246 (1966): 865–906; Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 2009.

⁷⁸ See interview on line at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hc-a-XLcN2I>, min: 4:30-6:10. Accessed on February 27 2013.

It goes without saying that this kind of conception does away with Kantian disinterestedness, or with Adorno's concern about commitment. But the more subtle truth of this bemoaning of the loss of the cultured man is that even its notion of commitment already presupposes some separation of the private and the public. So here we note both the separation of the private and the public (cultural production turns into a profession), but also how it brings about a notion of commitment that already assumes this separation and thus the end of the previous historical moment. Also important here is the fact that Awad's notion of "social conscience" has a long tradition in Hebrew and Israeli culture which at times have conceived of the writer as a secular prophet (*zofe le-bet yisrael*), whose duty it is to direct national life. Critic Dan Miron has noted the centrality of such a conception in 19th and 20th century Hebrew/Israeli literature and its unavailability in the 1980-1990s.⁷⁹

The same new division between private and public can be seen in another interview with a young writer living in Gaza, Atef Abu Saif. Abu Saif was supposed to attend the Manchester Literature Festival in October 2009, but as he was barred from leaving Palestine he was interviewed online instead. At one moment during the interview, conducted in English, he explains how nationalism is pressed on one's life and how one needs to find a way between loyalty to society and literature. He says:

[N]ational feelings can touch our lives. I can be touched on this [sic]. I remember when I wanted to do something, someone said: "this is for Palestine" and it's true, I love my country, everybody loves their country, we love our memories, we love our fathers, our families... we love our dreams that are not fulfilled, but at the same time... what matters is this over-exaggeration of nationalism... and this is where the writer can work, you want to be loyal to society and at the same time you don't want to be a politician, you do not want to talk politics, I don't want to be a political writer... to write slogans or political leaflets, I want to write a story, I want to write life, [I want] my stories to be vivid as life in the street is.⁸⁰

What is of import in Abu Saif's conception of the writer is a not so much his refusal to be a "political writer," but rather that for him the meaning of "politics" is now very different from that of Habiby or Kanafani. I argue that he is able to contrast politics to "life in the street," the abstract "leaflet" to the "vividness" of life (again in Kantian idiom: the discursive vs. the aesthetic) precisely because politics has been separated from life into its own abstract sphere such that now the latter can be juxtaposed to the former as intelligibility vs. sensibility, mind vs. nature. Explicitly put, Abu-Saif's writing could still be regarded as political, but what matters is that the meaning of politics itself has now changed.

3. Two Imaginary Worlds: Politics as Condition vs. Politics as Phenomenal Object Poiesis and Textuality, Event and Synchrony, Universality of Time and Universality of Language

I have hinted above that the difference between the two periods could be grasped through the category of time and I now propose these concepts that are most pertinent to the temporal dimensions of literary imaginary worlds.

⁷⁹ See Dan Miron, "Prosaic Reflections" [*Hirburim b-'idan shel proza*] in *Thirty Years, Thirty Stories* [*Sheloshim Shana, Sheloshim Sipurim*], Zisi Stav (ed.), 1993, pp. 397-427. I thank Eyal Bassan for this reference.

⁸⁰ See interview at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjYEz1v82hM>. Min: 6:20-7:30. Accessed on 2.27.2013.

In the simplest terms, the worlds of the first period could be described as worlds in which the events make the time of the world, and the characters (i.e., their name or identity) are made through these events, while in the second characters and events appear *in* time. In the former, we see time as it were in the event, while in the latter the source of time is not disclosed, and it is for this reason that the first worlds are finite and the second infinite. To be sure, the infinity of the second-type worlds confronts the characters as a problem, and a narrative (phenomenal) figure is invented to provide closure and finitude *in* the world. The difference between “making time” and “given-time,” is related to the twin concepts of inequality and equivalence, where in the first the direct unequal social antagonism, with no mediation, generates the time of social life, while in the second the time of direct social antagonism is mediated by civil society and its equivalent terms. In its most elemental form, the time of the imaginary worlds of the first period are constructed around an antagonistic event/encounter cast in terms of absolute difference (e.g., war, struggle, immigration, work, sex, etc.) while the time of the second are constructed as synchronous worlds of equivalent difference where constitutive events have now been removed and characters’ names and identities are given in advance of the event. However, in the same manner that inequality and heteronomy persist within equivalence and autonomy, taking the form of trauma, or Real that break the dream of civil society (today “terrorism” and “economic crises” are the quintessential political and economic figures for such traumas), so also the narrative time of the event does not disappear but returns as a localized symptom within synchrony (i.e., as content) as its temporal “other,” and disrupts its time. While such events in the world and in novels are grasped as unfathomable, irrational phenomena, cast in the idiom of “natural disasters,” it is important to remember that such conceptions are already imagined from the position of the synchronous time of civil society. In the Palestinian novel discussed here, *Touch* by Adania Shibli, such an event appears in the unexplained death of the protagonist’s brother and in the indecipherability of her mother’s actions. In the Israeli novel *Outsiders* by Shimon Ballas, the event appears as the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In the Beur novel, *Le gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag, the event appears in the encounter with the police as well as with the indecipherability of the protagonist’s father. Both the mother and father in the Palestinian and Beur novels are portrayed as unfathomable nature, as signs the protagonists cannot read. Finally, to complete this preliminary characterization, the two concepts of time alter the social meaning of “politics” and the attribute “political.” For precisely because the political antagonism has been removed as a condition *for* the world, it returns *within* the world as a phenomenal object, usually as a signifier pointing to a whole. In *Touch*, politics as antagonism enters the imaginary world when the protagonist discovers the hidden diaries of her sisters. In *Outsiders*, politics enters as a political discussion over the meaning of a film. In *Le gone du Chaâba* it enters as a series of essays. This is the difference between politics constituting the fabric of narrative time such that the entire world is political, and politics inhering in language and representation within the world as a figure of a whole which the protagonist reads as a text. What we see here then is localization of “politics as world” to “politics as text” in the world. If in the first worlds characters were made political by acting, in the second they are made political by reading. In the first worlds, characters are liable to lose the meaning of their lives, in the second it is texts that are liable to lose their meaning, while the meaning of the character’s life is never endangered, as its externality presupposes the act of reading. It is for this reason that to attribute the adjective “political” to aesthetic production is insufficient in and of itself. The novels of both periods can be understood to be political. We need to understand the difference between the two “political” concepts and their times. To grasp the key difference in the meaning of time and politics, I propose relating them to nomination, conceptuality and universality and for this I turn to Aristotle’s definition of *poesis*.

As is well known, in the *Poetics* Aristotle notes that the pleasure we derive from tragedy is inherent in the fact that when we watch this or that (particular) character we learn a more general

(universal) truth. It is this pedagogic aspect of art that has come down to us through time and we find it especially in the form of the tale, the parable and the allegory, not only in Western cultures but in many others as well. However, Aristotle is also known for being very specific about the meaning of universality, and the way the poet should bring it about. The heart of the matter lies precisely in the relation between nomination and time, discursivity and temporality. Aristotle discourages his poet from writing character-revealing *speeches*, that is, revealing the character in conceptual language, and instead argues that the truth of the character, that is its name and identity, should be revealed in necessary *acts*. Similarly, Aristotle tells us that the heart of tragedy should be in the mimesis of action, given in necessary and meaningful events. As Classicist scholar Stephen Halliwell argues, the universality of the play is embedded not in discursive language, however poetic, but in the events, that is in time itself.⁸¹ It is the constitutive nature of the event, especially antagonistic events that in turn endows the characters with their universality and truth. What is unique about such worlds has to do with the fact that the antagonism does not only divide the world in two; it is constitutive of the world itself such that all the signs, characters and events receive their meaning in relation to it. Such a temporal structure crosses ideological and stylistic differences. In Israel, for example, both pro-Zionists and critical-Zionists, as well as “Mizrahi” and “Ashkenazi” writers construct their worlds in such a way and it also crosses the division by decades (between 1940s-1980s), which is still the dominant way of historicizing Israeli literature. One can find such communality in Palestinian writers of different political positions, as well as in the diverse novels of the “second generation” in France up to 1986.⁸²

The quintessential formal aspect of the second period is the absence of the antagonistic event, of the universality of time such that nomination, i.e., the names of the characters and their identity is given in advance of any event. Here characters are conceived as complete, i.e., universal, before they enter the world, but since this wholeness is abstract and imaginary, characters are drawn to figures of wholes – crowds, classmates, families – and in the most extensive development of such a desire the novel is cast as an investigation of a lost whole, usually a family. It is important to note here that although the figure of the whole appears in the world as a text to be deciphered, it is the world itself that is now being textualized, existing in the infinite time of iterativity, which usually comes to an abrupt halt in a catastrophe or reconciliation. In Shibli, the world comes to an end with marriage; in Ballas in a political assassination; in Farida Belghoul’s *Georgette!* - in a car accident.

The fabric of time is then the fundamental difference between the two periods, and it is for this reason that I proposed the concept of “world” rather than style or form. Since time is the shared category of social life and literature, writers confront it as a *preliminary* condition with which they contend by inventing style and form. Thus, there are no conditions without forms. Forms of life and of the imagination are not the instantiation of a condition, rather they are its symbolic and imaginary answer and resolution, they betray their limit that inheres in them, making them what they are, in the very moment they seek to overcome it. It is for this reason that we cannot limit ourselves to thinking of forms without understanding that their very existence as *form* presupposes some condition/limit.

⁸¹ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, 2002, pp. 214-215.

⁸² In Israel, for example, we can find such antagonistic worlds organized around an event or an encounter in Shimon Ballas, Hanoah Bartov, Yehudit Hendel Moshe Shamir, Nathan Shaham, S. Yizhar (1950s); A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Shimon Ballas (1960s), Sami Michael (1970s), Eli Amir (1980s). In Palestine see, for example, Ghassan Kanafani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1960s); Sahar Khalifeh, Emile Habiby (1970s). In France see, for example, Mengouchi and Ramdane, *L'Homme qui enjamba la mer*, 1978; Salahadine Bahiri, *L'espoir était pour demain: les tribulations d'un jeune immigré en France*, 1982; Leila Sebbar, *Sbéraxade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*, 1982; Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d'Archib Ahmed*, 1983; Leila Houari, *Zeida de nulle part*, 1985; Mehdi Lallaoui, *Les Beurs de Seine*, 1986.

Utopian and critical moments could then be understood as those moments when we face the conditions (Real) that give form (the Symbolic) in general. What is unique about such moments is that in them, since we encounter the conditions directly, our form is being abolished as well as the movement of signification as it is predicated on the shuttling between particularity and universality. Civil society sees this moment as "formless," but it is in fact an "aformal" moment for in it the new relation between condition and form, particularity and universality is being determined. In social life such moments are revolutions, while in literature they appear in what could be called critical novels.

4. *Worlds of Critique*

To grasp the uniqueness of such worlds, appearing in both periods, I return to Kant's definition of the aesthetic. Since civil society has been separated from the state, it could be said that it deposits its universality, its name, in the state and can now imagine itself as an autonomous particularity. Particularity and universality appear to themselves as such, as "particularity" and "universality" only on the basis of such a separation. As I proposed above, following Eagleton, this separation enables the indeterminate relation between the state and civil society which is the preliminary condition for the aesthetic relation. In the same way then that the interference of the state as such (i.e. in the open) in civil life is considered a violation of the imaginary autonomy of the spheres, a "vulgarity," so also is any appearance of the universal/the concept as such in the imaginary worlds of civil society is considered an aesthetic violation. This means that the autonomy of civil society and the aesthetic is a paradox, for they must presuppose the law in order to imagine themselves free of it. As Eagleton explains about 18th century Germany:

The bourgeoisie has won certain historic victories within the political state, but the problem with such conflicts is that, in rendering the Law perceptible as a discourse, they threaten to denaturalize it. Once the Law is objectified by political struggle, it becomes itself the subject of contestation. Legal, political and economic transformations must therefore be translated into new kinds of spontaneous social practice, which in a kind of creative repression or amnesia can afford to forget the very laws they obey.⁸³

Thus, critical novels will be those rare novels where the separation and disavowal of universality/law is rejected, and universality as such is dragged into the phenomenal world of the characters such that particularity no longer insinuates universality, but rather exists next to it in a *simultaneous* fashion. This simultaneity cancels out the shuttling between particularity and universality, as well as the conventional forms of signification. One paradigmatic example of such worlds is the biblical story of *Job*, in which God is dragged into the phenomenal world of men and women to confront Job. Such a story shuts out not only the world itself and its forms of signification, but also the presumed universality of God itself. For in *Job* God does not appear in his symbolic guise as "meaning," but as pure arbitrary force, punishing Job for no apparent reason. Note that the biblical narrator is very careful to show us that Job is a righteous man and that God's acts are utterly unjustified, a matter of a wager between himself and Satan. Thus, the encounter between Job and God is not an encounter between particularity (Job as a particular person) and universality (heavenly providence), but rather

⁸³ Terry Eagleton, "The Ideology of the Aesthetic." *Poetics Today* 9.2 (1988): 329.

an encounter of two “aformal” entities whose meaning and forms will be determined only at the close of the encounter. These are terrifying worlds in which the “condition” of meaning itself appears in the world and is contested. Sophocles’s *Antigone* is a second, secular, example. Here, too, universality, the state in the figure of Creon the King, is dragged into the phenomenal world and is contested as “universality.” Antigone refuses to be interpellated as “particularity” and once this happens universality is revealed to be nothing less than arbitrary force. Moving to the cases discussed here, Shimon Ballas’s *The Transit Camp* (Ch. 2) is among the few novels in Israeli literature that does exactly this. What is so remarkable about this novel, setting it apart from other Israeli novels, as well as from *Job* and *Antigone*, is that not only does it show us the naked force of the state, it also turns into an object of narration the very historico-political process by which the immigrants are turned into “particular” subjects of the state through the twin powers of brute force and a political process. In this novel we then see how universality is made, that is, how nomination is generated, which is why it is closer to Kant’s concept of critique than to his aesthetic.⁸⁴ We can find similar examples in Sahar Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns* (Ch. 1), and Mengouchi and Ramdane *L’Homme qui enjamba la mer (The Man Who Crossed the Sea)*⁸⁵. Thus, if novels governed by the principle of Kant’s aesthetic give us particularity that insinuates the law/universal/name, novels governed by the principle of critique show us how the law/universality/name is made.

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In the preceding discussion I have outlined the conceptual and aesthetic significance of the historical shift in the structures of economic and political forms in Palestine, Israel and France (for Beurs). This rather abstract discussion is followed by five chapters, divided by state, in which I propose a more detailed analysis of specific novels and key historical moments.

Note on Translations, Transliterations, and Bibliographical Details

Other than French texts, given in the original, Arabic and Hebrew texts are given in English translation. Unless otherwise mentioned, I have used existing English translations. Transliteration of titles in Arabic and Hebrew follow IJMES and Encyclopedia Judaica. The bibliography provides full citations while footnotes in the body of the dissertation indicate titles of books in shorthand (author, title, year).

⁸⁴ Some of Balzac’s novels, narrating the making of a name in Parisian social circles, do exactly that.

⁸⁵ Unfortunately, I do not discuss this novel in the dissertation.

Chapter One

Into the Global: On the Making of Palestinian Civil Society and Aesthetic Autonomy

The following chapter proposes a new historical understanding of Palestinian literature written between 1963-2003. To be sure, such an understanding does not aim to provide a full literary history of this literature, but rather the historical concept and aesthetic categories for one.¹ To elaborate on this understanding, the chapter advances two related claims. First, to understand changes in literary forms as well as in aesthetic categories, we need to account for the changing relation between the Palestinian political formations and global capital. Thus, as Palestine political structure shifted from a national movement (1960s-1993) to state formation in 1993, so changed the forms of literary imagination. The chapter ties this aesthetico-historical change to the entry of global capital investment into Palestine, which initiated processes of privatization that have reshaped the relation between the private and public spheres. Breaking the previous overlap of “personal” and “political” spheres, globalization provided for the emergence of an autonomous civil society and the category of “private life” as a third term from which social life is now imagined. Second, as the sphere of private life is separated from the sphere of the political (“state”) and the sphere of the personal (“family”), the conditions for “aesthetic autonomy” in Immanuel Kant’s sense of an aesthetic activity lacking a concept emerge. For if in the first historical moment the immediacy of the “the political” provided the determinate concept, or universal, for the literary work, in the second moment the social separation of the “political” from the “private” allows for the indeterminate relation between the particular and the universal, akin to reflective (aesthetic) judgments in Kant’s sense.

To trace this complex shift in both literary categories and historical conditions, the chapter moves through several sections. The first section examines the manner Palestinian novels are read in the US, and contests the adequacy of categories such as modern literature, modernism, and autonomous art to the conditions under which Palestinian novels are produced until 1993. The second section examines Palestine’s socio-political history, and articulates the conditions that make Palestinian novels into an heteronomous art form. The third section offers a reading of Sahar Khalifeh’s 1976 *Wild Thorns (al-Subar)*, which both complicates the Kantian conception of aesthetics and offers an alternative relation between literary text and Palestinian history. The fourth section examines the shift in literary categories that occurs with Adania Shibli’s 2003 *Touch (Masaas)*, in which the emergence of Palestinian “inwardness” refigures the relation between text and history. The section then examines the historical changes in Palestinian society that enable this categorical shift.

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¹ Here I follow Fredric Jameson’s own attempt at developing such a “concept” for European literature. See his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, p.12.

1.

I would like to begin with a few statements about Palestinian literature by Salma Khadra Jayyusi whose scholarly work as well as translation projects are among the major sites through which Arabic literature is introduced to the West, especially to the USA.² At the outset of her substantial introduction to the 1992 *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, the most sizeable anthology to date, Jayyusi explains her position regarding art and the Palestinian condition:

Although I have, in my study of modern Arabic poetry, given attention to social (and political) factors as “important [external]³ forces behind the changes in the mind and consciousness of the creative Arab talent,” *primary* importance has been given to the internal evolution of the poetic art, an evolution determined first and foremost by elements intrinsic to the poetic art itself. This approach is based on the notion that art has its own internal laws of growth and development and that although these laws are influenced by external forces, social, political, and psychological, the ultimate determinant in the development of art will be the demands, needs, and possibilities of art itself at a certain moment of its history.⁴

Drawing a stark line between “intrinsic” poetic elements and “external” social and political factors, Jayyusi continues to quickly underplay such externalities and argues:

Because of their *immediacy*, political factors often tend to *interfere* in the artistic process, sometimes *diverting* it from its *natural course* in favor of a certain *commitment* or ideology. However, the history of modern Arabic literature, particularly poetry, and especially in the decades since the Palestinian disaster of 1948, shows that art has its own way of reasserting its natural course of development and growth.⁵

It is easy to understand Jayyusi’s position, as at least one commentator does, as conservative, conceiving of art in natural terms, and of social and political elements as almost unnatural, incidental factors.⁶ Later in the introduction, this romantic conception of art as an organically developing organ and the poet as “talent” is joined by an idealist conception, grasping Palestinian history as an aggregate of “rich material for literature,”⁷ as if it were sensuous matter submitted to the organizing order of literary forms.

This conception of politics as an external corrupting force that literature transcends or refigures is not Jayyusi’s alone. In his extensive study of the Arabic novel, Roger Allen concludes his reading of *What Remains for You (Mā tabaqqā lakum)* by the most important Palestinian writer, Ghassan Kanafani,⁸ saying,

² Jayyusi founded the Project of Translation from Arabic Literature (PROTA) in the 1980s, and edited some thirty anthologies of modern Arabic literature.

³ Square brackets in the original. Jayyusi is quoting her earlier work here.

⁴ Salam Khadra Jayyusi, “Introduction: Palestinian Literature in Modern Times,” in *Anthology of Modern Arabic Literature*. Ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, 1992, p.1, emphasis in original.

⁵ Ibid, 2. `My emphasis.

⁶ See Salah Hassan, “Modern Palestinian Literature and the Politics of Appeasement.” *Social Text* 75 21.2 (Summer 2003): 7-24.

⁷ Jayyusi, “Introduction,” 3.

⁸ Kanafani was a prominent member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and edited its newspaper *al-Hadaf*. The PFLP, comprised of students, professionals, and educators, was established in the late 1960s as a secular, left-leaning group with ties to Marxist organizations. For some details on the PFLP and other Palestinian political organizations of the 1960-1970s see, Ilan Pappé, *A History Of Palestine: One Land, Two People*, 2004, pp.142-169. A

Kanafani's *life* was one of *commitment* to the cause of the Palestinian people. His *fictional* writings, *however*, do not show that concern with the *magnified realism* that *marks* or even *disfigures* the works of less artistic commentators on the Palestinian cause. His literary career is marked by a constant concern with *form, style and imagery*.⁹

As with Jayyusi, the emphasis on “form, style and imagery” serves as an ideal mediator, as an a-political, ahistorical prism that refigures (but does not disfigure) reality in such a way as to make it distinct from the political and in this way gain universal value.¹⁰ If Allen historicizes the forms themselves, they are said to be derived from European and American modernism (*What Remains for You* is compared to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*),¹¹ but at no moment does Allen ask what was the history of these modernist forms, or whether a history of forms could explain their re-articulation in Palestine.

Even in the most politically sympathetic reading of Kanafani, that by Muhammad Siddiq, we find a similar disjunction. Discussing Kanafani's last unfinished novel, Siddiq concludes:

Though perhaps less drastic, earlier experiments clearly show that Kanafani was constantly searching for ways to adapt the form of his fiction to its political import. Unfortunately, the emphasis was more often laid on political rather than artistic considerations. In fact, among Kanafani's most accomplished works from a literary point of view are many of the earlier stories that have no specific political content or direct bearing on Palestinian concerns.¹²

Siddiq goes on to say that Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (*Rijal fil-shams*) and *What Remains for You*, have been written during ambivalent political times, exhibit modernist styles, while after 1967 and the change in the political programs of the PFLP, Kanafani becomes “indebted” to socialist realism.¹³ Since the latter is seen as having a low literary value, Siddiq signs off by reassuring us that “[Kanafani's] overall contribution to Palestinian fiction and political consciousness is safely beyond doubt.”¹⁴ Operative in these evaluations is a mechanical logic that proceeds to imagine the Palestinian writer as applying diverse forms to content, grasping the former as belonging to art proper and the latter to life. It is not surprising then that Kanafani's literary value and “Palestinian concerns” are eventually constructed in an inverse relation: as the latter decreases, the former increases.

Let me add at this point that it is important to acknowledge the institutional predicament of Arabic criticism and literary production during the time these studies were published. Since until very recently both Arabic literature itself and Arabic literary studies occupied, as Pascal Casanova would put it, a “peripheral” position in the world republic of letters, modernist styles operate for both writers and critics alike as a technique of *littérisation* that endows Arabic texts with legitimacy

more detailed history of the Palestinian national movement can be found in Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement 1949-1993*, 1997.

⁹ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: A Historical and Critical Introduction 2nd Edition*, 1995, p.153, my emphasis.

¹⁰ In this regard see also Hilary Kilpatrick's introduction to Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*. Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun, and Other Palestinian Stories*. Trans. Hilary Kilpatrick, 1978.

¹¹ The comparison to Faulkner is justified and helpful, and Kanafani himself is reported to have considered Faulkner as a direct influence. My reservations stem from the fact that “modernism” is used here not in order to explain Kanafani's text, but rather to endow it with aesthetic value. For Kanafani's invocation of Faulkner see, Muhammad Siddiq, *Man Is A Cause: Political Consciousness and the Fiction of Ghassan Kanafani*, 1984, p.38.

¹² Muhammad Siddiq, *Man Is A Cause*, 90.

¹³ Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

¹⁴ Siddiq, *Man Is A Cause*, 91.

and allows them to “move” into the center.¹⁵ While it is commonplace today to consider the 1960s as a moment of transition in modern Arabic literature, moving from realism to modernism, it is important to note that critics show this tendency as well. For if for Jayyusi, Allen, Siddiq and others, modernism is the standard value while realism is reduced to naïve representation, for the previous generation of critics it was mimetic realism that was dominant.¹⁶

However, the emphasis on form is not simply an institutional effect; one can see how it underlies positions for which the value of Arabic literature is not an immediate concern. Neil Lazarus’s review of Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* is a case in point. Harlow was probably among the first to insist on the practical nature of literature written for liberation struggles, and although I will go on to problematize her notion of “resistance literature,” it is instructive to see in what terms Lazarus criticizes her perspective.¹⁷ Unlike the critics discussed above, Harlow, less concerned with questions of value, provides a different understanding of Palestinian literature in which our inability to distinguish between the political struggle and the literary text is what makes such texts important. In this, Harlow joins Kanafani’s assessment in his study of Palestinian literature written between 1948-1968: “[t]he commitment of most of the resistance writers exceeded the boundaries of art; they are truly affiliated [منتسبون] with the national movement in one way or another.”¹⁸

In his review of Harlow’s *Resistance Literature*, Lazarus offers a sympathetic and endorsing criticism, but significantly points out that by grasping literature and liberation struggles as indistinguishable, Harlow fails to consider the “problem of form” and “literary value.”¹⁹

The primary disadvantage of Harlow's "expressivism" is to be seen in her occasional conflation of "literary" and "social" texts... the *specificity* of fictional mediation is sometimes neglected, and no allowance is made for narrative as a *reworking* of reality. To define narrative as documentary is to specify a certain relationship between it and that represented in or by it. *Documentary only seems to, but in fact does not, reduce the distance between representation and its object.*²⁰

Lazarus, although problematizing Harlow’s “expressivism,” does not do so in the name of a poststructuralist position; he still insists on the distinction between “literary” and “social” texts, which would have been much more tenuous had he been working with the concept of discourse. Rather, his is more specifically a modern and modernist objection, the former (modern)

¹⁵ As Allen mentions, in the beginning of his own career few considered modern or classical Arabic literature to be a worthy endeavor. The slow and uneven stream of translations into English, and Arabic acquisition being more difficult than most languages, are among the reasons Arabic remains a peripheral field of study. See his “Rewriting Literary History: The Case of the Arabic Novel.” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 38.3 (2007): 247-260. Casanova’s study centers around the uneven distribution of literary value on a global scale and argues that “modernism” in the hands of a few “peripheral” writers was made into a tactic allowing them to transcend the limits of national literary fields. See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 2004. See especially, pp.126-163; 336-345.

¹⁶ For the shift of the Arabic novel to modernist styles around the 1960s, see Sabry Hafez, “The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel’s Aesthetic Response.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57.1 (1994): 93-112; Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant*, 2001. For M.M. Badawi’s predilection for realism and *mimesis* see his *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, 1993.

¹⁷ See Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 1987; *Afterlives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing*, 1996; “Readings of National Identity in the Palestinian Novel,” in *The Arabic Novel Since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews, and Bibliography*. Ed. Issa J. Boullata, 1992, pp.89-108.

¹⁸ See Ghassan Kanafani, “*al-Adab al-Filastīnī al-muqāwīm taḥta al-ih̄tilāl 1948-1968*,” [Palestinian Literature Under Occupation 1948-1968] in *Al-Āthār al-kāmila* 4 (Beirut: dar al-tali’a, 1977), 256, my translation.

¹⁹ Neil Lazarus, “Comparative Resistance.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 23.3 (Spring, 1990): 321, 320.

²⁰ Ibid, 323, my emphasis. Emphasis on “reworking” is Lazarus’.

conceptualizes the practical ends of art as outside the sphere of the artistic, and the latter (modernist) insists on the non-referential aspect of fiction, on literature as a process of “reworking.”²¹ It is indeed the prevailing manner in which we grasp literature today, but as much as we should not forget the specificity of fiction, we should also remember that such a conception is *socially and historically specific* to certain social formations, which, as I argue, do not adequately fit the situation in Palestine.

In Lazarus, and the critics discussed above, the modern and modernist conceptions of art have turned somewhat ahistorical. For more than explaining Palestinian literature, such conceptions end up mediating it, standing in between first world critics and the specificity of Palestinian society after 1948. To make this discrepancy more evident, let me turn to a paradigmatic formulation of modern and modernist art. Given that Lazarus, like Siddiq, is working within and around the Marxist tradition, Theodor Adorno could serve as a useful example:

Works of art owe their existence to division of labor in society, the separation of physical and mental labor. At the same time they have their own roots in existence. Their medium is not pure mind, but the mind that enters into reality, and by virtue of such movement, is able to maintain the unity of what is divided. It is this contradiction that forces works of art to make us forget that they have been made. The claim implicit in their existence, and hence, too, the claim, that existence has a meaning is the more convincing, the less they continue to remind us that they have been made, and that they owe their own existence to *something external to themselves*. Art that is no longer able to perpetrate this deception with good conscience, has implicitly destroyed the only element in which it can thrive... A contradiction of all works of Art is the concealment of the labor that went into it, but in high capitalism, with the complete hegemony of exchange value, and the contradictions arising out of that hegemony, autonomous art becomes both problematic and programmatic at the same time.²²

Reading this passage one feels a certain uneasiness with phrases such as “high capitalism,” “concealment,” “autonomous art,” and “labor” as they seem to miss the mark in regards to Palestine. Even if we grant Rashid Khalidi’s claim that although severely fragmented into multiple sites,²³ post-1948 Palestinian society is still a “society,” one cannot in good conscience claim that the production of art under such conditions is similar to that in advanced capitalist societies.²⁴ Further, not only was the Palestinian economy mostly based on agriculture up until the 1970s, the existent conditions of capitalist production even today do not correspond to the mode of production of late or “high” capitalism, conditions which inform Adorno’s conception of art.²⁵ And most importantly, all the commentators feel uncomfortable with the fact that Palestinian literature insists on precisely the opposite principle of Adorno’s conception: it constantly reveals its dependency on external

²¹ It is important to note the non-referential aspect of modernist literature is typical to Western modernism, and not to all types of modernism. I thank Chana Kronfeld for this important qualification. For a discussion of alternative modernities see for example, Jameson’s “Modernism and Imperialism.” In Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Edward Said, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, 1990, pp. 43-68.

²² Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 2005, pp. 71-2, my emphasis.

²³ After 1948, apart from a population remaining in Israel under military rule, Palestinians fled/expulsed to the West Bank (under TransJordanian rule), Gaza (under Egypt’s), Syria, Lebanon, and TransJordan.

²⁴ See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

²⁵ For aspects of Palestine’s political economy after 1948 see, Ilan Pappé, *Modern Palestine*; Joel Migdal, *Palestinian Society and Politics*, 1980. For pre-1948 see *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Ed. Roger Owen, 1982.

conditions, and accepts being grounded on a heteronomous and *not* an autonomous principle.²⁶ The critics seem uneasy with this condition, partly for reasons I touched upon briefly above, and therefore constantly press Palestinian literature into a modern/modernist mold. And when this fails, Kanafani's (and others') "political" narratives are devalued in the name of a normative aesthetic standard that does not fit them in the first place. Once we consider that the modern and modernist conceptions of art hinder our understanding of Palestinian literature, it becomes necessary to turn to a different conception of art.

Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" can serve as a good alternative. Here, Benjamin explicitly explores a narrative mode in which the distance between the object and its representation is not reduced to zero (naivety), but rather is canceled out because the modern social and historical conditions that have brought about such a distance are yet to occur.

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience.²⁷

As is well known, Benjamin distinguishes here between the pure and abstract sign (information) on the one hand, and storytelling on the other whose embeddedness in experience prevents in advance the break between the storyteller and his "subject matter." The suggestive metaphor of the handprints on the vessel is diametrically opposed to Adorno's conception of art as a process in which work is concealed. It is an alternative understanding to the concepts of "figuration" or "concealment," as Benjamin insists that practical antecedents enter the story. Furthermore, Benjamin's formulation, "[storytelling] sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller in order to bring it out of him again" intimates the bodily relation between the narrator and his story, i.e., a state of undifferentiation between signs and their subject.

Benjamin's conception of the relation between the storyteller and the story can easily be thought of as a prelapsarian subject-object harmony, and indeed his melancholic comments about the lost art of storytelling might reinforce such an interpretation.²⁸ But we need to remember that the strength of the essay lies in the fact that its aesthetic observations are embedded in a proto-anthropology that offers a dialectical relation between this kind of aesthetic relation and particular forms of life. Thus, what enables this subject/object relation depends on the historical moment itself and not only on the formal properties of storytelling.

²⁶ To dispel any confusions between Palestinian literature and avant-garde art whose principle is indeed one of demystification, it is important to remember that the latter arises in advanced capitalist societies where, as Peter Bürger explains, art has been separated from daily praxis and the avant-garde seeks its re-integration. Palestinian literature is confronted with the opposite situation where private life, history and art seem inextricable. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, 1968, pp. 91-2. At the very end of the essay, Benjamin adds: "in fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship..." Ibid, 108.

²⁸ For relevant critiques on Benjamin's notion of experience related to "The Storyteller" see, Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 312-360; Neil Larsen, "Literature, Immanent Critique, and the Problem of Standpoint." *Mediations* 24.2 (2009): 48-65.

Reading Benjamin we can ask whether it is possible that the very category of modern literature as autonomous art, and more generally, the way we understand representation today, are adequate to conditions in which capitalist production and the structures of state-governed societies do not fully obtain. Let me now introduce an alternative understanding of Palestinian literature.²⁹

2.

Although they work with modern and modernist conceptions of literature, critics, in fact, do affirm the singularity of the Palestinian case as one that resembles neither the socio-historical condition of other Arab states nor “advanced” capitalist societies. They do not, however, explain the implications this state will have for both the forms of literature and its social location.³⁰ Writing in 1992, Jayyusi explains:

While one can say that all Arabic literature nowadays is involved in the social and political struggle of the Arab people, politics nevertheless imposes a greater strain on the Palestinian writer...

Modern Palestinian experience is harsh, unrelenting, and all penetrating; no Palestinian is free from its grip and no writer can evade it. It cannot be forgotten and its anguish cannot be transcended. Whether in Israel, or in the West Bank and the Gaza strip, or in the Diaspora, Palestinians are committed by their very identity to a life determined by events and circumstances arising out of their own rejection of captivity and national loss... For the writer to contemplate an orientation completely divorced from political life is to belie reality, to deny experience; for to engross oneself for too long in “normal” everyday experience is to betray one’s own life and one’s own people.³¹

I would like to draw attention to the manner in which Jayyusi offers us a tight relation between Palestinian subjectivity, collective life, and history. I note the manner in which she understands Palestinian experience as “all penetrating,” as having a tenacious “grip,” which one cannot avoid, forget or transcend, one which impels not only Palestinians under occupation, but others residing elsewhere as well. While we are used to thinking of imagined nationalisms in such a way, this experience is not simply produced by political organizations, but rather by the historical situation of war, occupation and exile that itself produces political organizations.³² In what follows, then, while I acknowledge the effect of the Palestinian national movement on the production of symbolic forms, I suggest that the historical conditions of Palestinian life and the forms of literary production cannot be reduced to the specific “political” aims of national organizations. So, to be clear, contrary to Jayyusi’s quote above, I reject the notion that one can separate between daily experience, the forms

²⁹ It would have been useful to offer here a historical detour through the conditions that brought about the category of modern literature in Europe, as well as the concept of aesthetic autonomy, and compare them to the socio-political conditions associated with the emergence of modern Arabic literature in Egypt, which is recognized as the first state in which such forms have emerged. However, keeping with the specific argument about Palestinian literature, and since this would have required a long exposition not immediately relevant, I decided not to include this discussion in the present version of the chapter.

³⁰ I am deliberately not using the East-West opposition because not only does Palestine differ from other Arab states, the issue here is less of cultural differences, than of social ones, differences that have to do with distinct historical (yet changing) social formations.

³¹ Jayyusi, “Introduction,” 2-3.

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1991.

of art and the forms of political organization and its aims, because the historical situation in Palestine after 1948 does not allow for such a separation. Thus, I ask to reconsider our understanding of the “political.”

Tying the condition of Palestine after the 1948 war to a general attitude of the Arab writer, Edward Said writes:

In such a context, then, the role of any writer who considers himself seriously engaged in the actuality of his time – and few writers during that period since 1948 considered themselves otherwise engaged – was first of all, as a producer of thought and language whose radical intention was to guarantee survival to what was in imminent danger of extinction... Writing therefore became a historical act...³³

Moving on to discuss the 1967 war, Said argues that for Arab writers and thinkers this war, unlike others, was “immediately historical” in a sense similar to the one Georg Lukács discussed in his study on the historical novel. The Napoleonic wars, Lukács argued, assembling popular armies for the first time and waging battles on a massive scale, created a new sense of history, one unfolding in the present moment.³⁴ Said suggests that this change in the temporality of thinking brought about by the magnitude of the events induced a new role for art.

Hitherto wars had been distant and exclusively the affair of armies. Now everyone was involved. Everything thought or written about the war had the status of historical act; whether as a soldier, a writer or an ordinary citizen, the Arab became part of a scene... Therefore the only progressive role to be played was that of an activist-author forcing the Arab to recognize his role in the struggle. No one could be, or really ever was, a spectator; the present was not a project *to be* undertaken; it was now.³⁵

In Said’s emphasis on the leveling effect of this moment and the performative nature of any writing as a historical act, one can begin sensing how such historical conditions would unsettle the very concept of representation together with the symbolic divisions between literature, historiography and other modes of knowledge. Said’s notion of the impossibility of being a passive spectator, bringing to mind Jayyusi’s formulations mentioned above, furthers the notion that boundaries between subject and world are being collapsed.

This historical situation is intensified in Palestine proper. Giving here a sense of the structural and historic changes of Palestinian society and how they transformed the social location of literature will exceed the scope of this chapter. I will gesture only at the changing form of the “political” after 1948 and the ways this change redraws social spheres.

After the 1948 war, Palestinian society was fragmented into several communities, most of which are still living in refugee camps.³⁶ Historians describing this period talk about processes of

³³ Edward Said, “Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948.” In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 2000, p.48. For similar claims on the historical significance of the 1967 war, see statements by Saadallah Wannous in Friederike Pannewick, “Historical Memory in Times of Decline: Saadallah Wannous and Rereading History,” in *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, Eds. Angelika Neuwirth, Andread Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler, 2010, pp.97-109. Questions about the significance of literature after 1948 inform also the well-known debates in Egypt about commitment literature, especially in the journal *al-Adab* in the 1950s. I discuss this below.

³⁴ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 1962.

³⁵ Said, “Arabic Prose,” 56, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Of the 1.4 million Palestinians living in what was Mandatory Palestine in 1948, 160,000 Palestinians remained in Israel while over 750,000-800,000 were displaced and lived as refugees in Transjordan, the Gaza strip, Syria and Lebanon. See Samih K. Farsoun and Naseer H. Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians: A Social and Political History*, 2006, pp.105-143.

disintegration and slow gradual rehabilitation, changing the nature of Palestine's political, social and economic life.³⁷ To be sure, social and cultural structures had durability that traversed the 1948 war and it is not the case that all structures were obliterated in one stroke. Rather, what arises from historical accounts is that within a decade there emerged a new national movement that, conjoined with other economic and social changes, redrew social spheres and revolutionized older social relations. A key aspect here is the change not only in leadership, but also in the type and structure of the political system, especially the urban one.³⁸

Palestine's urban nobility, the *a'ayan*, were elite families whose genealogy originated in early Islam. Albert Hourani explains that prior to the reforms in the Ottoman Empire, a "politics of notables" was characterized as a form of moderate mediation between the local Palestinian communities and the Ottoman rulers.³⁹ This form of elitist political space, based on family relations and ethics, began changing with the rise of popular nationalism. In 1917, with the Balfour Declaration,⁴⁰ and the ensuing competition between the Zionist and Palestinian political entities, the system of notables was slowly transformed into a national leadership.⁴¹ However, historians and political scientists agree that the 1948 war and its disastrous consequences (in Arabic: *al-nakba*, the disaster) has discredited this older system of politics, which mostly gave way, during the 1950s, to newly emerging leaderships (secular and religious), based in the refugee camps.⁴² In the early stages this national movement was assimilated to pan-Arabist movements such as the Arab Nationalist Movement, but towards the end of the 1950s it crystallized into Palestinian organizations proper, such as the Palestine National Liberation Movement.⁴³ Historian Ilan Pappé explains that while only a few thousands Palestinian refugees engaged in armed struggle, this popular development "revolutioniz[ed] the social structure of Palestinian society.... The young generation now took precedence over the older, patriarchal one; women began playing a more central role on the public stage; and the clans lost their dominance almost totally and were gradually replaced by the nuclear family."⁴⁴ Samih Farsoun and Naseer Aruri argue similarly that while kinship and patronage served to contain the trauma of 1948, over the years:

[M]ore modern sociopolitical organizations... began to be reconstituted or emerge with a modern, secular pan-Arabist ideology, [which] modified those traditional social relations and values. One generation after al-Nakba, an indigenous, more modern leadership emerged and attempted to establish among the displaced communities and fractured society quasi-state

³⁷ See Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 142-161; Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 177-186; Naseer and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 105-122

³⁸ Ylana Miller examines the changing political structures in rural Palestine. See, Ylana N. Miller, *Government and Society in Rural Palestine 1920-1948*, 1985.

³⁹ See Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *Beginning of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*. Eds. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 41-68.

⁴⁰ The Balfour Declaration was first sent as a letter from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour to Baron Rothschild, one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine, on November 2nd 1917 and was published in the press on November 9th. It famously promised a national home for Jews while leaving somewhat vague the national rights of non-Jewish communities, especially Palestinians. It is considered among the first documents that legitimized Zionism's claim to Palestine. Lord Balfour was a British statesman and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1902 to 1905.

⁴¹ Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 79-81.

⁴² See Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 142-168; Shimon Shamir, "West Bank Refugees – Between Camp and Society," as well as Mark Heller, "Politics and Social Change in the West Bank Since 1967," in *Palestinian Society and Politics*, 146-168; 185-211.

⁴³ Spelled *Fatab* in reverse, meaning "victory" in Arabic.

⁴⁴ Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 152. For commentary on the transformation of social structures, see also Naseer and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 105-142; 175-206.

institutions as a framework for the restoration of Palestinian political rights, repatriation, self-determination, and nationhood. This [was] a revolutionary transformation of the Palestinian people...⁴⁵

I would like to suggest that this revolution in “traditional” forms of socialization and political organization could not be understood simply as politics in the way we understand the work of political parties or even popular mobilization in democratic civil societies. Given the absence of stable state structures that erect durable symbolic divisions between social spheres, and the liminal conditions of Palestinians as refugees, such changes in political structures not only affect a longitudinal transformation, crossing diverse social spheres, they also make the very solidity of social boundaries more porous, potentially endowing every sphere with a public and political significance. More importantly, given that these changes happen after a catastrophic war, changing dramatically the geo-political reality in the Levant, these structural changes now *appear as such* throughout the region and are grasped, as Said suggests, as “immediately historical.”⁴⁶ Writing in 1971, Aziz Shihadeh explains: “with the June [1967] War all previous modes of life were shattered. The whole social structure was challenged. All previous values and convictions were put to the test.”⁴⁷ And in this kind of experience, it is not implausible to think that literature has a very different function and location than in so-called “advanced” capitalist societies where a stable differentiation of spheres, even if contested, delineate the social boundaries of art. To dispel any misunderstanding, it is not that Palestinian literature is now *recruited* for political purposes; such an understanding still maintains the symbolic differentiation between the political and the artistic. Rather, given that the historical situation is such that social structures are themselves shifting, and will continue to shift for several decades, it is difficult to determine the boundaries of both. In this context, it is important to recall that the two most important Palestinian writers, the novelist Ghassan Kanafani and the poet Mahmoud Darwish, were active members of political organizations, the former in the PFLP and the latter in the PLO (until 1993).

Pappe, elaborating on the condition of Palestinians in Israel after 1948, offers us a telling anecdote about Palestinian poetry during these years:

Poetry was the one medium through which the *daily events* of love and hate, birth and death, marriage and family could be *intertwined with the political issues* of land confiscation and state oppression and aired in public at special poetry festivals...⁴⁸

Here we read the same kind of habitual separation between “daily life” events and “political issues.” They are intertwined, no doubt, but Pappe is still able to differentiate between them. What is of import, however, is their embeddedness in the practice of a public festival during a period of historical uncertainty. He continues:

The Israeli secret service was powerless to decide whether this phenomenon was a subversive act or a cultural event. The security apparatus would be similarly puzzled in the early 1980s, when it began monitoring festivals organized by the Islamic movement.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Naseer and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 124-125.

⁴⁶ Said, “Arabic Prose,” 56.

⁴⁷ Aziz Shihadeh, “The Palestinian Demand Is for Peace, Justice and an End to Bitterness – the Initiative is with Israel – The Time to Negotiate Is Now.” *New Middle East* 35 (August, 1971), 22.

⁴⁸ Pappe, *Modern Palestine*, 158.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 158.

Poetry embedded in a public practice in such historical times can begin to explain why objections to “mimetic” or “committed” representation are misleading. The Israeli secret service is not simply uncertain as to whether the event is cultural or political; the question revolves precisely around representation. Is the poetry recited there mere representation or is it an act? The significance and social location of poetry is not simply determined by its properties (political content/form), or the context (festival), but by the historical moment that will render even the most “apolitical” content political, and *merely* cultural events subversive. In other words, if in a prevalent conception of political literature, most rigorously defended by Adorno’s insistence on form, the properties of the artwork itself are understood to transgress symbolic divisions between spheres (such as the private and public; the political and the cultural), in Palestine, under conditions of crisis and occupation, these spheres objectively overlap such that poems are political almost by default.

Palestinian literature, very much like the way Benjamin describes the storyteller and storytelling, cannot be easily extracted from this complex historical situation without its meaning being affected, for precisely such an extraction renders it “autonomous.” The critics do just that – they extract it from its sites, and once such a procedure takes place (quite implicitly and “naturally”) the conditions have been procured to regard it as “art.” Palestinian literature at this moment is therefore a kind of act, but one dissimilar to those attempted in “advanced” capitalist societies. For while in these societies, as Adorno would say, great art always seeks to be more than art, to break its *Schein*, its structure of surface appearance and depth, for Kanafani and probably others, history itself makes this transgression the norm.⁵⁰

I believe that Said understands this condition, albeit in a displaced manner, when he tries, implicitly, to deflect criticisms of the “mimetic” quality of Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*. Arguing that the Palestinian “present” after 1948 cannot be “given” but must be “made” or “achieved,” Said understands the crisis in temporal terms as a historical predicament that complicates for Kanafani the stability of temporal presentation and the inherited form of the novelistic “scene.” He argues:

This is not a matter of providing how literature or writing reflects life, nor is it confirmation of an allegorical interpretation of Arab reality; for, unfortunately, these approaches to modern Arabic writing are endemic to most of the very scarce Western analysis of the literature... the scene *is itself* the very problem of Arabic literature and writing after the disaster of 1948: the scene does not merely reflect the crisis, or historical duration, or the paradox of the present. Rather the scene is *contemporaneity* in its most problematic and even rarified form.⁵¹

Said suggests that the crisis of Palestinian temporality is not expressed in content only. Although the crisis is glimpsed in the complex temporal modalities in the fictional world, the scene itself as a European novelistic heritage betrays the fact that it cannot function for Kanafani:

Kanafani... must make the present; unlike the Stendhalian or Dickensian case, the present is not an imaginative luxury but a literal existential necessity. A scene barely accommodates him. If anything, then, Kanafani’s use of the scene turns it from a novelistic device which anyone can recognize into a *provocation*.⁵²

⁵⁰ Discussions of and around *Schein* pervade Adorno’s major writings and his essays on literature. See, *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); “On Epic Naiveté,” “The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,” and “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” in *Notes To Literature I*. Trans. Shiery Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); 24-29;30-36; 241-276; “Notes on Kafka,” in *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shiery Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 243-271. For a short discussion on Adorno’s concept of *Schein* see, Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, 1990, pp.165-176.

⁵¹ Said, “Arabic Prose,” 51, emphasis in original.

⁵² *Ibid*, 53, emphasis in original.

The emphasis on “provocation” remains somewhat vague, but what is more important here is the manner in which Said himself attempts to break the limit of “reflection” and the gap between representation and reality by offering us a “paradox:”

A scene is made for the novel, but out of material whose portrayal in the present signifies the psychological, political, and aesthetic result of the disaster. The scene *provokes* Abu Qais [one of the characters]; when he achieves action because of it, he has made a readable document and, ironically, the inevitability of his extinction. The distances between language and reality are closed.⁵³

I cite here Said’s reading not so much in order to follow its lead, but rather to take it as a symptom. The interpretive intricacy of these passages and others, betrays, I believe, Said’s understanding that the Palestinian present challenges our conception of the relation between history and novelistic language. However, given that he is still committed to articulating this problem as a literary symptom, his reading, although not tempted by content, ends up taking the “scene” as a literary homologue for the crisis. Said’s reading then is a reading that oscillates implicitly, as I see it, between two categories: the novel as “artwork” and novel as “act.”

If we understand that the crisis induces a spatial crisis as much as a temporal one, we will see that the changing “distances between language and reality” are not only a matter of “form,” but also of the social location of literature. As Palestinian social spheres are redrawn, their symbolic boundaries having become more porous, “literature” itself is changing its meaning as much as, following Said, other modes of knowledge are. It is this historical condition that unsettles literature’s structure of appearance and significance, as well as our habitual understanding of the relation between readers and fictional texts.

To understand Kanafani’s works under the term of political “commitment,” or in Arabic “*iltizam*,” is then not entirely correct. As the issue of commitment is fairly well known, and less urgent at this moment, I leave its discussion to another occasion.⁵⁴ By invoking it here, I would like to stress briefly that Jean-Paul Sartre published *What is Literature* in 1949, and the term “*engagement*” received its impetus similarly, but not identically, from the consequences of War World II. Sartre’s term, to be sure, assumed an explicit and implicit engagement with the intellectual scene in France after the war, but he, too, understood committed literature as *praxis*, and distinguished it from the

⁵³ Ibid, *passim*, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Originally, I considered adding a section on the discussion of Sartre’s *engagement* (*iltizam*, in Arabic) and the way the concept informed heated debates in Egypt, especially in the journal *al-Adab*, but this would have made the chapter too long and blurred its focus. I will say briefly that according to Verena Klemm, the term was first introduced to Egypt by Taha Hussain in 1947. It was popularized by Salma Musa, ‘Umar Fakhuri and others and at one point “dominated the Arab world,” as one commentator put it. The term received direct endorsement by Suhail Idris in 1953, in the first editorial of the new journal *al-Adab*, although critics explain that the term was understood somewhat differently in the Arab world. Important to note here that while the term loses its vitality in the 1970s, it is then that Kanafani publishes his studies about Palestinian literature, and demonstrates the relevance of the term to Palestine. As I argue below, this would suggest that the history of Palestinian literature does not follow the main currents and trends in the Arab world. Most significantly, while critics argue that the 1960s was the decade in which Arabic literature (especially Egyptian) shifted from realism to modernism, this shift does not pertain to Palestinian literature as it remains “realist” until very recently. See Verena Klemm, “Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizam*) and Committed Literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq. *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures* 3.1 (2000): 51-62; Suhail Idris, “*risalat al-adab*,” *al-Adab* 1 [1] (Jan. 1953): 1-2; Sabry Hafez, “*Sh’ir al-ma’sa fi’l ard al-muḥ tala*,” *al-Adab* 3 [17] (March 1969): 70-76; Ghali Shukri, *Adab al-muqawama*, 1970, pp.5-18; 129-142. M.M. Badawi, “Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature,” in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*. Ed. Issa J. Boullata, 1980, pp. 23-46.

more narrow political ends of the Communist Party.⁵⁵ He understood the term as rising from the historical moment of France after 1945, and this is how I would like to understand *iltizam*. Although critics understood it as describing the writer's commitment *to*, or adherence *to* a specific political cause, that is, as a willful relation between a subject and an object, it is useful to remember that the word comes from the root *l.z.m* (ل.ز.م), which means necessity. Necessity is the condition that prevents a clear division between subject and object, for it is used to describe situations in which subjects are *impelled* to act, not necessarily out of free will. If we understand the "political" not as a political program, but, more broadly, as a historical predicament effecting all spheres of life, "commitment" would suggest a response, taking a broad variety of forms, political organization being only one of them.

Here is how, for example, Sahar Khalifeh, one of the best known Palestinian woman writers, describes this situation:

At the time [the 1970s], we didn't differentiate between poetry and politics. This "resistance poetry," as we termed it, spoke to us of humanity, revolution, ideas and dreams; it touched our daily lives with the images of the heel of the peasant, the bread of the mother... The new poetry and the new situation made me feel that I had to write - it was not a decision, but a need.⁵⁶

Situated in its context, Palestinian literature acquires the status of practice with which one understands and engages the world. It is a mode of knowledge whose weight is secured not simply by its own properties, but by the context of crisis. Understood in this way, the question of representation is reversed: it is not that Kanafani's works intend simply to represent or imitate Palestinian history, but rather that its readers consider it a model of imitation. In other words, it is written in such a way, and in such times that readers may read it in the same way they read a discursive text, but with the important qualification, and this is what is *aesthetic* or *poetic* about it, that in their hands it does not turn into a source of mere knowledge (Benjamin's notion of information), but rather something with which they make sense of themselves and of the world. To paraphrase Benjamin, here the novel seeks to sink its story into the Palestinian subject in order to bring it out of him again.⁵⁷ I will attend to some of the difficulties this subject-object relation raises momentarily, but first let me suggest how readers of Kanafani attest to this reciprocal relation between Palestinian history, narrative and subjectivity. In the introductory remarks to Fadl al-Naqib's study of Kanafani, the publisher says, for example, "he [Kanafani] wrote the Palestinian story, then he was written by it,"⁵⁸ and we saw the same kind of dialectical relation between writing and Palestinian history that Said suggested earlier.

This kind of relation between subject-object begins to suggest that Palestinian novels challenge another important pre-condition for aesthetic autonomy. As Terry Eagleton explains:

The emergence of the aesthetic as a theoretical category is closely bound up with the material process by which cultural production, at an early stage of bourgeois society, becomes "autonomous," autonomous, that is, of the various social functions which it has traditionally

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature and Other Essays*, 1988.

⁵⁶ Penny Johnson and Sahar Khalifeh, "Uprising of a Novelist: Penny Johnson Interviews Sahar Khalifeh." *The Women's Review of Books* 7.10/11 (July 1990): 24.

⁵⁷ Critics acknowledge the fact that Kanafani wrote his last finished novel *Umm Sa'd* [*Sa'd's Mother*] with this subtle intention. Through a series of daily conversations between the writer/narrator and an old Palestinian peasant, Umm Sa'd, the latter and her son come to terms with the political and economic situation in Palestine. See Ghassan Kanafani, *Um Sa'd: Qisas Filastiniya* (Beirut: Dar al-'Awdah, 1969).

⁵⁸ Fadl al-Naqib, *Hakadha tantabi al-qis'as, bakadha tabd' a* [*This is How Stories Begin, This is how They End*] (Beirut : Muassasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya, 1983), 7, my translation.

served. *Once artifacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular* and can consequently be rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves.⁵⁹

If we understand Kanafani's works in the manner suggested here, then it becomes evident that they are written predominantly for the Palestinians *in particular*, and only secondarily for a general and "universal" audience. As I will demonstrate, this relation begins to change with the novels of Adania Shibli in the first decade of the 21st century, when Palestinian literature is not simply read *by* but also written *for* a global readership.⁶⁰

Palestinian literature has something local about it as well as useful because of the particular history of Palestine. Emile Habiby, one of the most respected Palestinian-Israeli novelists, whose novels critics usually use as an example for Palestinian literariness, conveys this local relation explicitly. In an interview conducted in 1986, explaining the use of citations from classical Arabic texts in his novels, Habiby confesses:

I want to be honest with you. First of all, I always want to give my reader something. Some new knowledge. I don't want it to be only fiction... I want to give information from our heritage to the new generations, in order that they respect it. I do this intentionally, cold-bloodedly... This I always do because I respect my reader... I know for example, in our newspaper, everybody reads my article, I know all the young are reading my article and I want to help them add to their knowledge. And the other thing is that I always want to stress, like all the writers of the Third World, that we have behind us a rich heritage. I want to defend my heritage. I do not stick to the old heritage, but I am not a nihilist. In this, I am one of many, as I understand it, in the Third World... We have to defend ourselves, our humanity, our equality.⁶¹

What Habiby intimates here is how the Palestinian novel belongs to at least two categories: practical and aesthetic. Habiby, it seems to me, understands his role not very differently from the so-called "pre-modern" conception of the artist whose art provides pleasurable instruction. The seamless shift in Habiby's response from his novel to his newspaper article suggests that he does not hold the novel as a separate aesthetic category. The purification of the practical "functions" happens only when the novel is extracted from this site and assumed in advance to be "autonomous." Habiby's confession ("I want be honest with you") suggests that he is aware of the First World/Third World break between him and his interviewers, whom he assumes in advance not to think of art in this "practical" manner.

*

Considering these historical and political conditions as well as the aesthetic statements by Said, Khalifeh, Kanafani and Habiby, I claim that Palestinian literature written between the 1960s and the 1990s cannot be understood under the category of autonomous art, and should be understood instead as heteronomous. It is a category at odds with the aesthetic tradition of capitalist states whose characteristics have been obscured due to the universalist nature of "Western" literary

⁵⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 8-9, my emphasis.

⁶⁰ It is important to note here that Palestinian poetry has a different trajectory, and that Mahmoud Darwish accomplishes this shift earlier.

⁶¹ "Literature and Politics: A Conversation with Emile Habiby - Interview conducted by Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas," in *The Arabic Novel Since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews and Bibliography*, Ed. Issa J. Boullata (Cambridge: Dar Mahjar, 1992), 42-3.

criticism whose historical, political and aesthetic categories, grounded in the problem of “private life” are ill-suited to explain the specific nature of artistic production emerging in other forms of life where “private life” has yet to emerge as such. To be sure, the specificity of Palestinian literature has at times been engaged through the term “political-” or “committed literature,” but such attempts are inadequate as well for they mistakenly take the “political” to be an attribute of the literary text while, as I have argued, the “political” should be understood as an attribute of historical conditions, and more specifically, of the articulation of private and the public spheres. In other words, previous criticisms have displaced the historical into the literary, and offered us distinctions based on formal properties rather than on aesthetic categories. Thus, a history that seeks to grasp the manner in which Palestinian literature imagines and engages the world over time needs to trace the broadest historical changes, and especially the change in the articulation between the private and the public which presents both a limit and a challenge to imaginative works.

As we shall see, this new emphasis on the articulation of the private and the public spheres will have direct bearing on how we understand the relation between aesthetics and knowledge and as a consequence will allow a reexamination of Kant’s concept of “reflective judgment.” To demonstrate these relation I turn to a short reading of Sahar Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns* (*al-Subar*, 1976).

3.

Wild Thorns is one of Sahar Khalifeh’s best known novels, winning her recognition both in and outside the Arab world. Its events take place five years after the 1967 war, the year when Palestinians in the now occupied West Bank and Gaza strip began entering Israel legally as day workers for the first time after 1948. The novel begins with Usama, a scion of the respected al-Karmi family, who returns to the West Bank as a guerrilla fighter (*fida'i*) with orders to plant a bomb in a bus taking Palestinian workers to Israel so as to stop this new form of dependency. While providing the novel with its weight and urgency, this temporal dimension is weaved with a more patient spatial exploration of Palestinian society. Providing a complex critique both of the Israeli occupation and of Palestinian nationalist agenda, as well as an acute historical insight into the changing patriarchal and class structures in Palestine due to labor migration to Israel, the novel maps the political and social relations in Palestine after 1967. In such a map, the guerrilla fighter element works more as a catalyst, quickening the crisis of several social structures at the same time that Usama, as an “outsider,” allows us to survey them. Thus, the moral question regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, crystallized in the opposite attitudes of Usama, the guerilla fighter, and his cousin Adil, the humanist, although making explicit the ethico-political stance of the novel on the basis of which Khalifeh’s “politics” can be identified, has a localized significance in comparison to the overall ambition of the novel.

Before trying to understand Khalifeh’s historical thinking and its relation to the previous discussion on aesthetics, it would be useful to have a sense of the novel’s reception outside Palestine. Here are two examples.

Fadia Faqir.

The major problem of this novel is its voice and perspective. Authorial voices and those of characters overlap and fly into each other... In certain scenes the voice cannot be attributed to

anyone but the author, despite an evident wish not to present her point of view in this particular fictional work.⁶²

Penny Johnson.

Khalifeh is occasionally heavy-handed and characters ruminate far beyond the *scope* of their world.⁶³

I begin with these relatively negative judgments so as to illustrate how *Wild Thorns* brings to light implicit aesthetic norms as well as to examine its ambivalent status as a work of art for a European stance. The value judgment of the reviews notwithstanding, Faqir seems to take issue with the fact that the novel exhibits both “fictionalized” and “referential” (authorial) voices, and grasps this as a *technical* flaw. Although Faqir never provides concrete examples of such authorial voices or criteria for identifying them, I suspect that at work here is a normative aesthetic standard that monitors the boundary between artworks and discursive texts and deems the latter’s manner of presentation to be outside of the aesthetic. We find such an understanding in Freud’s account of the creative act as one of repression in which the secret desires of the author must be disguised in order to “enter” the fictional world, but also in James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus’ famous assertion: “the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.”⁶⁴ As we shall see in a moment, in both cases the appearance of the artist biographical details or artistic plan would be grasped as “vulgar” as they violate the Kantian’s nature-based concept of art understood as an indeterminate relation between the rule, or concept and its execution.

If we also consider Johnson’s comments about Khalifeh being “heavy handed” and her characters “ruminat[ing] far beyond the scope of their world,” we will see, however, that Faqir and Johnson’s objections are not raised against “political” content as such, but rather against its aesthetic form. Such objections, present also in commentaries on Kanafani’s works, found at times to be “too clear,”⁶⁵ “flat,”⁶⁶ and so forth, are directed against the abstract, or “direct” presentation of political content, which will be more suitable for what is grasped pejoratively as “social documents.”⁶⁷

The challenge of this chapter is not to demonstrate that *even* such “documents” have literary value. I already noted above that the “value” of Palestinian literature is not to be understood as a

⁶² Fadia A. Faqir, “Occupied Palestine: The Writer as Eyewitness.” *Third World Quarterly* 9.4 (Oct. 1987): 1408, my emphasis.

⁶³ Penny Johnson, “Interrupted Lives.” *The Women’s Review of Books* 7.3 (December 1989): 20, my emphasis. There are other, more positive readings but the ones cited above give a sense of the difficulties it posed to readers. For other reviews see Peter Nazareth and Sahar Khalifeh, “An Interview with Sahar Khalifeh.” *The Iowa Review* 11.1 (Winter, 1980): 67-86; Issa J. Boullata, “Review,” *Middle East Journal* 42.2 (Spring, 1988): 328-329; Barbara Harlow, “Partitions and Precedents: Sahar Khalifeh and Palestinian Political Geography,” in *Intersections: Gender, Nations and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*. Eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba, 2002, pp. 113-131; “Men Dominate Society: Sahar Khalifeh,” in *Literature and War: Conversations With Israeli and Palestinian Writers*. Ed. Runo Isaksen. 2009, pp. 183-188.

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” In *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. IX, 1959, pp. 143-153. James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1993, p. 207.

⁶⁵ See Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 147.

⁶⁶ Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 132.

⁶⁷ H.A.R. Gibb made this comment as early as 1926, but one can find it also in Fadia Faqir, who argues that these novels are both art and document. Citing Gibb, M.J.L. Young, writes in defense of Arabic novels as well. While I do not think the novels I discuss here are *merely* social documents, I do not attempt to defend them, but rather to re-examine the way we understand the binary between “art” and “document.” See H.A.R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*, 1963, p.161, cited in M.J.L. Young, “Modern Arabic Fiction in English Translation: A Review Article.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 16.1 (January 1980): 147-158; Faqir, “Occupied Palestine,” 1405.

property of the artwork but rather a matter determined within the power relations between what could be called “peripheral states” and dominating states, “literary value” being the enabler of wider circulation, recognition and eventually cultural capital. Rather, I argue that the categorical break between literature and other, more discursive modes of knowledge through which Khalifeh’s novel is judged, is first a result of applying the modern/modernist concept of art (and aesthetic autonomy as we shall see), and second an effect of the extraction of Khalifeh’s novel from its socio-historical context in which divisions between politics and literature, and more generally, between discursive and literary modes of knowledge do not have such a clear-cut existence. This is already somewhat evident in the account Khalifeh provides on the treatment of the manuscript in the Arab world prior to its publication.

[*Wild Thorns*]... was initially rejected by a series of Arab publishing houses. One publisher showed it to a famous Palestinian poet living in Beirut who said not to publish it - he thought my portrayal of Palestinians was negative. After it appeared in French (Gallimard) and Hebrew (Galileo), publishers in the Arab world became interested. Finally, there was a critical shift and the book received positive attention.⁶⁸

The Palestinian poet, judging the manuscript to be portraying the Palestinians too negatively, gives us the sense that in the context of publishing houses in the Arab world, *at that time*, any statement about Palestine has a real consequence regardless of its fictional or non-fictional status. A similar attitude can be discerned in American criticism. Providing a panoramic view of Arab women writers, Miriam Cooke introduces Khalifeh’s novels in a manner not dissimilar to discursive texts. She says:

Sahar Khalifah... has asked questions none have known how to answer: How is Palestine best defended? Is it by staying on the land, even if that staying involved collusion with the enemy to the extent that work must be sought in Israel for survival? Or is it by leaving and plotting and then returning to carry out grandiose missions that do not count the sacrifices? What role women can play? Does the nationalist agenda have any space for feminist activism?⁶⁹

Although not saying so directly, Cooke is implying not only that a Palestinian novel can indeed engage these socio-political questions as any other discursive text but also that its readers would read it so, as did the exiled poet.

I would like, however, to return to Faqir and Johnson’s comments and read more closely their aesthetic judgments. It would seem that both critics suggest a problem of epistemological boundaries. Not only do characters’ thoughts exceed the “scope” of the fictional world, they compete with the perspective of the narrator. This leads to a problem of attribution - who speaks? Let me give an example of such a moment in the narrative. Here is the first time that Usama’s gaze surveys the town, after being several years out of Palestine.

Nothing in the town seemed to change. The square looked the same as always; the hands of the clock still moved on slowly and silently, marking the passage of time. Only the trees and plants had grown taller. The soap factory was still there; a damp smell of crushed olive pulp still seeped from behind its huge door. In the main office of the factory the big men of the town still sat

⁶⁸ Penny Johnson and Sahar Khalifeh, “Uprising of a Novelist,” 24, my emphasis.

⁶⁹ Miriam Cooke, “Arab Women Writers,” in *Modern Arabic Literature*. Ed. M.M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 452-3.

talking, but doing nothing. Everybody was out on the pavement, doing things but not talking. Yes, nothing has changed.⁷⁰

Keeping with the novelistic free indirect discourse, Khalifeh's narrator keeps very close to Usama's perspective. The imbrication of omniscience and mind takes here the subtle form of a spatio-temporal weaving, in which Usama's mind marks the temporal dimension ("seemed," "looked," "as always," "still") while the spatial mapping ("square," "clock," "trees," "factory") invokes an impersonal surveying of scenery typical of an omniscient narrator. Further, Usama's mind is identified by an emphasis on details, which intimates a familiarity, but more importantly a sense of his *own* time in the present. Now compare the following passage not eight lines below:

And yet. The people no longer seemed poverty stricken... There seemed to be a lot of money about. There were more sources of employment and wages had gone up. Prices had risen, but people were eating meat, vegetables, and fruit voraciously, as though they were starved, stuffing their children. Those who once had not owned so much as a sweater now swaggered about in leather jackets. Those who did not even possess a scarf now muffled their ears in fur collars...Girls who had once been servants now worked in factories and offices. They were plumper, too. Something has changed.

But occupation is still occupation...the servant girls were servants no more, and the class ladder was less steep...⁷¹

Although the previous mode still lingers on, the relation between narrator and character is markedly different. Usama is still on the street and in a moment someone will address him, but the kind of observations he makes now are utterly out of sync with the present time of the scene. If in the previous passage the signature of his mind was given by concrete objects in the present time, the shift to "sources of employment," "prices," and "class ladder,"⁷² to choose the most obvious, assume a quasi-omniscient perspective, existing in a different kind of time, an impersonal, historical time. More interestingly, Khalifeh intimately suggests a disjunction of times: while the personal, existential time of Usama seems immutable (nothing has changed), the historical time betrays complete change. What makes this disjuncture difficult to resolve, assuming, for example, that we have simply moved to the omniscient narrator as such, are the tone and texture of the passage that intimate that these are Usama's thoughts. It would seem then that the received category of omniscient narration is challenged in a manner not dissimilar to the "scene" Said identifies in Kanafani.

In the first passage, Usama's sense of time, as I suggested, is inseparable from concrete objects while the second sense of time suggests conceptual abstraction. Usama is not simply shifting "number" – singular to plural – he is shifting "kind" – concepts such as "sources of employment," "prices" etc., are not only aggregate nouns, they are what we might call structural indicators, grasping Palestinian society as an abstract construct, and individuals as social types. The difficulty arises due to the fact that this kind of conceptual and structural abstraction is usually reserved for the omniscient narrator of the realist variety, while here it seems that characters are taking over this

⁷⁰ Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*. Trans. Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1989), 26.

⁷¹ Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 26-27. In Arabic: Sahar Khalifeh, *al-Subar* (Jerusalem: Galileo, 1976), 31-2.

⁷² In Arabic: كثرات الاعمال ; ارتفاع الاسعار ; السلم الطبقي respectively. To be sure, "sources of employment" is not an accurate translation as in Arabic Usama says simply that there is more work, or more employment. The French translation renders this phrase more accurately as "plus de travail." See Khalifeh, *al-Subar*, 1976, pp.31-2. For the French translation see Sahar Khalifa, *Chronique de figuier barbare*, 1978, p.28.

role. Here is another example, this time a conversation between Palestinian youths to whom Usama listens:

Basil's friend was saying heatedly, "look this is the situation. First, at elementary school, we're repressed and tamed. Then, at secondary school, our personalities are crushed. In high school they foist an obsolete curriculum on us and our families begin pressuring us to get the highest grades so we can become doctors and engineers. Once we've actually become doctors and engineers, they demand that we pay them back for the cost of our studies. And our parents don't work their fingers to the bone paying for our education so that we'll return and work for peanuts at home. So the only solution is emigration, which means working in Saudi Arabia, Libya and the Gulf. What's the result of all this? Educated people leave the country, and only workers and peasants remain. And that's exactly what Israel wants to happen. But whether its workers and peasants or doctors and engineers who stay, our mentality and our activity remain the same. We're humble in spirit, feeble-hearted. Men who work like machines, too scared to say 'no' to anything."⁷³

This kind of abstraction, offering a structural and historical account of Palestinian society on the part of characters, let alone teenagers, unsettles a dominant principle of literary description, most known perhaps from Henry James' dictum "dramatize! dramatize!"⁷⁴ but receiving its philosophical crystallization a hundred years earlier, in Kant's conception of reflective judgment.

As is well known, Kant distinguishes reflective judgments whose object is beautiful art from determinant judgments whose object is nature. The latter are judgments whose activity and products are guided by concepts and rules while the former are those judgments that lack a concept, whose particulars are not subsumed under a universal.⁷⁵ Beautiful art is then for Kant first, a purposive activity that is not guided by a preceding rule, or concept, and second, the product of this activity in which one senses a "purposiveness without a purpose."⁷⁶ In this understanding, the sense of pleasure arises from the play of faculties sensing a design, matching and combining elements without an explicit guiding concept or purpose. Let us look more closely at one of Kant's formulations:

Now art always has a determinate intention of producing something... If the intention were aimed at the production of a determinate object, then if it were achieved through art, the object would please only through concepts.... It would not please as beautiful but as mechanical art. Thus the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional, i.e., beautiful art must be regarded as *nature*, although of course one is aware of it as art. A product of art appears as nature, however, if we find it to agree **punctiliously** but not **painstakingly** with rules in accordance with which alone the product can become what it ought to be, *without the academic form showing through* i.e., without showing any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist and fettered his mental powers.⁷⁷

⁷³ Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 59-60; *al-Subar*, 57

⁷⁴ Henry James, "Preface to *Daisy Miller*." In *Daisy Miller*, 1986, p.40.

⁷⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 2000, pp.17; 66-68. But see Beatrice Longuenesse's argument about reflective judgment not being a separate kind of judgment, but rather an earlier moment in determinant judgment. Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, 1998, pp.163-166.

⁷⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 105

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 185-6, emphasis in bold in original, emphasis in italics added.

Putting aside for a moment the validity of Kant's arguments, I argue that they inhere in a displaced manner in the criticism we have examined so far. To see how such a conception underlies the objections mentioned above, and more generally, the way the relation between art and politics is understood in the context of Palestinian literature, we would need to make two substitutions: I argue that what Kant understands as "concept" and "nature," the critics mentioned above understand as "politics" and "aesthetic illusion" (or *Schein*) respectively. Given this implicit substitution, I would like to make several claims. First, if for Kant art executed according to a concept is mechanical, then for the critics a novel written according to a political program is didactic. Second, if for Kant a concept, or rule, appearing as such, foils the natural illusion of art, then for the critics, explicit political content (whatever that might be) unsettles the fictional illusion and exposes the novel as a document. Third, such "violations" shift the category under which Palestinian novels are read from art to non-art. In other words, although never admitted as such, the aesthetic principles underlying readings of Palestinian literature, presented in this section as well as in section one, are grounded in a Kantian understanding of the relation between art and nature. They assume in advance the indeterminate (concept-less) relation between particulars and universals, and use this aesthetic principle as an implicit standard. If we do not want to impose a normative Kantian standard on Palestinian literature and press it to fit the critics' strictures, we would need to formulate a different relation between the universal and the particular.

Let us return to Said's aesthetico-historical observation from the previous section, but this time translate it into Kantian terms.

Hitherto wars had been distant and exclusively the affair of armies. Now everyone was involved. Everything thought or written about the war had the status of historical act; whether as a soldier, a writer or an ordinary citizen, the Arab become part of a scene... No one could be, or really ever was, a spectator; the present was not a project *to be* undertaken; it was now.⁷⁸

What I ask to do here is to map the relation between the Kantian subject and the work of art on the relation between the Arab subject and history and propose that once the subject-object relation between the subject and history collapses so also collapses the subject-object, particular-universal relation on the basis of which Kant's concept of the aesthetic is grounded.

Without spelling it out, Said's unsettles here the paradigmatic aesthetic relation at the heart of Kant's theory of taste – spectatorship and its temporality. Kant's conception of the aesthetic does not spring from the site of art-making (as it does for Aristotle's *Poetics*) but rather from that of the observer, the museum goer and art critic. The knowledge of the art observer, as indeed, as Terry Eagleton explains, the 18th century European bourgeois subject more generally,⁷⁹ is grounded on a subject-object relation, the former taking the artwork, as the world itself as an object of his gaze. In contrast, similar to Benjamin's account of the storyteller examined above, Said argues that such symbolic binarism between the "Arab" and history has been shattered due to epochal events. For these events, which make it impossible to occupy a contemplative stance looking onto the theatre of history (as Kant admits to being a non-participating spectator of the Revolution in France⁸⁰), also collapse the relation between the particular and universal such that the individual grasps himself or herself as "immediately historical," that is immediately universal. Appealing to Benjamin again and

⁷⁸ Said, "Arabic Prose," 56, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 70-101.

⁸⁰ "This revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry... this revolution – I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm..." Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 153

recalling his well-known concept of “*Jetztzeit*” (the time of the “now”), we notice a similar concept of time, history and epochal events. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” tying together the revolutionary classes, the materialist historian and the French Revolution, Benjamin argues that all of these figures break the empty and homogenous time typical of historicism that gazes over completed and past events as an indifferent subject.⁸¹ Such objective historical conditions bear directly on Kant’s concept of the aesthetic as well as on art production. Khalifeh (as Kafka before her if we follow Adorno⁸²) breaks the aesthetic distance between reader and world, the sense of security one has when reading a fictional text because such an aesthetic distance between the subject and the world has already been broken in social reality.

To elaborate on this last point let me return to Shihadeh’s 1971 article. I cite another passage that immediately follows the previous one and repeat only a few lines to offer continuity:

With the June [1967] War all *previous* modes of life were shattered. The *whole* social structure was challenged... Never before were the mistakes of Hashemite rule [in Jordan] so *obvious*. Never before had the mistakes been so *apparent*. *Now*, with the other side open to visitors [i.e., Israel open to Palestinians], *everyone could see* the progress the Jews had been able to make. Something basic was wrong. The *organization of the society*, the values, the ideals were all upset... Not only was the social life challenged but also business life. The difference of working under a more organized *system* was *obvious to any employer or worker*... Thus, a change has become urgent in the mind of the majority who may rightly be referred to as a silent majority. They are obviously heading towards enlightenment, a social revolution and co-existence.⁸³

Scholarship on the 1967 war agrees that it was experienced as a shock in the entire Arab world, leading to the eventual decline of pan-Arabism, Nasserism, and to a period of intense internal critique. I would like, however, to focus on the *aesthetic* side of Shihadeh’s account. At this moment of historical break, past life is not only grasped as already in the past (“all *previous* modes of life were shattered”), but it is also *seen as such* – as a complete form of life that precisely at its moment of demise enters consciousness as a system. Hegel’s idiom is pertinent here: “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.” The crisis befalling Palestinian society then makes the previous form of life appear as a form in itself, and consequently forces the historical meaning, i.e., the universal on the particular phenomenon and alters the relation between the two such that we no longer have two distinct poles anymore. That is, in such moments the abstract and unconscious structure of daily life is revealed as such, such that it is impossible not to *see at one and the same time* act and significance. This historical condition unsettles the aesthetic movement, whose innermost principle is that of an indeterminate shuttling between particular and universal, surface appearance and significance. The epistemological break in Usama’s perspective as well as in other characters’ experience is then a symptom of the existence of historical time on the very surface of reality, as it were.

Although having in mind a different scale of events, Fredric Jameson has suggested such a relation between aesthetics and historical events:

[T]he “appearance” of History is dependent on the objective historical situations themselves... Just as it is in revolutionary situations that the dichotomous classes are so radically simplified as to allow us to glimpse class struggle as such in a virtually pure form, so also only privileged

⁸¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253-264. See especially 261-3.

⁸² Adorno, “Notes to Kafka,” in *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 245-271.

⁸³ Shihadeh, “The Palestinian Demand,” 22, my emphasis.

historical crises allow us to “see” history as a process – and it is also in those crises that “history” is most vulnerable.⁸⁴

Important also is the fact that the coming into existence “as such” of the existing mode of life has to do not only with war, displacement and occupation, but also with the fact that the sheer mass of Palestinians, now working in Israel for the first time in nineteen years, can compare their form of life to another, and as a consequence to grasp it as such. This social and historical abstraction, I would like to stress, both “enters” literature, putting pressure on its received forms, and as Said suggests, unsettles the distinctions between art, social science, and historiography. Thus, it is the co-existence of these historical conditions with the narrative forms of *Wild Thorns* that provide a different concept of aesthetic, one that is usually ignored and misread.

Before moving forward to another example, I would like to point out that this kind of surfacing of abstraction is not necessarily unique to Palestine, to the Third World or the “East,” but is characteristic of periods of crisis and acute social change in general. Many of Balzac’s novels, for example, and the period between the French Revolution and 1848 are often understood in the same manner I have discussed Khalifeh’s novel.⁸⁵ Benjamin’s Paris essay can provide us with such an example as well as help us transition to the problem of character and subjectivity in *Wild Thorns*. In the Baudelaire section, Benjamin observes the problem of individuality. He gestures to Balzac and explains:

The typical characters [in Balzac] seen in passersby make such an impression on the senses that one cannot be surprised at the resultant curiosity to go beyond them and capture the special singularity of each person. But the nightmare that corresponds to the illusory perspicacity of the aforementioned physiognomist consists in seeing those distinctive traits – traits peculiar to the person – revealed to be nothing more than the elements of a new type; so that in the final analysis a person of the greatest individuality would turn out to be the exemplar of a type... [In Baudelaire’s “Les Sept Vieillards”] the individual... testifies to the anguish of the city dweller who is unable to break the magic circle of the type even though he cultivates the most eccentric peculiarities. Baudelaire describes this procession as “infernal” in appearance.⁸⁶

What Benjamin describes here is the contradictory appearance in modernity of singularity, individuality and eccentricity, which have the tendency to turn into their opposite and be revealed as typicality. Again, we see here how periods of acute transformation collapse the gap between particular and universal (here in the figure of individual and type), such that it is impossible not to see the social category, as it were, underlying the most unique particularity.

Similarly, problems of individuality are tightly associated with the very possibility of poetry and art in *Wild Thorns*. Usama, now the determinant agent of action whose sense of time is shot through with history, is characterized as a person who once believed in poetry and art, but can do so no longer.

⁸⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 583.

⁸⁵ Lukács’s *The Historical Novel*, cited above, is an important precedent here, but there are more recent examples such as Judith Lyon-Caen who examines Balzac’s correspondence with his readers and argues that in such historical times his novels were read and used as guides to a chaotic and changing reality. Although not invoking Lukács, she argues that such a relation changed after 1848. Jameson’s broader generalization about the relation between the private and the public in Third World countries, despite its shortcomings, proposes another perspective on this matter. See Judith Lyon-Caen, *La lecture et la vie: les usages du roman au temps de Balzac* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006); Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” *Social Text* 15 (Autumn, 1986): 65-88.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century. Exposé of 1939,” in *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 22.

He'd never been a romantic himself. At least he wasn't any longer, or so he believed. How had he come to this conclusion? Training. Bullets. Crawling on all fours... Such things make you unromantic in thought and deed. Personal dreams evaporate... That was the logic of it all. They'd said many things and so had we; logical things, historical equations imposed on the individual, making him a single number in the equation... Thus the equation takes form scientifically, rationally, tangibly. Thus romanticism fades and dreams die.⁸⁷

And this thematic appearance of the impossibility of art *in* the fictional world returns also as the problem of Usama's character *for us*. For his sense of history also renders his character "flat," one motivated only by a principle. He is unable to develop a private personal life, or interiority, and is portrayed as the most abstract and superficial of all characters. And yet, this is not only the problem of the guerilla fighter. As crisis renders the form of life abstract and palpable, so are other characters unable to develop "depth" and appear to their peers as abstract types. This kind of abstraction receives one of its most spectacular, or "infernal" demonstrations as Baudelaire would say, in the height of the crisis, in which, at the very last moments of the novel, the political crisis intersects with forms of patriarchy, bringing the collapse of the latter. Basil, the youngest member of the al-Karmi family, silently witnessing throughout the novel the effects of the occupation as well as the degeneration of the patriarch, lashes out:

I hate my father because he *personifies* sickness. I hate my mother because she's the *personification* of submissiveness. I hate my old grandmother: she *represents* man's collapse in the face of time. And Nuwar's hateful because she's spineless. She's unsuited to her *role* in life... I'm a *stranger* in this house, damn this house.⁸⁸

The estrangement of Basil invites us to consider this moment in Brechtian terminology, understanding it as the moment where the mimetic illusion is broken and the novelistic apparatus is exposed. But this reading will miss the fact that this kind of Shklovskian "laying bare the device" takes place for the characters themselves, for whom "traditional" life in the moment of crisis is revealed in all its conventionality as mere representation. It is not then that the medium is exposed here; it is life itself that is revealed to be as conventional as a play, one that has reached its end.

And as life is revealed in all its abstraction, the subjectivity and interiority of Basil is affected as well and he is gradually reduced to objectivity: his movements turn mechanical and he sounds "as though [he is] reading a formal statement" or, as having "the tone of a radio announcer."⁸⁹ As this kind of abstraction and conventionality surfaces the older form of life – here explicitly patriarchy – loses its grip on life and at the end of Basil's infernal speech, exposing all lies and secrets, we read of the death of the patriarch and the entry of Israeli soldiers. "The father's hand clasped the table convulsively... His head fell forward and hit the table with a bang... While they were struggling through the hall, a loud banging sounded on the door below: 'Open up!' 'Open Up!' soldiers were shouting. 'Open Up!'"⁹⁰

Finally, as the Israeli soldiers enter the al-Karmi house and discover Usama's weapons in its basement we can see an example of Jameson's argument as to the overlap of the private and the public spheres in Third World countries.⁹¹ Here we can see in tangible spatial form the co-existence

⁸⁷ Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 5-6.

⁸⁸ Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 199.

⁸⁹ Ibid, passim.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 201.

⁹¹ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." See full citation in footnote 84. Although Aijaz Ahmad offered a useful critique of Jameson's concept of national allegory and its suitability to India, I find Jameson's perspective appropriate for Palestinian literature written between 1948-1993. See Aijaz Ahmad,

of the personal (the category of the “family”) and the political (the guerilla cell) that has underlined the entire problematic of the novel and finally finds its resolution when both poles are destroyed as the soldiers blow up the house.⁹²

In the next section, discussing Adania Shibli’s literary works, we will see how precisely this co-existence of the personal and the political is being severed via processes of privatization that allow for the emergence of a civil society, a third social sphere that rearranges the relation between private and political life, and consequently brings about new forms of literary imagination.

4.

Adania Shibli’s first novella, *Touch (Masaas, 2003)*, intimates the sensations and impressions of a young Palestinian girl, impressions that center around colors, silence, movement, language and “the wall” – which are also the titles of each of the novella’s five parts.⁹³ In an anthology of short stories, the renowned Palestinian writer, Anton Shammas, introduced Shibli as a “writer who has turned her back on the ready-made structures and prevalent rhetoric of modern Arabic literature.”⁹⁴ We can have a first sense of this shift when we compare the manner in which Sahar Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns* (1976) and Shibli’s *Touch* are offered to English readers. Here is the “back matter” of Khalifeh’s book:

Written in the Arabic of the West Bank and first published in Jerusalem, *Wild Thorns*, with its panorama of characters and unsentimental portrayals of everyday life, is the first Arab novel to give a true picture of social and personal relations under the occupation. Its convincing sincerity, uncompromising honesty, and rich emotional texture plead *elegantly* for the cause of survival in the face of oppression.⁹⁵

Translated into English in 1989, two years into the first *intifada*, this introduction draws attention to the authenticity and truth-value of *Wild Thorns* by emphasizing its aesthetic directness, as well as its relation to origins (written in a colloquial Arabic; published in Jerusalem). However, because it is still a work of art these values are balanced in the last sentence with a mention of the novel’s artistic qualities, here colored with an appeal to nature as the opposite of harsh social relations (emotions and “texture”). All in all, it seems that the “value” communicated here is that *Wild Thorns* is first and foremost a “document,” and whatever “elegance” it has is secondary. The “back matter” to Shibli’s *Touch*, translated into English in 2010, is markedly different.

“Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” in *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures* (Verso: New York, 1992), 95–122.

⁹² Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 202-207.

⁹³ Adania Shibli, *Masaas*, 2003; in English: Shibli, *Touch*, 2010. The novella was originally written in 1999. The following references indicate the English pagination followed by the Arabic.

⁹⁴ Anton Shammas, “Adania Shibli.” In *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers*. Eds. Samantha Schnee, Alane Salierno Mason and Dedi Felman, 2007, p.131.

⁹⁵ Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 1989, back cover, my emphasis. For a similar technique of authentication in both the original Arabic edition and French translation see Khalifeh, *al-Subar*, 1976; *Chronique de figuier barbare*, 1978.

In the singular world of this novella, this young woman's everyday experiences – watching a funeral procession, fighting with her siblings, learning to read, falling in love – resonate until they have become *as weighty as* any national tragedy. The smallest sensations compel, the events of history only *lurk at the edges*...⁹⁶

It will not be too symmetrical, I hope, to say that we have here an inversion. The newness of Shibli's novella is expressed in an inverse relation between "self" and "history," one accompanied by a new and more intricate style of writing. The phrase "as weighty as" signals the publishing house's calculated anticipation of objections to a Palestinian novella that might be seen as indulging in such miniature sketches at a time in which Israeli occupation reaches new levels of violence, especially after the 2008 Gaza War (Operation Cast Lead) and new levels of global denunciation. If history is lurking only at the edges then surely the self has taken center stage, kaleidoscopically filtering the "referent" through the prism of its consciousness such that the very arrangement of the signifier takes over the signified.

Every night the little girl would go to bed at sleepiness's command, but this night she went to bed at the mother's.

From time to time, she would hear bits of words: "imals," "ker," "Allah," "dren," "tards," "ratila" through the door separating her room from the living room where the family had gathered. "Ratila" was especially difficult. Then she heard the television set click on, though the sound hardly made it through the door, but "ratila" became "abra and tila." After more repetition, Sabra and Shatila.⁹⁷

In case it needs to be mentioned, "Sabra and Shatila" refer to a tragic event in Palestinian history. In September 1982, during the invasion of Israeli forces to Lebanon, Christian militia (Phalanges) infiltrated Palestinian refugee camps (Sabra and Shatila) and massacred its inhabitants. Israeli forces, surrounding the camps, were accused of allowing the massacre to happen.

The prismatic registering of the world (and not only of historical events), and not least the status of the "referent" as a television image, might suggest a shift from "realism" to a modernist or postmodernist idiom. Such a shift, as I mentioned above, is said to characterize Arabic literature after the 1960s, most notably in Egypt with the appearance of the Sixties Generation (*jil al-sitina*) including writers such as Edwar al-Kharrat, Sonallah Ibrahim, Yusuf Idris, Ghama al-Ghitani, and Naguib Mahfouz's own shift into experimentation with stream of consciousness. Palestinian literature, however, cannot be appropriated into this narrative so easily. Although Kanafani's 1966 *All That's Left to You* might be said to exhibit such modernist tendencies, his prose never undermined the relation to history and referentiality as one understands the terms in the context of Western European modernism around the 1920s. Similarly, understanding Shibli's style in such a fashion will miss what is unique about it, for the relation to "Palestine" is not handed over into "discourse" or a "plurality of narratives" as one finds, say, in Elias Khoury's 1998 *Gate of the Sun (Bab al-Shams)*. We would need therefore to look closer at the meaning of the "self" here and how it differs from the aesthetic principle I discussed in Khalifeh.

"Defamiliarization" might get us a little closer to the significance of Shibli's attention to detail. It is somewhat at work in the example above in which the historical "event" is not given immediately, but is rather delayed and deferred. The difficulty, however, arises when we consider that defamiliarization techniques are directed at the habitual and the ordinary, having the intention of renewing our perception and grasping reality anew. By contrast, Sabra and Shatila, and perhaps

⁹⁶ Shibli, *Touch*, back cover, my emphasis.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 56/84.

the Palestinian experience in general, belong to the *extraordinary*, to that experience that never turns habitual as Jayyusi describes above. Shibli's style, in conjunction with other historical developments I will address momentarily, reacts to this kind of historical predicament. Although it filters the harsh reality of Palestine through the little girl's mind, *Touch's* energies are directed not so much at estranging it but rather at weakening its "grip," as Jayyusi says, so as to carve out a space for language and the aesthetic itself.

The little girl's consciousness allows then something like holding history at arm's length. She is too young to understand the full meaning of the situation and consequently licenses a period of time during which events (and more generally signifiers) can be appreciated not for their meaning, but precisely for their aesthetic quality – for their color, sound and movement. When we finally arrive at language acquisition, as in the first example above, words are disassociated from their historical meaning and appreciated either as sounds or as lexemes. This hiatus from history and signification, however, cannot last forever, as the narrative trajectory moves towards it, towards language, conceptuality, and comprehension with which, at the very last page of the novel, we seem to arrive at some form of necessity greater than the girl's consciousness. Concomitantly, as language is acquired, the novella also seems to suggest a (secular?) movement through different modes and genres of texts, beginning with the Quran for children, going through the sisters' diaries and ending with the girl beginning to read classical French and Russian novels.

The once meaningless lines transformed into words that created worlds. Those worlds stood right behind the clean panes of glass.

The little girl started at the beginning, with the first book on the shelf.

Al.Alex.an.der.Dumas

The Three Musketeers...

"Dos.Dosto.oevs.ski.yevski.

*Crime and Punishment...*⁹⁸

In *Touch* we follow then the weaving of both the slow establishment of conceptuality and an obscure sense of history whose deferral, I suggest, allows space for the aesthetic. But I would like to offer a more specific explanation of this important process and its historical conditions of possibility.

I mentioned earlier Henry James's emphasis on the importance of "dramatization," and it will be even more helpful to think here of *What Maisie Knew*, and the manner James explicates its stylistic logic in the preface. As for Shibli, James's Maisie is a "small expanding consciousness,"⁹⁹ perceiving the world in "gaps and voids"¹⁰⁰ such that we learn of that world through her precocious mind. James' early experiment with inwardness can be understood as a displacement in which, more important than the events themselves (the mundane relationships of her parents, Ida and Beale Farange), is the manner Maisie grasps hold of them. Through such displacement from world to mind, James strikes gold:

[These apprehensions] become, as she deals with them, the stuff of poetry, and tragedy and art; she has simply to wonder, as I say, about them, and they begin to have meanings, aspects, solidities, connexions – connexions with the universal! – that they could scarce have hoped for.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Shibli, *Touch*, 64/94.

⁹⁹ Henry James, "Preface." In *What Maisie Knew*, 1908, p.vi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, ix.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, xii.

Here, too, the intricacy of the fictional world is achieved thanks to the absence of conceptuality, the fact that Maisie's apprehensions and perceptions, as James explains, are far stronger than her ability to articulate their meaning.¹⁰² The universal for James is not the universality of conceptuality, but rather the universality of the mind in the moment of its internal perceptions, which James's style makes visible, as it were, to the reader.

James's sense that he found "art and poetry" in Maisie's relation to the world should, I suggest, bring to mind again Kant's concept of the aesthetic: that movement of the particular searching for a universal, which is at one and the same time the property of the beautiful object and the characteristic of reflective judgment. In other words, Maisie's consciousness is a figure for the aesthetic, while James's technique is its instantiation. As Eagleton would say, James, as Kant, projects on the object (here, Maisie's mind) the very logic of the aesthetic. "When the Kantian subject of taste encounters an object of beauty it discovers in it a unity and harmony which are in fact the effect of the free play of its own faculties..."¹⁰³

Now if the relation between Kant's reflective judgment and James' style of writing Maisie's mind is clear, we can see that Shibli's little girl is a similar literary instantiation of this aesthetic principle, of a mind that makes sense of the world without the direct application of concepts. The cardinal question is then what concept is missing in the world of *Touch*? What concept, or "universal," as James and Kant would say, are we sensing, but is never there as such? I argue that what has turned implicit is precisely the historical meaning of "Palestine" as a universal concept capable of endowing meaning to the girl's particular aesthetic experience. In other words, what we see in the apprehensions of Shibli's girl is as it were the moments *before* she becomes conscious of her subjectivity as a Palestinian girl: "the girl tried to understand the meaning of the words *Sabra* and *Shatila*. Maybe they were one word. The word *Palestine* was unclear, except that its use was forbidden."¹⁰⁴ But this aesthetic-psychological principle, entering the novella as "content," as a mind within the world, governs the very world of the girl, that is, it is a compositional principle conditioning what can appear in such a world (i.e., the phenomenal content). Its significance is double: as content it allows an aesthetic space, in Kant's sense, one intimating "Palestine," but remaining un-subsumed by its significance, which in turn provides for the autonomy of the character's inner *private* life in relation to Palestinian history. As literary form, it ushers Palestinian literature into aesthetic autonomy, allowing it freedom from the national struggle that in the past imposed itself on writers in the same way, as it were, a determinate judgment imposes its category on particular sense-data. Thus, if, as we saw in section Three, Khalifeh's prose "violated" the aesthetic principle by flaunting the abstract concepts and structures underlying her characters' experience and consequently her novel approached the verge of non-art, Shibli's little girl crosses over to the aesthetic, and with her Palestinian literature.

The question I would like to pursue now has to do with the social and historical conditions of possibility associated with this change in aesthetic categories. I argue that the autonomization of Palestinian literature is concomitant with the autonomization of the socio-political conditions under which it is produced and that those in turn emerge as a result of a liberalization process that separates Palestinian civil society (the private sphere) from its political sphere. Putting this in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the autonomization of literature is tied to the autonomy of its institutions, which consequently lead literature to gaze back at itself and invent a self-reflexive form:

¹⁰² Ibid, x

¹⁰³ Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Shibli, *Touch*, 58/86.

The assertion of the autonomy of the principles of production and evaluation of the work of art is inseparable from the assertion of the autonomy of the producer, that is of the field of production... the evolution of different fields of cultural production towards a greater autonomy is accompanied by a sort of reflexive and critical turning back by producers upon their own production, which leads them to distinguish its own principle and its specific assumptions. In so far as it manifests a rupture with external demands... the affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of mode of representation over the object of representation, is the most specific expression of the claim to the autonomy of the field...¹⁰⁵

Let me now explain how the autonomization of the cultural field proper is related to the emergence of Palestinian civic institutions, funded by global capital, which in turn brings about new aesthetico-epistemological relation, one turning Palestinian life into a text and the writer into a reader.

While Israeli occupation and internal political rivalry between different Palestinian political factions (predominantly the PNA, Fatah and Hamas)¹⁰⁶ continue to unsettle, and at times make impossible, stable forms of life, after the 1993 Oslo Accords, the nature of the “political” in Palestinian society began to change. Although this process is highly volatile, it seems that for several interlocking reasons, previously communal-political organizations have been professionalized so that by the end of the 1990s clearer (although always contested) boundaries began separating between civil society, proto-state bodies (PNA, Fatah) and Palestinians having a private life. Rema Hammami was perhaps the first to explain this change in 1995.¹⁰⁷ If in the previous sections, I argued that the nature of the “political” was such that it potentially transgressed all spheres of life, Hammami explains that after Oslo social spheres had to be redrawn.

The discussion of civil society was initiated by left intellectuals in the NGO community shortly after Oslo. What had become clear was that some redefinition of boundaries would be inevitable as the PNA developed its institutions of rule in a context in which a large NGO sector had developed in the absence of a state.¹⁰⁸

The trajectory of this long process exceeds the scope of this chapter, and I include here its main argument only. Hammami traces a historical development in which, after the 1977 Camp David accords, the PLO/Fatah together with rival Leftist organizations such as the PFLP, DFLP and the PCP,¹⁰⁹ began mobilizing a mass base in the occupied territories against the accords. Organization took the form of what could be called proto-NGOs: community committees of all sorts (women, health, students, labor, agriculture and others) initially working across political factions, and effectively blurring the boundaries between the political bodies proper and their community bases. By the mid-1980s mobilization was fragmented, each political faction now organizing its own NGOs, and quickly contradictions began to rise between national grass roots mobilization and more narrow political aims. Hammami explains that this first fragmentation was the beginning of the NGOs’ professionalization, by which she means that their organizational forms turned more institutionalized. However, the first years of the *intifada*, beginning in 1987, blurred boundaries again, and only towards its third year, with funds arriving more and more from foreign donors (shifting

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 1996, pp.299-300.

¹⁰⁶ PNA – Palestinian National Authority (sometimes referred to as PA).

¹⁰⁷ Rema Hammami, “NGOs: The Professionalization of Politics,” *Race and Class* 37.2 (1995): 51-63. See also her related article from 2000. “Palestinian NGOs Since Oslo: From NGO Politics to Social Movements?” *Middle East Report* 214 (Spring 2000): 16-19,27,48.

¹⁰⁸ Hammami, “NGOs: The Professionalization of Politics,” 53.

¹⁰⁹ DFLP - Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. PCP – Palestine Communist Party.

from Arab countries to European and American sources) did the logic of NGOs began to change and become autonomous.

This transformation of the mass movement into an NGO community, of mass-based, voluntarist organizations into more elite, professional and politically autonomous institutions was a complex process in which variety of forces were at play [but critics point predominantly] to the dependence on foreign funders... Organizational leadership, in becoming financially independent of their [political] factions, were able to wrest a certain autonomy over setting and managing programme priorities and content... and see the party as something separate.¹¹⁰

In 2005, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, picking up and nuancing Hammami's research, argued in an extensive study that the shift from political "grass roots" organization to a professional, externally funded NGOs community have restructured the forms of "knowledge and practices" with which such organizations engage Palestinian society.¹¹¹ They describe a condition of disarticulation between the civic and the political.¹¹² I would like to emphasize one key element that seems to me relevant for an inquiry centered on the relation between aesthetic relations and globalization processes in Palestine: the process of "disembedding of social relations from their local context"¹¹³ and their re-embedding within international organizations, be they European, or North American. Put simply, if in the case of Kanafani and the PFLP, social and political organizations stemmed locally from within Palestinian forms of life, new NGOs were based on activists, Palestinian or not, who "approach" the local community as if from the outside, as professionals. This new relation is an outcome of implementation of foreign donors' policies that grasp society as a set of problems to be fixed and managed.¹¹⁴ Correspondingly, a new "development" and human rights discourse replaced the older national-political one, favoring short-term "relief" projects and effectively de-linking the political aspects of refugees and their "rights."¹¹⁵

Significantly, Shibli's two novels won awards from and were co-published by such an NGO - the A.M Qattan foundation. The foundation was established in 1994 in England by Abdel Muhsin Al-Qattan, a Palestinian businessman, whose career, beginning as a teacher in Kuwait, getting involved in the establishment of the PLO, and then withdrawing from politics and turning to business and charity work, illustrate well the gradual differentiation of Palestinian politics from the private sector.¹¹⁶ By 1999 the foundation was fully operational in Palestine and began several projects in education and arts. Its mission statement, while not making it into the English translation of *Touch*, welcomes the reader in the first pages of the Arabic *Masaas*. It states, among others, that the non-profit foundation "seeks to support the educational and cultural development as well as the critical thinking [الوعي الفكري] of the Arab people in general and the Palestinian in particular."¹¹⁷ On its website, the language of the foundation follows very closely the language of development which Hammami, Hanafi and Tabar discuss in their studies. The Qattan foundation:

¹¹⁰ Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalization of Politics," 56. For an important critique of Hammami, see Benoît Challand, *Palestinian Civil Society: Foreign Donors and the Power to Promote and Exclude* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹¹ Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, *The Emergence of A Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, International Organizations and Local NGOs* (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2005), 24.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 354.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 28.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 223-233.

¹¹⁵ See Sari Hanafi, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory: Territory of Exception and Locus of Resistance," in *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*. Eds. Adi Ophir, Michal Givoni, and Sari Hanafi (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 495-518.

¹¹⁶ This process echoes an earlier one in which Palestinian notables turned from politics to business after 1948. See Pappé, *Modern Palestine*, 154-155.

¹¹⁷ Shibli, *Masaas*, 5, my translation.

adopts a long-term, participatory developmental ethos through programmes that foster critical thinking, research, creativity and the production of knowledge, while also providing an inspiring model of transparency and excellence;

advocates cultural and educational development as an essential tool of resistance for a society faced by conditions of acute political instability and humanitarian catastrophe.¹¹⁸

It is not necessary, or even possible, to map Shibli's aesthetics directly onto the foundation's aims. Suffice it here to note, first, that the foundation allows autonomy from the political sphere, now understood more narrowly as the proper domain of the PNA, Fatah, or Hamas. I would like to recall that what stalled the publication of Khalifeh's novel was that it was first deemed "negative" in relation to the national cause. Second, the differentiation between civil society and the political sphere changes modes of knowledge regarding Palestinian society, and consequently the status of art and literature. For example, one of the consequences of these new civic practices has been the transformation of local communities into an object of knowledge in relation to which civic organizations are constituted as spectators and observers. In other words, the differentiation of the civic and the political levels has established a new aesthetico-epistemological relation towards Palestinian society. This kind of relation is quite palpable in another short story/diary of Shibli, where the narrator and a Finnish journalist visit Balatah refugee camp.¹¹⁹ The narrator accompanies the journalist as a translator and is situated in a mediary position not unlike the one Hanafi and Tabar examine. The narrator, although Palestinian, confronts a Palestinian reality that is hers, but not entirely, and by translating this reality also transforms it into an object of knowledge for the Finnish outsider. Most importantly, once this social position is created, Palestinian reality turns into a sign, and the narrator into a reader. Meeting Salma, a refugee in the camp, the narrator observes:

[T]he dark rings under her eyes undoubtedly hinted at extreme fatigue that she refused to give in to, and wouldn't even acknowledge in the first place. She was behaving responsibly, trying to rein in the loss and the destruction and, on top of that, to insist that there was something worth living for. After a while, and at the request of the journalist, she took us around to see the holes that the soldiers had left behind...¹²⁰

To be sure, one can find such descriptions of refugees in Kanafani's *Umm Sa'd* as well, and surely elsewhere. I would like, however, to stress the *relation* between the narrator and the refugee. It is not simply that Palestinian daily life is observed, but that it is observed from the point of view of private life, from a perspective of someone who is shielded from these events to a certain degree and can reflect on them. Indeed, the movement of the short story is one between moments and sites of private life and *encounters* with Palestinian life. This is most evident when the narrator encounters the "political:"

March 28, 2002

I hadn't finished my cup of coffee, but was ashamed to say so to the girl who'd lifted my tray with the other cups and walked away toward the kitchen. My coffee!

I came back to my senses and to the two persons with whom I was sitting, the Finnish journalist and one of the political leaders of Hamas...

More than three weeks ago, on March 4, 2002, the Israeli government tried to assassinate him...

¹¹⁸ <http://www.qattanfoundation.org/subpage/en/index.asp?sectionID=107>.

¹¹⁹ Located in northern West Bank, adjacent to Nablus.

¹²⁰ Shibli, "Faint Hints of Tranquility." In *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers*, Eds. Samantha Schnee, Alane Salierno Mason and Dedi Felman, 2007, p.134

And immediately after narrating the incident:

Marib 29, 2002

I went back to bed with my coffee, away from the kitchen and its thoughts.

The differentiation between private life and the political sphere underlies the genre of the diary: Palestinian life is now a series of events, or more generally “content” the author of the diary registers. Once such a differentiation has occurred, the autonomous subject is left to make “decisions” as to its relation to the people. In this case, the narrator decides, in an ironic turn, to change her email password to “Arafat” so to support the struggle.¹²¹

Such diaries appear also in *Touch* and I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to the novella and reflect on the new mode of knowledge it offers in a time of such social differentiation. While the girl’s consciousness keeps Palestinian history at bay, grasping it mostly in its aesthetic dimensions, *Touch’s* movement is still towards necessity, that, which if to appeal to Lacan’s concept of the Real, cannot be refigured or reworked by the imagination. Such necessity is given in a displaced manner when the girl, now knowing how to read, discovers her sisters’ diaries and her father’s work related documents. In the following passage one can notice how both “others” turn into signs for the subject, and how, perhaps for the only time in the novella, the subject imagines collective life existing outside of her self:

About the sisters she read on a sheet of paper or a diary carefully hidden under a mattress or in a drawer behind a picture hanging from the wall. The father’s world came from a little green box filled with papers... Shared events and similar feelings gathered in every diary and on every sheet of paper, transforming the single world of the house into several distinct, contradictory worlds, which the girl’s eyes traversed. She read all the pages and reread them again and again. Without anyone seeing her, she came near each of their worlds...¹²²

While Palestinian history is deferred, it finds its way back into the novella in the foreign world of the family. It stands both as an allegory for the disjunction between the autonomous writer and Palestinian society figured as a cipher, and for Palestinian history as that multiplicity of (hidden) narratives left outside the purview of the fictional world.

*

I have proposed in this essay a preliminary outline for a new conceptual and historical understanding of Palestinian literature. In opposition to dominant readings, I have shown first that between 1963 and the 1990s Palestinian literature cannot be understood under the category of aesthetic autonomy but rather under aesthetic heteronomy and proceeded to provide the historical and political grounds for such a claim. Second, I have shown further that the historical conditions for aesthetic autonomy emerge only after the 1993 Oslo Accords, specifically as a consequence of the new division of political space brought about by globalization. At the heart of this change in aesthetic categories lies a new social relation between the private and the public sphere which

¹²¹ The differentiation between private, civic, military and political life is also discussed in Raja Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing: Life in Ramallah Under Siege*, 2003.

¹²² Shibli, *Touch*, 66/96-7.

underlies different imaginary worlds in each period. It should be clear, however, that the shift in aesthetic categories is not clear-cut. It is not the case that the earlier mode of writing has utterly disappeared but rather that it has become marginal and less visible, especially when it comes into contact with networks of global circulation.

Mizrahi Subalternity and the State of Israel:

1.

As familiarity with Mizrahi history in Anglo-American academia is fairly minor, I begin first with a brief clarification of terms.

“Mizrahi” or “Mizrahim” (literally, “oriental”; “orientals”) designate Jewish Israeli citizens originating from Arab and Muslim lands, comprising, ever since the 1950s, at least half of the Jewish population in Israel. Although it became the standard designation only as of the 1980s, records of similar ethnic designations appear as early as the Yemenite labor immigration to Palestine in the beginning of the 20th century. Due to the capitalist and colonial nature of the Zionist project, Mizrahim were proletarianized on arrival (whether in the 1910s and the 1950s), and are struggling for equality ever since. The designation itself groups together nationalities from North Africa and the Middle East and more than pointing to a real communality, it marks all of them negatively as non-Ashkenazi (Jews mostly from Eastern European provenance). Outside Israel, the designation “Mizrahi” is sometimes confused with the designation Sephardic (Jews of Spanish provenance) although the two are quite distinct. The latter were Jews living in Palestine much before the arrival of Zionist colonial settlers, inhabiting what was called *ha-yishuv ha-yashan* (the old settlement). Although brought together by Zionism, they name two rather different histories. My inquiry centers exclusively on Mizrahim.¹

*

Introducing the 2004 findings of his comprehensive history of the Mizrahi struggle between 1948 and 2003, political scientist Sami Shalom Chetrit argues that “the [Israeli] regime’s ability to oppress and control the protest and resistance has never been greater or more confident as it has during the last decade. Today, there is no organization or movement, nor a coalition of movements, with the capacity to threaten the extant economic order...”² One of the concerns that guides Chetrit’s study is understanding the reason for the failure of Mizrahi social movements “to organize Mizrahim into a political collective that would realize their struggle for equality.”³ My inquiry begins with this failure and its mediated consequences for political and literary representation.

¹ For details on pre-1948 Yemenite immigration, see Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*, 1996, pp.91-122. For Pre-1948 Yemenite and Sephardic political organization see Hanna Herzog, *‘Adatiyut politit-dimuy mul metsi’ut: nituab sotsyologi-histori shel ha-reshimot ha-“adatiyot” la-Asefat-hanivharim vela-Keneset (1920-1984)*, 1986.

² Sami Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews*, 2010, p. x. The Book first appeared in Hebrew as *Ha-ma’avak ha-mizrahii be-Yisra’el: Beyn dikuy le-sibirur, beyn bizdabut le-alternativab, 1948-2003*, 2004. I refer both to the English and Hebrew editions.

³ Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish conflict*, 2. For some studies documenting domination over Mizrahim see the still unsurpassed class analysis study of Shlomo Swirski, *Israel: The Oriental Majority*, 1989). The book was published in Hebrew as *Lo neheshalim ela menuvshalim: Mizrahim ve-Ashkenazim be-Yisra’el: nituab sotsyologi ve-sibot ‘im pe’ilim u-fe’ilot*, 1981. For statistical studies on gaps in income and education see Yitchak Haberfeld and Yinon Cohen, *Pe’arim ba-baskala u-vahabnasa beyn Mizrahim le-*

A useful place to begin such an inquiry can be Pierre Bourdieu's reflection on political representation. What animates Bourdieu's thought and propels it forward is the paradoxical situation where those who must delegate their power and hence accede to legitimate speech run "the risk of being dispossessed of speech [due to] the discordance between what they have to say (which they can discover through this very discordance) and what is being said by the authorized speech of the spokespersons."⁴ The question that requires reflection here is then not simply who can speak, inviting us to forgo, once the dominated have acceded to official speech, the discontinuity between representation and its object. Somewhat different than the Indian case Gayatri Spivak discusses, the Mizrahi subaltern has spoken and continues to speak.⁵ Chetrit and others have documented many instances of such popular revolts, the most significant examples of which were those of the residents of Wadi A-Salib (1959) and the Mizrahi Black Panthers movement, operating between 1971 and 1973.⁶ Rather, a more suitable question will be to ask whether the subject position of the dominated and its form of knowledge can be taken to remain the same once they have entered into official and state-sanctioned relations of representation. Chetrit explains, for example, that the Mizrahi Black Panthers were able to put forward a radical critique of Israeli society, while ultimately failing to obtain the position of "legitimate representatives" in the public's eye.⁷ In contradistinction, as sociologist Deborah Bernstein argues, once acting in parliament, via other parties, their critique has become much more moderate.⁸ In the 1990s, sociologist Shlomo Swirski noted a similar phenomenon: "the Mizrahi leadership in the parties is today the first obstacle in the way for political change. It speaks "in the name of" the residents of the projects and development towns, but the voice coming from its throat is the voice of the administration."⁹ In other words, Mizrahim seem to have been able to accede to positions of "speakers," yet once official and legitimate speech has been secured, a discontinuity was introduced between the subject of representation and the object of representation. Relying on Chetrit and Bourdieu, I suggest that this structural condition is not a transcendent characteristic of representation as such, but rather the result of the sanctioned entry of Mizrahi representatives into the Israeli public sphere. By "sanctioned entry" I mean that Mizrahi representatives conceive of the Mizrahi through the medium and form of the state and as subjects of civil society, while the existence of the Mizrahi subaltern is predicated precisely on its exclusion from this sphere. Let me show how this split between subject and subaltern is played out in the new vein of postcolonial/post-Zionist criticism.

Since the 1990s, especially after Ella Shohat has introduced Mizrahi history to humanities circles in Anglo-American academia,¹⁰ postcolonial/post-Zionist scholars in Israel have insisted on the capacity of the Mizrahi "to speak as a subject."¹¹ In 1999, in a major conference dedicated to Mizrahi scholarship, several senior Israeli scholars argued that the new Mizrahi is "speaking as a

Ashkenazim be-Yisra'el 1975-1992, 1995; Yitchak Haberfeld and Yinon Cohen, *Hitpatbut ha-pe'arim ha-'adatiyim be-kerev beny ha-dor ha-shevi be-Yisra'el*, 1998.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Mystery of the Ministry: From Particular Wills to the General Will." *Constellation* 11.1 (2004): 42.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, 1988, pp. 271-313.

⁶ See Chetrit, *Intra Jewish Conflict*; Hanna Herzog, 'Adatiyut politit, 155-159; Deborah Bernstein, "Ha-panterim ha-sborim: Konflikt u-meh'a ba-bevra ha-yisraelit." *Megamot* 25.1 (September 1979): 65-80.

⁷ Chetrit, *Intra Jewish Conflict*, 172-180.

⁸ Bernstein, "Ha-panterim."

⁹ Cited in Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*, 278.

¹⁰ Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims." *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn, 1988): 1-35.

¹¹ See *Kolot Mizrahiyim: likrat si'ab Mizrahi badash 'al ha-bevrah veba-tarbut ha-Yisre'lit*. (Eds.) Guy Abutbul, Lev Grinberg and Pnina Motzafi-Haller, 2005); *Mizrahim be-Yisra'el, 'iyun bikorti mebudash*. (Eds.) Hannan Hever, Yehouda Shenhav and Pnina Motzafi-Haller, 2002.

subject, trying to understand social phenomena and the essence of Israeliness out of an internal Mizrahi gaze.”¹² According to the participants of the conference, “Mizrahiness stop[ped] being [on] the ‘margins’ of academic research and [became] the center, an analytic and political site from which [Mizrahi] voices speak themselves.”¹³

The proponents of this position were fully aware that the accession to speech by Mizrahi intellectuals might be at odds with the dominated position of Mizrahi working class and poor. Invoking Spivak’s well known intervention, they acknowledge that “the production of this [new Mizrahi] perspective is complex...especially if it is done by intellectuals whose life experiences and epistemic stance are limited, as Spivak argued.”¹⁴ However, they conclude that they can bridge the gap between the subaltern and the intellectual because:

Most of us, apart from being academics... are also active in the cultural and social fields and are in one way or another a part of what we call today “politics of identity.” A major part of the positions produced in this book are a result of our *life experiences*... Our position – as *both intellectuals and Mizrahi political subjects* – allows us to blur (or make dull) Spivak’s conclusion as to the ability of the subalterns to speak.¹⁵

Thus, the knowledge produced by Mizrahi intellectuals avoids the pitfalls Spivak discusses because they are *both* subalterns and intellectuals. In order to put forward their critique, Mizrahi intellectuals must posit then a continuity between their “life experiences” as Mizrahim and their intellectual position without taking into account the institutional mediations exerted by the university, and ultimately their class. Such theoretical patchwork indeed blurs Spivak’s conclusion, that is, disavows it.

Nothing speaks to this disavowal better than the displacement of Spivak’s conception of the subaltern. Subalterns are neither academic activists “in the cultural and social fields,” nor are they part of the “politics of identity” exercised mostly in the metropolitan areas of Israel, if not only in Tel-Aviv – they are precisely those excluded from these fields and practices. The elision of the difference between the Mizrahi subaltern and the Mizrahi intellectual is the denial of the distance crossed from periphery to center, from the school to university, from the family to the political association, from being excluded from civil society to being part of it – all are changes that profoundly alter the subject position of the individual Mizrahi without, however, entailing a structural change in the position of Mizrahim as a whole. This long and solitary odyssey comes to grief with the realization that the attainment of the goal - official speech - has meant the loss of origin. To paraphrase Spivak’s conclusion about the fate of the Indian postcolonial scholar, the Israeli Mizrahi scholars cannot acknowledge that their “privilege is their loss.”¹⁶ The misrecognition of their own subject position leads Mizrahi intellectuals to double as subaltern and scholar and thus to underplay existing social discontinuities.

For Israeli sociologists, the political surface of these discontinuities looks like this: while Mizrahi intellectuals finds themselves on the secular left, taking Israeli nationalism as their primary object of critique and promoting an inclusive Arab-Jewish identity, Mizrahi subalterns find themselves for the most part on the religious right, instrumentalizing their inclusion in the Israeli republic so as to struggle in an ethnically diverse labor market, and lend their vote to ethnocentric

¹² Abutbul et al, *Kolot Mizrahayim*, 24.

¹³ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴ Hever et al. *Mizrahim be-Yisra’el*, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid, emphasis added.

¹⁶ Spivak, “Subaltern,” 287.

political projects.¹⁷ Staying even on this surface level, it will not be inaccurate to suggest that the ethnic designation “Mizrahi” covers over real social discontinuities *within* this group that precede their political expression. This social discontinuity is acknowledged but only accidentally, as if it has no bearing on the new Mizrahi critical knowledge. Thus, Lev Grinberg, in the conference mentioned above, can discuss the new Mizrahi subject as a cultural identity during his formal paper presentation, while during the more informal Q&A he brings up a very different line of thinking:

[I] would like to bring up something that is not discussed here... Apart from the important and interesting discussions we engage in here, there is a political context taking place outside that we do not discuss... I argue that [after the 1999 elections we can see] a Mizrahi class located on the periphery... and [another] group of Mizrahim that is able to integrate. The price that [this last group] will demand is a cultural price, that is, recognition as a cultural group and this will be a relatively cheap price. But those on the periphery demand also material resources and that is a different matter.¹⁸

He then goes on to explain, as Chetrit does elsewhere,¹⁹ that the religious-Mizrahi party SHAS, mostly on the right, has come to represent these “peripheral” Mizrahim.²⁰ What Grinberg actually describes here is a class analysis internal to Mizrahim that is dissimulated by the secular-religious, as well as by a right-left split.²¹

It is not accidental that the category of “class” (softened here by the geographical term “peripheral”) enters this major conference incidentally, subversively, as if “from below.” As sociologist Uri Ram has argued, since the early 1990s with the establishment of the journal *Theory and Criticism*, critical circles on the Israeli left have shifted from Marx to Foucault, from critique of ideology to critique of discourse.²² Specifically, in the Mizrahi case, paradigms of analysis have shifted from Swirski’s groundbreaking analysis of class relations in Israel, beginning in the late 1970s to Ella Shohat’s postcolonial interventions, beginning in 1988.²³ Although poststructuralist critique in the US and France has contributed significantly to shake a few positivist Marxist positions, such a shift in critical categories in Israel left unattended the “economic.” And indeed, with the historic eruption of the 2011 summer protests, revolving predominately about questions of economic inequality and liberalization, this poststructuralist and postcolonial theory has remained mostly silent, lacking relevant concepts to explain such events and their causes.

My intention here is not to reconstruct an orthodox class category and “locate” its corresponding positive content in literary works. Such a reading will be hard pressed to find such conscious class literary content for the simple reason, with which I began, that other than the rare

¹⁷ See Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: MacWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem*, 2008; *The New Israel: Peacemaking and Liberalization*. (Eds.) Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, 2000; Danny Gutwein, *Zebut mul ma’amad: rav-tarbutiyut ke-ideologya ne’oliberalit. Te’orya u-vikoret* 19 (Fall 2001): 241-257.

¹⁸ Abutbul et al, *Kolot Mizrabiyim*, 218-219.

¹⁹ Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*, 152-199.

²⁰ In 1999, the third largest party in parliament with 430 thousand votes.

²¹ Political scientist Yoav Peled, discussing SHAS, arrives at a similar conclusion: “as a rule, the data that attest to a real gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim conceal the emergence of a social-economic gap internal to Mizrahim.” Yoav Peled, “Arye sha’ag – mi lo ira.” In *Mizrahim be-Yisra’el*, 278.

²² Uri Ram, “Mizrahim or *Mizrabiyut*? Equality and Identity in Israeli Critical Social Thought.” *Israel Studies Forum* 17.2 (2003):114-130. For a critique in the same vein see Ehud ‘Ein-Gil and Moshé Machover, “Zionism and Oriental Jews: A Dialectic of Exploitation and Co-optation.” *Race and Class* 50.3 (January 2009): 62-76. For the difference between Ella Shohat’s critique and that of Yehouda Shenhav see Moshe Behar, “Mizrahim, Abstracted: Action, Reflection, and the Academization of the Mizrahi Cause.” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37.2 (Winter 2008): 89-100.

²³ Swirski, *Lo nehsbalim*; Shoht “Sephardim in Israel.”

moments discussed above, Mizrahim did not organize as a class and did not develop a sustained class critique. The importance of “class” and the “economic” is then precisely as a negative measure in two important ways: first, they will disclose the limits of the postcolonial/post-Zionist critique, and second, offer us, as Fredric Jameson would say, a way to the unconscious materials of Mizrahi literary works.

To explain the gap between the Mizrahi representative and the Mizrahi subaltern from which a new approach to Mizrahi literature will be possible, we would need to understand both the significance of the conceptual shift in the category of the “Mizrahi” as well as the socio-historical conditions that are associated with it. In academic vernacular, such a conceptual shift is often understood as a dematerialization of the Mizrahi into “Mizrahiness” such that socio-economic questions are turned cultural. This analysis, however correct, is not precise enough not least because Mizrahi activists and scholars never ceased to pursue socio-economic questions. The cardinal difference between the two understandings of the Mizrahi is predicated more precisely on their different relation to the Israeli social formation. Let us return to Marx’s early understanding of the working class situated in his critique of Hegel’s doctrine of the state: “[T]he class of immediate labour, of concrete labour, [does] not so much constitute a class of civil society as provides the *ground* on which the circles of civil society move and have their being.”²⁴ Let us rewrite this formulation in Kantian terms and offer the following distinction: while in Swirski the category of the Mizrahi “working class” provides one of the *conditions of possibility* (the ground) of the Israeli social formation, the new postcolonial approach conceives the Mizrahi as a “social identity,” as a member of civil society and thus presupposes it as a *phenomenal part* (as appearance) of the Israeli nation state. The former formulation posits a constitutive a-symmetry and *inequality* between the Mizrahi and civil society, while the latter posits the Mizrahi as a member of civil society, conceived as the sum of its parts, which, however unequal, are nonetheless *equivalent*.²⁵ What guarantees the formal equivalence of the Mizrahi and procures its legitimate speech is precisely the law of the state under which all citizens are equal *in form*. Thus, in an Oedipal manner where the hand of the perpetrator is also the hand that exercises the law of the sovereign, the medium of the state through which the Mizrahi accedes to legitimate speech and is recognized is also the medium that obscures its own conditions of possibility.

Here we find then the uncritical kernel of Mizrahi post-Zionist/postcolonial criticism – for by playing the game of appearances and “naively” demanding its equal rights as a member of civil society as if unaware of the “other scene” of power (call this Mizrahi naivety) it must presuppose the state as an unquestioned, *a-priori* substance, and is thus pushed to displace the question over the conditions of possibility of the Israeli social formation into the question of the phenomenal content of Israeli nationalism. Only when we are silent over the “unconditioned” (the state) can we begin to talk and argue about its predicates, substituting one nationalism for another. It is for this reason that ever since the late 1980s Israeli postcolonial criticism has conceived of the Mizrahi only in so far as it proffered it an alternative hybrid content to the pseudo-European content of Israeli nationalism. Articulated from this ‘statist’ position, it is not surprising that the Mizrahi was associated with the Palestinian for its plight is precisely predicated on the national level and not on the social formation as a whole. For the same reasons, literary criticism in Israel and the US centered on the Mizrahi replaced him with the formal, socially empty concept “Arab-Jew.”

²⁴ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State,” trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, in *Early Writings*, 1992 [1843], pp. 146-147, emphasis added.

²⁵ Following Hegel’s Master and Slave dialectic, Kojève develops the argument that once the battle for *equality* is lost for the slave, the latter can demand only its *equivalence* to the Master by an appeal to the law. See Alexandr Kojève, *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*, trans. Bryan-Paul Frost and Robert Howse, 2000.

Such a conceptual shift needs also to be related to socio-historical changes; it is, in a way, the expression of the gradual entry of the Mizrahim not so much into the middle classes, but rather into civil society and the public sphere whose language they adopt and through the medium of which they become Subjects. Such a shift is concomitant with larger structural changes historians and sociologists term the “globalization of Israel.”²⁶ As it shifts from a statist model, in which the economic sphere is subordinated to the political one, to a globalized model where the two spheres are more symbolically separated, civil society as the site of private life and its attendant discourses (primarily civil and human rights) emerges as that semi-autonomous social sphere that takes the state as such as its object of criticism while leaving the conditions of its own autonomy unexamined. Due to this process, the more the Mizrahi seeks its formal equality through the language of civil society and the state, through what Jacques Lacan would call the Symbolic, the more its critical discourse is unable to account for the Real of the subaltern; the more the Mizrahi turns into an autonomous Subject the more he is unable to account for his own conditions of autonomy, his unconscious.

If we do not want to continue misrecognizing the Mizrahi through the state and civil society, if we do not want Mizrahi literature to be co-opted for a liberal post-Zionist project that leaves questions of domination not simply unanswered but not even posited, we will need to return to the “other” of symbolic phenomenon, to the Mizrahi-as-condition of possibility.

But what political and literary forms would take the “conditions of possibility” of appearance itself? Stated in Kantian terms, if the state and civil society (as Subject) provide the symbolic form and law under which social phenomena appear then the conditions of possibility of the Subject would appear, *for it*, not only outside the law, but also outside form. Further, since historically the Mizrahi never achieved political autonomy and was pushed to solve its plight through the legitimate language of the state and civil society, such subaltern forms will not appear as such in Mizrahi literature, but rather in a displaced language, one that will be unrecognizable for contemporary post-Zionist readings.

We can find an excellent example for such forms in Shimon Ballas’s *The Transit Camp* [*Ha-ma’abara*], a novel that is doubly important for this discussion.²⁷ First, being that Ballas’s novel is one of the cornerstones of the new canon of the post-Zionist stance²⁸ an alternative reading, going against its grain, will serve also to discuss the limits of this theoretical stance. Second, *The Transit Camp*, although published in 1964 was composed in the early 1950s, a mere 4-5 years after the establishment of Israel, and as such is among those rare novels in which we can glimpse traces of literary and political materials that have not yet been rewritten by the aesthetic and political categories of the young state.²⁹ The following reading will seek then to demonstrate how the efforts of the Mizrahi intellectual to enter official state relations of representation, cast in the omniscient language of the realist novel, mediate and ultimately render illegible other political and literary forms that insist on remaining outside such state relations. As we shall see such subaltern forms would appear precisely as non-novelistic as well as “non-realist,” both literarily and politically.

²⁶ Ram, *Globalization*; Shafir and Peled, *New Israel*.

²⁷ Shimon Ballas, “*Ha-ma’abara*” in *Tel-Aviv Mizrahi – Trilogy*, 2003.

²⁸ See Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*, 2002, pp. 140-176.

²⁹ Ballas wrote the novel first in Arabic during the early 1950s, translated it himself into Hebrew and then published it with *Am-Oved* in 1964. I refer both in the main text and in footnotes to the English title of the novel. The edition I use was reprinted in Ballas’ trilogy *Tel-Aviv Mizrah – Trilogy*, whose title refers to the second novel in the trilogy. I refer to the title *The Transit Camp* so to avoid confusion with the trilogy’s title.

2.

Shimon Ballas's *The Transit Camp* is set in an imaginary, mostly Iraqi immigrant transit camp in the early 1950s, just a few years after the establishment of Israel.³⁰ This period was characterized by mass immigration of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands to Israel and constitutes the major encounter between the soon-to-be “Mizrahim” and the Zionist state.³¹ According to Shlomo Swirski and Deborah Bernstein, this encounter, beginning in 1949 and continuing through the 1950s, was embedded in Israel's economic integration into the world economy and ultimately led to the proletarianization of the immigrants.³² The major social loci of this process, as Ballas's title suggests, were indeed 127 transit camps scattered all over Israel but mostly located in low-density areas so as to achieve control over the newly formed state. There, far from urban areas, not yet speaking the Hebrew language, unorganized and managed by a centralized political system, these immigrants lived in a state of massive unemployment and were gradually turned into a cheap labor force.³³

Embedded in this historical moment, *The Transit Camp* opens with the problem of acute unemployment; the immigrants are unable to provide for their families and life in the transit camp quickly becomes unbearable. This condition reaches a point of crisis when a doctor refuses to enter the muddy terrain of the transit camp, an event leading to a delivery of a stillborn baby. As a response a few primary characters decide to initiate a general assembly meeting in the course of which a committee is to be chosen to represent the immigrants before the Zionist institutions. This political process and the literary forms that underlie it will be my object of reading here.

It is important to note at the outset that if we look closely at this political process in relation to the overall narrative, we find that the novel actually tells two stories: one narrates the encounter of the immigrants *as a whole* with the Zionist state; the other narrates the *internal* response of the immigrant community to this crisis. The narratives are, of course, not separated. Rather, the encounter with the state and capital leads to the internal response in the form of a political process, i.e., an internal system of political representation. This process leads further to the break-up of the immigrants' community into two – the immigrants and those who, in the course of the narrative, are turned into their representatives. Most of the novel's materials engage this internal process, while the contact with the state/capital is quite limited, even perfunctory. And yet, the major contemporary readings of the novel by scholars working with a postcolonial conceptual framework attend to the contact between the state and the immigrants as a whole, and for the most part disregard the historical, political and literary significance of the internal narrative.³⁴ This betrays both their limited literary optic, but more importantly their “statist” political and historical perspective. For the contact with state grasps the immigrant community already under the form of the state as one entity and tells a story of an encounter between two groups, while the internal narrative, qualitatively different, tells a story of three: the Zionist state/capital and the two groups within the immigrant community: the immigrants and their representatives. Totalizing the historical moment as an encounter between

³⁰ Ballas discusses the conditions surrounding the publication and reception of the novel in his autobiography, Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 2009, pp. 50, 70, 78-87. The term ‘Jews from Arab Lands’ is of course problematic, as it excludes Jews from Iran, for example. I use it for purposes of convenience.

³¹ By May 1959, the state of Israel absorbed 481,603 “Mizrahim” (including immigrants from Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia and India). See Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*, 53. Clearly the populations in parentheses do not merit either the term Mizrahim” or the term “Jews from Arab lands”; such an amalgamation is an outcome of the “Ashkenazi” term taking the center and turning almost all other populations into “others” in relation to it.

³² Swirski, *Lo nehsbalim*; Deborah Benstein, “Ma’abarot bi-snot ha-hamishim.” *Mabbarot le-mebkar ule-vikoret* 5 (November 1980): 5-49.

³³ Unemployment reaching 40-50%, while the national average was 6-10%. See Bernstein, “Ma’abarot,” 20.

³⁴ Hever, *Modern Hebrew Canon*, 140-174; Batya Shimony, *‘Al saf ha-ge’ulah: sipur ha-ma’abara-dor rishon ve-sheni*, 2008.

two entities – the Zionist state and the immigrants - the critical gaze of Israeli critics misrecognizes the internal break within the immigrant community and takes for granted the cardinal question, i.e., who tells the story of this encounter and in what literary forms. This disregard is not accidental; it betrays the motivation of Israeli critics on the left to mobilize Ballas’s narrative for a critique of Zionism as a cultural-political ideology, and expose its pseudo universalism. While important in and of itself, this literary-political perspective renders unavailable, or worse illegible, questions that elude this “statist” and “national” horizon, which, if considered, could unsettle not only their literary readings, but also the multicultural project they advance.

The political process that unfolds in the camp is too intricate to reproduce here. In essence, three political ideologies as well as political practices compete for the residents’ votes. Yosef Shabi, the protagonist, a member of the communist party and the camp’s unofficial leader, articulates not so much a communist option, but rather simply a democratic and egalitarian one.³⁵ He grasps the transit camp’s residents as citizens of the state, equal in principle to their Zionist/Ashkenazi counterparts and correspondingly he insists on a general assembly in which all will participate in electing a committee. Over and against Yosef, two other candidates present themselves. The first is Eliyahu ‘Eyni, a *déclassé* Iraqi dignitary. Corresponding to his class and station in Iraq is his social and political ideology: a vision of an oligarchic society, a political tutelage of the upper classes, for whom the masses are like children who cannot take care of themselves.³⁶ ‘Eyni’s reactionary politics seek to forestall the general assembly, advocating instead an appointed committee of dignitaries. The third and more serious candidate is Haim, nicknamed “Haim-committee” for his relentless desire to form one. Although somewhat antagonistic to the Zionist administration, Haim articulates the Zionist “ethnic” representation. He conceives of the Iraqi immigrants as a dominated ethnic community and envisions a politics of exchange in which Iraqis will put in the service of the state the knowledge about the enemy (Arabic language and culture), and will be rewarded with an upgrade in their standing within the new Israeli state.³⁷ Haim’s politics of ethnic clientalism favors an appointed manager (himself) that will act as a liaison between the transit camp and state officials.

In the last moments of the novel, after two attempts at establishing democratic procedures to elect a committee fail, the candidates agree on Haim’s solution, i.e., giving up electing a committee and instead appointing a manager (himself).

We will invite the best and most loyal in the transit camp, without ‘Eyni and the likes of him. We will articulate our demands and choose one of us to the position of the manager. Then we will go to the [Jewish] Agency and tell them that the transit camp suggests that such and such a person be manager...

“I have no objection to such a meeting...” [Yosef said].³⁸

What is remarkable about this moment is that Yosef does not mind giving up calling for another general assembly and basically grants himself and Haim executive powers to act *de facto* as political representatives. Not only do Haim and Yosef decide unilaterally what is best for the transit camp, they also limit participation to those few “most loyal.” This authoritarian political scandal has escaped post-Zionist readings of Ballas who take Yosef as the exemplar of a progressive Mizrahi subject.

³⁵ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 29. Although Ballas was a member of the Iraqi Communist Party as well as the Israeli one, he minimized the role of the Party in the novel. See his short autobiography, *Be-guf rishon*, for details.

³⁶ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 44.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 80

³⁸ *Ibid*, 147

But this compromise begs the following questions: why does Yosef fail as a leader, and whether there could have been a fourth political option? Recent readings of the novel acknowledge Yosef's failure, and yet curiously enough, referring to all the immigrants as "inhabitants" or "residents," they seem to conflate the political representatives and the people of the camp. Hannan Hever argues: "the struggle of the [transit camp's] *inhabitants* is unsuccessful and the text of the novel's concluding section is replete with the smell of hashish..."³⁹ Batya Shimony, citing the same concluding scene, argues:

In conclusion, the crucial position expressed in this book is one of helplessness whose origin lies in both sides... on the one hand, the repressive and castrating force exerted on the *immigrants* by the regime, and the rule of instincts [*shilton ba-yetzarim*] and the lack of initiative on the part of the transit camp's *residents*, on the other.⁴⁰

What I would like to stress here is that both Hever and Shimony conflate the political sphere (albeit in the process of being established) with the social one. It is an important symptom precisely because they do separate between the political sphere of the Zionist administration and the residents of the camp. To conflate the internal political system being established in the camp with those who are in the process of becoming "voters," and more specifically, to understand the failure of the political representatives as the failure of the camp as a whole is tantamount to arguing that the failures of government are the failures of the citizenry in its entirety. Why is it that the postcolonial reading is unable to discern between the "Mizrahi residents" and the "Mizrahi representatives?"

Once we see that the novel's movement is invested precisely in separating the political sphere in the camp from its civil society, as it were, it becomes clear that first, it is not the residents who have failed to improve their lot, but rather it is the transit camp's political system itself that has *failed them*. Recalling the aforementioned Mizrahi scholarship, this fictional failure bears an important resemblance to the failure of Mizrahi politics. Second, the blind spot of the postcolonial critics, one in affinity with the novel's imaginary, as we shall see, suggests that the emergence of the political system in the transit camp might render illegible other forms of action, what I will call the subaltern form, that escape the logic of political representation and its corresponding narrative system of character-political position.

What form do these other narrative materials take? If we turn our attention from the main events and characters to more aleatory materials, description becomes an important locus for the symptomatic appearance of the image of the "people." I note in advance the affinity of this collective with images of nature.

A cold and wintry evening descended on *Uriya* [the name of the transit camp]. *Tunes* emerging from the café accompanied the *roar of the wind*. Bent-over *people*, their *hands* shoved in their *pockets* and their *heads* tucked in their *coats*, moved to and fro and hopped between the *puddles* (Ballas, 2003: 39, emphasis added).

Like fire's smoke, thin *clouds* passed in the sky and heavy gray *masses* hung above them, moving slowly, casting their *shadows* over *fields* and *hills*. Tired and shattered light beams appeared here and there and a strong *wind* blew dry leaves and waste-paper, hitting squeaky *lavatory doors*, and shaking the *showers'* tin *roofs*.... *By factions* the *residents* of the transit camp thronged to the gathering place next to the small store; *men and women carried their babies* on their *arms*, followed by many *children* (Ballas, 2003: 51, emphasis added).

³⁹ Hever, *Modern Hebrew Canon*, 166, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Shimony, *'Al saf ha-ge'ulah*, 148, emphasis added.

In the *marshy path*, thundering *heavy feet* climbed up towards the *hill*. The *footprints of people* were imprinted side by side, sometimes covering each other, and created a deformed arch, stretching from the path to the wood shack that was covered with the last light of day.⁴¹

What is glimpsed in these and a few other short descriptions of the transit camp's residents is a narrative figure for the immigrant collective, a dialectical opposite of the immigrant politician. In contradistinction to the full-blown characters of a Yosef, Haim, 'Eyni, Esther, and others, the collective is reduced to an anonymous and faceless mass. It seems that in the novel's economy of representation, once the political system begins to emerge as such, the collective is produced as a mere background, as an inchoate remainder.

What is remarkable about these passages rendered in the omniscient point of view of the narrator is that they suggest an affinity between the anonymous Mizrahi collective and nature, one not unlike the organicist metaphors underlying Zionist conceptions of Mizrahi ethnicity. Preceding the appearance of this collective are plural nouns - clouds, puddles, shadows, fields and hills - as if the plural form of the nouns announces the arrival of the collective image. Note how in the second passage, the shadows of clouds hovering over hills and fields emit the sensation of a whole seen from above and how then the wind is the means by which the text moves from nature into sites of collective life - lavatories and showers - and as this foreshadowing is complete the collective itself, or its signs, appear in full view, again, always in the plural: people, hands, pockets, men, women, children, heavy feet, foot prints etc. Note how suggestive is the shift in the first passage where it is again the wind that carries the tunes that emerge from the cafe where the transit camp congregates and then again when this image is completed a figure of the collective emerges.

I would like to suggest that the appearance of the transit camp people as *scenery*, as a natural background for the political events is not accidental, but is rather a symptom accompanying the emergence of the modern political system in the novel. It is an intricate symptom disclosing an opposition that inheres in all the layers of the novel. For it is not only that the world of the transit camp is being divided into political representatives and subaltern masses, (a thematic division finding its way at times in the division between description and action), the political sphere, as we shall see, will understand itself as an agent of culture and civilization, taking the oriental multitude as undeveloped nature. Cardinal here is the fact that these divisions and orientalism are *internal* to the immigrant ("Mizrahi") community, and to make sense of them I would like to turn to Antonio Gramsci's conception of the difference between the subaltern ("spontaneous") consciousness and intellectual leadership. Fundamental to this difference is the qualitative emphasis which an intellectual leadership puts on conscious, abstract thought and organization such that any other kind of organization and knowledge goes unrecognized or is coded as deficient.⁴² Drawing from Gramsci, Ranajit Guha argues for the same split between the colonial and nationalist Indian thought and alternative forms of organization and politics proper to the Indian peasants:

What is conscious is presumed in this view to be identical with what is organized in the sense that it has, first a 'conscious leadership', secondly some well-defined aim, and thirdly, a programme specifying the components of the latter as particular objectives and the means of achieving them... The same condition is often written with politics as a substitute for organization. To those who prefer this device it offers the special advantage of identifying consciousness with their own political ideals

⁴¹ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 115, emphasis added

⁴² Gramsci, Antonio, 'Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, 2001, pp. 430-435.

and norms so that the activity of the masses found wanting in these terms may then be characterized as unconscious, hence pre-political.⁴³

As is well known, Guha and the subaltern studies group proceed to produce a subaltern history from the colonial archive, where a similar symbolic condition exists, i.e., the signs of resistance appear only in the rational code of the colonialist (and the nationalist) such that this last needs to be read against the grain.

Drawing from these studies, I argue that what we witness in *The Transit Camp* is a fictional emergence of a split between two forms of organization/knowledge: an intellectual/political, and a subaltern one. This split does not appear simply in content, for otherwise the subaltern form would have appeared as such. Rather, the subaltern forms of organization/knowledge are subordinated to and mediated by modern forms of representation and thus appear under their code in a displaced manner. Thus, the relation I seek to propose here is neither a direct encounter between two parts, nor two wholes, but rather a whole containing/mediating another whole as its “other.” We already saw how such a displacement appears in the passages above, taking the form of natural phenomena. It inheres also in Hever and Shimony’s accounts. In line with the new post-Zionist ideology of “giving voice” they argue that Ballas portrays the Mizrahi as an active agent and not as a victim, but they do so by implicitly separating the main (active/political) characters from an inchoate and passive Mizrahi collective who, according to Shimony, is “dominated by the rule of instinct” and, according to Hever (and the narrator) abandon itself to smoking Hashish. It is already possible to glimpse here how Hever and Shimony implicitly endorse a latent orientalist-enlightenment imaginary, in which the Mizrahi intellectual politicizes a dormant Mizrahi mob, pushing it “forward” by teaching it how to adopt modern forms of political organization. Let me now try to excavate the displaced subaltern reality and the kind of alternative knowledge it makes possible.

3.

To make visible these other forms of organization we would need to widen the historical perspective in which the novel is read so as to displace the primacy of Zionism as the ultimate subject and referent of Israeli history. This would mean not only moving backwards to a time before 1948, or even 1882 - the onset of Jewish nationalism - but to a non-capitalist moment against which the future emergence of Zionism would not be grasped simply as a political and cultural ideology – that is, as content - but as a new form of life made possible by capitalist modernization. This would mean that a reading of the novel would not only open up to a longer *durée* but also devise a way to register different temporalities and levels that inhere in it.

In the theoretical essay of *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson suggested such a way of reading cultural texts, arguing that they could be read in three overlapping and ever expanding interpretive circles.⁴⁴ The first level of interpretation engages the text as a symbolic political intervention within the narrow horizon of its immediate context. The second moves to a more abstract level and grasps the text as a struggle between social classes where the analytic category is

⁴³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 1983, p.5

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 1981.

the *ideologeme*. The third and most encompassing level locates the novel in the largest historical moment:

When finally even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of what I will call the *ideology of form*, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production.⁴⁵

What I would like to do now is read *The Transit Camp* in accordance with such a broader historical horizon and see it, as Jameson suggests, as a coexistence of two social formations and accordingly between two sign-systems, or literary forms.

I recall that Swirski's 1981 study conceived the encounter between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in the 1950s not as an encounter between two cultural groups, but rather between a Zionist capitalist social formation and a non-capitalist one.⁴⁶ Thus, we need to go back and understand the relevance to a literary criticism of the form of life of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands in the Middle East and North Africa prior to its subjugation to Zionist capital. Before doing so, it will be important to keep in mind that living conditions of Jewish communities, influenced by British and French colonial expansion and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, were themselves beginning to change during the course of the 19th century, showing signs of what we understand as modernity.⁴⁷ Postponing for a moment discussion of these changes, it will be safe to say that historians agree that Jewish life in the Middle East and North Africa up until the early 19th century was organized in religious communities whose central organizing social category was patriarchy and whose forms of labor were primarily artisanry, trade, and agriculture.⁴⁸ One dominant literary form of this form of life, written in either Hebrew or Arabic, was storytelling: the oral tale, the anecdote and similar other genres.⁴⁹

Now, once we conceive of the encounter between Middle Eastern Jewish communities and Zionist capitalism as an encounter of two social formations, two forms of narration, it becomes necessary first to devote much more attention to the fact that *The Transit Camp*, as a modern novel, already sides with the literary forms coterminous with capitalism and modernity;⁵⁰ that the non-modern literary forms of this form of life, most relevant for our purposes is storytelling, are already appropriated and reshaped by it such that they lose their independent quality, and become objects *within* the novel. Here, too, recalling the changes going over the Middle East as of the second third of the 19th century, the novel being the "natural" form in which Ballas can imagine the encounter in Israel indicates his modern position *vis à vis* life in Iraq. For Ballas, being a son of a middle class Iraqi family, a graduate of *Alliance Française*, an avid reader of French literature, and a supporter of

⁴⁵ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 76, emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Swirski, *Lo Nebshalim*.

⁴⁷ Such changes, at least in the Ottoman Empire, begin in 1839 with the *Tanzimat*, a series of political and economic reforms meant to compete with European capitalism. See Shafir, *Land, Labor*.

⁴⁸ Hayyim Cohen, *The Jews of the Middle East 1860-1972*, 1973; Nitza Druyan, *Be-'en "marvad kesamim": 'ole-Teman be-Erets Yisra'el 1881-1914*, 1981; Reeva Spector Simon et al. (Eds), *The Jews of The Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, 2003.

⁴⁹ Dan Ben Amos, (Ed), *Folktales of the Jews: Tales from the Sephardic dispersion*, Vol. 1. trans Leonard J. Schramm, 2006.

⁵⁰ Shmuel Moreh, *Ha-ilan vebe-' anaf: ha-sifrut ba-' arvit ha-badashbah vi-yetsiratam ha-sifrutit ba-' arvit shel yots' e ' Irak*, 1997.

progress, the social processes coterminous with capitalism have already become the new ground on the basis which he was educated, inducing a break between the “modern” and the “traditional.”⁵¹

Before continuing to explain how these forms appear in the novel and consider their significance, it would be important to note that Ballas’s novel does not represent these forms of life as they really are. Since the novel is not the place to look for ethnographic objectivity, my discussion of these narrative materials is not meant to retrieve some kind of literary homologue of “pre-modern” life forms, but rather, paying attention to the novel’s law of form, as Theodor Adorno would say, to explain the significance of the *relation* between these two literary forms for the articulation of a subaltern dominated form. In other words, while I posit the Real of these two forms of life, their representation is a matter of imaginary displacement, a way to imagine, as Louis Althusser would say, an absent cause, a social and historical contradiction that cannot appear as such.⁵²

Discussing all the narrative materials associated with this co-existence of forms will far exceed the scope of this chapter, so I will concentrate on two key points.⁵³ One of the most important effects induced by the encounter as it is imagined in the novel is the separation between the private and the public domains, and more specifically between the political and psychological domains. I argue that for some of the main characters this modern separation has occurred while for others, more peripheral/background characters, it has not. This split is consequential for the manner political organization will be presented, for the latter assumes a modern split between the private/psychological domain and the political one.

The novel’s main plot hinges precisely on the idea that the transit camp’s people need to be politicized, to be pushed out of their private interests and into the political struggle. Here is how Yosef explains to himself the meaning of the first assembly: “the entire camp attended. It was an important day and the people will not forget it. But what will happen tomorrow? Will each of them retire to his home for fear of the hooligans?”⁵⁴ This understanding is then echoed in criticism: “the transit camp is politicized as [Yosef] demands political action (establishing a committee)...”⁵⁵ Similarly, Haim imagines himself in the same leading subject role, operating on a passive mass object: “[H]e wants to redeem his people [*bney ‘adato*]. He wants to generate a movement of fate-stricken immigrants.”⁵⁶ This modern conception structures the novel and hence will distort other forms of politicization that do not comply with the private/public split. Let me show how this split appears directly in content and then how it informs two different conceptions of subjectivity and the narrator’s voice as well.

One of the two characters whose subjectivity is most regulated by this private/public split is Yosef who is the most political character, and yet the one with the most developed sense of inwardness. Yosef’s alienated and split subjectivity, one affecting his sexuality and blocking his romantic relationship with Esther, receives one of its most significant articulations at the end of the second part when he is in prison.

Something inside him rises and wishes to burst out. It is a deep-seated problem with him that he tends to seclusion, being unable to open up to others... indeed he remains sealed off from his friends... and

⁵¹ Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*.

⁵² See Jameson, *Political Unconscious*; Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. **Geoffrey Wall**, 2006.

⁵³ The encounter appears explicitly in the breakup of patriarchy and the authority of religion, and much more subtly in forms of sexuality, gender roles, aesthetic categories, and finally in conceptions of private/public spheres, organization/communication and political action.

⁵⁴ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 67.

⁵⁵ Hever, “Sofer Yehudi-Aravi,” in *Tel-Aviv Mizrabi – Trilogya*, 520

⁵⁶ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 76.

as to the rest of the camp's people, he sometimes feels this wall of strangeness that separates him from them, a wall of revulsion [*slida*] towards their narrow, corporeal [*gashmi*] world.⁵⁷

A romantic figure, Yosef's subjectivity is characterized by an extreme split between his political, external duty towards the subaltern residents (his material, earthly life) and a tortured inner self that cannot identify with the people he tasks himself to save. This split structures his gaze and his understanding of the subalterns as well as our understanding of them. At the very end of the novel, when all is said and done, Yosef sits in the café and as his thoughts turn towards the people at the café we read:

It is pleasant, at winter, to sit in a narrow warm place. The density of people, the cigarette smoke, the warm drink, the voices - all that plants in him a feeling of belonging, of cooperation. The café dwellers are given to their affairs and he *observes* them from his place. *They do not see him, do not feel his gazes, do not know that he reflects on them.* They give themselves away to games and set sail in their routine conversations. *Drinking, and smoking, their countenance reveals a wish to forget, to turn a blind eye, to cast aside all that was and is, if only for an hour.* They have a job. And that's what matters...⁵⁸

It is not accidental that Yosef is described very much in the manner we typically think of an omniscient narrator: "he observes them from his place. They do not see him, do not feel his gazes do not know that he reflects on them..." His detached gaze, a subject looking onto an object, but most importantly, his invisible gaze, knowing their thoughts without them knowing his, points to the intellectual and exterior relation that constitutes Yosef's subjectivity. Very much an alienated subject, Yosef's sitting in the café compensates for his lack of belonging, an inability to be a part of the transit camp's community. It is this intellectual detachment that implicitly writes the café people under the sign of oriental lassitude. And from this understanding of inner/outer relations the move to imagining a political project of politicization, where he imagines himself as a subject operating on a passive object is very short.

Let me compare Yosef to an alternative narrator-like character, Shlomo Khamra. Shlomo is the owner of the only café in the camp and the quintessential man of gossip. At the opening of the novel, the narrator offers us the following description:

And then he relates [to his wife] *all* he saw and heard when the people passed by him [coming back to the camp from work]. He knows *all* the histories [*korot*] of the *people*, including their desires and secret hopes. A curiosity that knows no end spurs him to ask, to investigate, to *poke around* [*le-pashpesb*] in the *private* affairs of each one of his many acquaintances.⁵⁹

Here, too, we would not fail to notice that Shlomo's curiosity is described in terms reminiscent of an omniscient narrator but Shlomo, so very different from Yosef, does not gaze upon the residents of the camp secretly from the outside. Rather, he talks to them and passes their stories on as camp "gossip." The difference between Yosef and Shlomo (as well as other similar local or diegetic narrators) is the difference between a modern "objective" reporting, based on a subject-object split and communal forms of knowledge, in which the narrators, while relating a story, are also narrating themselves as members of that community. Walter Benjamin's important conception of the

⁵⁷ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 132.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 159, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 9, emphasis added.

storyteller as embedded within experience is very relevant here, and I refer to it below. More relevant now is the different division between private and public: while for Shlomo gossip is a social, public practice, for the omniscient narrator, framing this practice from the perspective of modern subjectivity, Shlomo's gossiping is coded as a personal, intrusive practice and as trait of his eccentric personality only, i.e., his curiosity. In other words, the real life knowledge proper to a community life in which the private/public split does not yet hold (so to know something means to know both what is private and public) is reduced in the new form of life and its attendant narrative forms to the private domain.

This antagonism between the omniscient narrator and the local narrators has important consequences to the manner in which politics would be understood. For under the gaze/code of the omniscient narrator, Shlomo is coded as apolitical, a man who does not understand politics. Speaking about international politics in the café, the omniscient narrator reports, "this politics is not to his [Shlomo's] liking... He turned his head to the people sitting at the tables who did not stop playing games and did not pay attention to these complicated matters."⁶⁰ But if we grant that the narrator's conception of politics is itself based on the private/public split then we could see that Shlomo is very much a political character, always engaged in the affairs of the camp's residents, only that his politics eludes the standard of the narrator. Let me show more explicitly how such a distortion appears directly in matters of politics.

Critical to the difference between two forms of politics is the opposition between the concept of modern democratic life and its "other," oriental lassitude. One complaint directed at the oriental mob is their indifference to political life. Early on the Ashkenazi manager of the transit camp says: "you sit in the café and wait for someone to redeem you... first you need to establish a committee. It is impossible to have such a big public [*tzibur*] without a representing body. I cannot take care of all your issues..."⁶¹ Here again we can notice that, contrary to Hever's claim, establishing a political body is not simply Yosef's demand; it is explicitly encouraged by the Zionist administration for its own interests, precisely in order to manage the camp. At the end the manager complains again, "you [the immigrants] have no concept of democratic life..."⁶² By now we should be skeptical about the manager's reproach, let alone of the orientalist conception grasping the café people as passive and apolitical. Yosef, it is important to mention, rejects the manager's accusation but he does so in the name of democratic political organization. I would like, on the contrary, to emphasize the attitude of the residents themselves. Perhaps the people of the camp, always anonymous, have a good reason to be suspicious of the democratic political practices offered both by the manager and the Mizrahi leaders and their claim to transparent and fair representation. Throughout the novel, for example, Haim's political itinerary, moving between the yet unelected leaders, was directed precisely at "preparing" the assembly in such a way that the free election of candidates put before the general assembly will be decided *before* it takes place. We also saw that at the moment of truth, Yosef himself ceded to Haim's opportunism and agreed that he be appointed manager without going to another assembly. And indeed at one point when 'Eyni tries to convince the people in the café that they should go and vote for a committee in the "free and open" assembly, we hear the following conversation.

Eliyahu 'Eyni, sitting in his regular seat, rolled his beaded necklace and looked at the people next to him. "One needs to go and listen." ['Eyni said].
"But what kind of a committee is this" asked a *man wearing a sweater*.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁶¹ Ibid, 43.

⁶² Ibid, 146.

“The committee for the transit camp,” ‘Eyni responded.
 “Since when do we have a committee in the transit camp?”
 ‘Eyni’s face revealed the countenance of a man who knows a secret, “they will choose one there.”
A young man immersed in a game of *taula* [backgammon], cast his gaze around while *playing with the dice*. “It’s the doings of Haim-committee,” he said mockingly and threw the dice on the board. “jahar-yak!⁶³ You lost!” he called happily.
 ‘Eyni turned to him, “it concerns all of us.”
 “A second serving of tea on your expense!” laughed *the young man* winning the game.
 “It seems that you are on that committee,” said the *man with the sweater* to ‘Eyni.
 “There is no committee yet, come and vote.”
 “*Walla*, I think you are on that committee,” *the man* repeated his assertion.
 His words made the *people* smile. ‘Eyni was embarrassed, but quickly laughed himself, *as if it was a joke*.⁶⁴

Note how the anonymous people (the man with sweater, the young man, the people) remain incredulous that the assembly is indeed free and democratic. Knowing ‘Eyni and Haim, they sense that the elections are rigged in advance. And yet, all they *appear* to be doing is sitting and playing games at the café. Note also the important narrative genre of the anonymous people’s critique: it is taken as a “joke.” I will examine momentarily the relation between critique and popular genres.

Let us now move to discuss the co-existence of narrative genres, what Jameson sometimes refers to as “generic discontinuities.”⁶⁵ If we look closely at the narrative materials, it becomes evident that the novel oscillates not only between two kinds of narrators, but also between two kinds of narrative genres. The novelistic omniscient narrator orchestrates the major movement of the primary and secondary plots, those structured teleologically and having a clear line of character-event development, while the second narrative structure is characterized by something like anecdotal islands where the primary narrative movement comes to a halt and turns itself over to an embedded storyteller. The relation between the omniscient narrator and the embedded narrators is then not a relation between two parts but rather between a whole (the novel form itself) and an “internal literary other,” the anecdote. The relation between the two narrative genres corresponds to the relation between the two forms of life. As I suggested earlier, the relation between the two forms of life is not one of direct explicit antagonism (this is reserved to the political antagonism between Zionism and the Mizrahi politicians), but rather the new and dominant form of life engulfs the older dominated one, such that the latter is now located within it. This would mean that the subaltern could not speak in his/her own language, but rather in displaced signs. More specifically, while the omniscient narrator takes up the language of the European realist novel (Ballas’s ideal model), the subaltern narrators speak not simply in popular forms of narration, but also in a different narrative modality, one that exceeds the objective limits of realism and opts for the allegorical fable, the “as if” so crucial for imaginary acts.⁶⁶ Read this way, the anecdotes achieve a new and quite unexpected meaning, something like an unconscious wish. To appeal to Freudian terminology for clarification, it would seem that the narrative governed by the “official” narrator obeys a strong “reality principle” – in this case, the “political” – while the anecdotes are governed not so much by a “pleasure principle” as by a speculative one. Moreover, if the official political plot is limited by the limits of objective reality, by a certain historical limit that blocks certain thoughts,

⁶³ In Turkish, ‘four and one,’ indicating the numbers on the dice.

⁶⁴ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 114, emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Jameson, ‘Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.’ *Social Text* 15: 65-88.

⁶⁶ See Jameson’s masterful reading of Balzac for purposes of comparison. Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 164-169.

the anecdotes, and one in particular, allows for transgressing this limit as long as it is coded as “impossible,” or as a “joke.” As this particular anecdote is preceded by a discussion that encapsulates the transition from tribal social form to capitalism, I discuss it in some detail.

Quite early in the novel, as he canvases the camp in order to politicize its residents, Yosef pays a visit to the tin shack of Na‘aman, but as the latter is absent a conversation with his father, Abu Na‘aman, ensues. Significantly, the conversation begins and revolves around the differential position of women in the older and new society. Slowly we are keyed into the “traditional-modern” debate in which Yosef takes on the side of modernity, where women serve as the index of his progressive ideology, while Abu-Na‘aman seems to be written under the sign of old-fashioned patriarchy. And yet, things develop quite differently. At a certain moment the conversation takes an interesting turn and we move away from the immediate context of the transit camp. Mentioning that he learned how to make coffee from the Bedouins in the south of Iraq, Abu Na‘aman has an excuse to tell a tale and the novel to offer us an “aside.” “Have you ever traveled to the El-Dalim and the southern Desert?” Abu Na‘aman asks. “No, never in my life did I leave Baghdad,” Yosef answers.⁶⁷ Yosef’s modernity is now compounded by his urban ignorance, his capital-centric outlook, and as Yosef’s character is gradually being coded as “young,” “naïve,” and “urban” the tale begins to signal an alternative. Abu Na‘aman goes on to relate how as a merchant his commercial relationship with the tribes was never limited to commodity exchange and how, being a Jewish outsider, he was turned into a counselor of sorts, sometime even a doctor. Finally, recalling by association the Israeli doctor’s refusal to enter the transit camp, a refusal that contributed to the death of the newborn baby, Abu-Na‘aman weaves the tale back into the fabric of their current life. Before relating Abu Na‘aman’s suggestive association between the Bedouins and the immigrants, let me first offer a detour.

It is well known by now how Benjamin conceived of storytelling, so I believe a brief reference will suffice.

In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers... After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story... Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom.⁶⁸

The meeting between Yosef and Abu Na‘aman, between the “experienced” one and the perplexed, between one form of life on the verge of decomposition and the other in its spring, is also the scene of counsel and wisdom. Storytelling, that which the novel form itself displaced as Benjamin famously argues, finds its place within the novel, like a ruin, transformed from an independent narrative form to subordinate material, rife with meaning. And how apt is Benjamin’s conception, explaining that “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.” Being that we are in the early stages of the novel, the Bedouin tale is slowly released from its “folkloric” disguise and acquires the status of a counsel, an allegory. But what is Abu-Na‘aman’s counsel, his proposal?

Less an answer, the counsel seems to suggest a new optic, a new form, with which to interpret the situation of the immigrants. Abu Na‘aman continues:

“If a doctor would have refused to enter [the Bedouin] village, fearing to dirty his shoes – I wouldn’t want to imagine what would have happened to him.” “They would murder him?” “Only murder him? None of his household would remain among the living!”... “When a

⁶⁷ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 30.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, Walter, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, 1968, p. 86.

[British or Iraqi] government doctor would visit them... they would refuse to accept him. They did not trust him. In general, they did not trust any messenger of the authorities..."⁶⁹

Without ever explicitly articulating it, Abu Na'aman draws a parallel between the anti-colonial struggle of the Bedouins and the condition of the immigrants. To make his point and bring us back to the question of the status of women, Abu Na'aman goes on to tell a story about one Bedouin woman's brave defiance of the British and the battle that ensued. Here is the tale in some detail:

We have some time [Abu Na'aman said]. I want to tell you something about women. You said that... [they] had no value [then] and I would like to challenge your opinion. I am not a learned man and I do not read books, I barely read a newspaper. I did not attend school, but I learned a lot from life. Listen to this story. One time I entered one of the villages and I saw a great commotion. I asked: what has happened. They answered: a celebration... The next day I learned about its circumstances from a man named Sheikh Hassan... He told us about a nineteen-year-old girl, obedient and industrious, who lived as a shadow in her home; she did not speak and was given to reflection. And the days were the days of calamity. The English entered Iraq and punished its inhabitants. Seeing her tribe's people humiliated and submitting to the occupiers, her heart will not acquiesce. How did it come to pass that the tribe's people, lovers of freedom whose glorious deeds were immortalized by poets, are [now] slaves to a foreigner?... one day she gathered her courage and left her house unveiled, astonishing the village people, for a woman will never leave her house unveiled. Her face could be revealed, but her head forever covered. A demon is in her, they thought. But she did not allow them to reflect on her condition and for the first time broke her silence. "Men," she called, "a woman I am, but courage I have more than you!" She carried an axe and run towards the camp of the occupiers. At the gate of the camp, the guns of the guards welcomed her and she fell, wallowing in her blood. The men of the village were startled and her husband, shocked, started to scream; he took an axe and hurried to the camp. After him the entire tribe followed. That day, not a trace remained from the camp of the English...

"It sounds like a legend," Yosef Said.

"It is the truth, my son..."

"Yosef looked at him with admiring and loving eyes.... He knows how to tell a story. Fathers in his age know how tell one, and he does not remember even one conversation with his father, he was young when he passed away..."⁷⁰

It is a remarkable tale that deserves much more attention, especially the way in which it is the one designated as "weak" (female) who turns out to be stronger than the "strong" (male) and the fact that such act of defiance is weaved in with a defiance of female domination in the figure of the veil. But here I will note only the woman's act of violence and Yosef's modern realist perspective that disavows the truth of Abu Na'aman's tale. "It sounds like a legend,"⁷¹ he says and the novel leaves the "legend" and returns to the unfolding of the "real" political plot in the transit camp.

The meaning of the split between a modern subjectivity and a subaltern one receives in Abu Na'aman's tale its most significant articulation. While Yosef grasps the immigrants' situation according to the formal categories of the Israeli liberal democracy, Abu Na'aman's allegory suggests a condition of violent colonial rule, and thus undermines the reality of the liberal language. The difference between the subaltern position and official Mizrahi politics then subtly implies the use of force. To be sure, the immigrants never engage in a violent anti-colonial struggle. Rather, it is the

⁶⁹ Ballas, *The Transit Camp*, 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 32.

⁷¹ Ibid, passim..

state that does. At the very beginning hooligans, sent to disrupt the assembly, attack the immigrants, and at the very end we read of a brutal police raid:

A police car came speeding in and inserted itself like a blade of a knife into the mass of bodies. Five men in uniform jumped out and swung their batons, but they were quickly swallowed within the *people* wearing rags... all the sedimented bitterness, anger, and discrimination rose and bursted at once, and for a moment it seemed that the five cops will be devoured whole by the *masses*.

While the cops swung their batons and the men held them back, a *woman* ran in and threw mud in the face of one of the cops... she didn't hesitate and threw another one at the small of his neck.... And in the meantime other *women* filled their hands with mud and threw them at the cops.⁷²

The placement of this incident at the very end is not accidental. For if we follow the novel's division of parts, we will note that each of the first two parts ends with a democratic general assembly, the first organized by Yosef, the second by Haim, and both fail. This anecdotal incident appears in the third part, when all political candidates are away and for a moment it seems that the Bedouin tale, especially with its emphasis on women's defiance, finds itself in the world of the novel. This random incident cast not as an integral part of the political plot but as an *anecdotal* remainder is precisely that other political and literary form of subaltern solidarity, the fourth political possibility, which the transit camp's political system fails to recognize precisely because it exists beyond its boundaries. Here it is revealed as if as an afterthought that democracy is forged in and predicated on violence and it is resisted by subaltern collective force rather than political procedure. Postcolonial readings confirm this illegibility for even their endorsing studies read the novel only on its own terms as a failure of the transit camp people to organize and the persistence of oriental lassitude. Recall Shimony's conclusion: "the crucial position expressed in this book is one of helplessness whose origin lies in both sides... on the one side, the repressive and castrating force exerted on the immigrants by the regime, and the rule of instincts and the lack of initiative on the part of the transit camp's residents, on the other".⁷³ In such "sympathetic" readings the critic misrecognizes Mizrahi subaltern resistance and the violent nature of the modern capitalist state.

Now, all this would still remain literary speculation if it were not possible to see how this anecdotal literary form relates to the first decade of Israeli history, the years in which the novel was first written. Already in April 1949, less than a year after the establishment of Israel, government officials understood the meaning of the immigration from Arab lands in an alarming way. Pinhas Lavon, a member of the ruling party MAPAI, and a future Defense Minister,⁷⁴ informed the secretariat of his party of the following:

During this year [1949] the critical mass for a counter-revolution may come together in the country. I propose that we and our comrades in government handle this by applying the severe letter of the law... The comrades who handle immigration affairs say they are amazed by the relative calm in the camps. I think they are deluded. It may be quiet at the top, but down below the natural forces of destruction are coming together. And one clear morning, a hundred thousand people of that kind that will be concentrated in the camps without any way out, and they can converge for a whole month, they will rise, and this can be such an

⁷² Ibid, 138.

⁷³ Shimony, *Al saf*, 148.

⁷⁴ Lavon was a member of MAPAI and a parliament member between 1949 and 1961. In 1954 he was appointed Minister of Defense and was implicated in one of Israel's biggest political scandals, named after him (The Lavon Affair), which led to his resignation in 1955.

explosion as to take down the government with it, and the Knesset [parliament]... altogether.⁷⁵

Lavon's appraisal of the situation betrays the ambivalence, to say the very least, with which the young state conceived of its immigrants: are they citizens or are they enemies? Faced with such a regime, and with its own Mizrahi politicians co-opted by the government, it is not surprising then that the only effective way immigrants found to improve their lot was by direct confrontation, a confrontation, however, that was waged sporadically, *anecdotally*, without a unifying narrative form and outside any official political discourse or institution:

The second and most common type of Mizrahi political activity [in the 1950s] was one-off acts of protest and collective confrontation with the authorities, which resulted at times in a chain reaction and the beginnings of organizing, but never became an organized social movement... Even when the confrontations were severe, as in the storming of the old Knesset [parliament] building in Tel Aviv or the blocking of access to kibbutzim in the Negev, they did not have a sequel, and they did not reach the organizational stage.⁷⁶

I seek to relate this Mizrahi history to the reading of Ballas' novel. For it is widely agreed that historic confrontations with the state such as the Wadi-A-Salib revolt of 1959 in Haifa, and the activities of the Mizrahi Black Panthers between 1971 and 1973 brought about official recognition from the government and the establishment of a new and improved welfare policy. Such revolts by mostly anonymous individuals signify, according to Chetrit, "action against an oppressive regime while challenging its authority and violating its systems of laws, usually by use of force."⁷⁷ Such an understanding positions the Mizrahi subaltern outside official relations of representation, while the main narrative of *The Transit Camp* seeks entrance into such official relations.

What is the significance of this reading to contemporary Mizrahi critique? The reading I offered here posits a gap between the Mizrahi subject constituted in and through Israeli civil society and the Mizrahi subaltern constituted outside of it and as such calls for a new research direction that will clarify the confusion of these two subject positions and distinguish between the knowledge they produce. Further, such an approach rejects the presupposition grounding contemporary Mizrahi knowledge production that domination over Mizrahim can be settled by a politics of cultural recognition under the capitalist state and argues that any critical understanding of such domination and its reproduction must contend not with nationalism but with the state and the conditions set by capitalist accumulation. Unlike current readings of Mizrahi literature that rehabilitate Arab-Jewish culture as an alternative to Jewish nationalism, the reading offered refuses to be interpellated by the universal/national pretense of such readings, and identifies this universality as the content of a particular social subject – liberal Mizrahi intellectuals/cultural producers - and its specific site of articulation – civil society and the cultural industry. Accordingly, "Mizrahi literature" cannot be understood as synonymous with "literature of Mizrahim" and any future inquiry into "Mizrahi literature" will do well to begin with this discrepancy.

⁷⁵ Cited in Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict*, 59.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 75.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 63.

Mizrahim in the Neoliberal Imagination

1.

This chapter will attempt to theorize the ways neoliberalism in Israel appears in social, conceptual and literary form. This will be a preliminary attempt, for I will here work with a single principle of neoliberal change, yet one that elucidates well both the historical moment and the general stakes for literary interpretation. To put it directly and in the most abstract terms, neoliberalism in Israel can be understood as a new relation between state and capital, or more precisely a capitalization of political relations that alters and redraws not only the social terrain itself but, more closer to our interests here, the symbolic forms of thought and imagination. To do so, I propose a reading of Shimon Ballas' *Outsiders* [*Yaldey Huts*], the third installment in his Trilogy *Tel-Aviv East*, written during the late 1990s but published only in 2003.⁷⁸ However, since the three novels that comprise the trilogy were written between the 1950s and the late 1990s and follow more or less the life span of a few principal characters, I start first with short readings in the first and second installments (*The Transit Camp*; *Tel-Aviv East*) so as to make the neoliberal change in the third installment more pronounced. I begin then on the heels of the previous chapter, with a discussion of the significance of *The Transit Camp* in the context of a longer historical duration.

2.

The uniqueness of Ballas's *The Transit Camp* in the corpus of Israeli Literature is that it is probably among the few novels, if not the only one that imagines immigrants from Arab lands as a collective rather than as individuals. Hannan Hever rightly points out that contrary to what he calls the "Oedipal allegorical code" of Zionist novels during the 1960s, which imagines the Zionist community through a typical character or an institution, *The Transit Camp* exhibits multiple characters and plots:

A major phenomenon in the aesthetics of *Ha-ma'barah* [*The Transit Camp*] is the fact that instead of a central Oedipal character that fights, fails, or even triumphs – as is customary in the Oedipal model – Ballas composed an array of characters that do not revolve around one axis... Alongside a collective struggle waged between the inside (the camp) and the outside (the Ashkenazi establishment)... and a personal struggle – between the generation of the fathers and the generations of the children – Ballas draws interlocking sites of struggle that do not run in parallel lines.⁷⁹

Yet, instead of constructing a reified and ultimately false binary between "Zionist aesthetics" and "Mizrahi aesthetics," encouraging us to limit Ballas's literary act to a "formal response" to yet

⁷⁸ Shimon Ballas, "Outsiders." In *The Transit Camp - Trilogy*, 2003.

⁷⁹ Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur veba-leom*, 2007, p.260.

another “form,” and thus construing “Mizrahi” literary production already (and only) within the Zionist symbolic horizon, I suggest we consider the form of the novel *vis-à-vis* a far more plausible “other,” i.e., the condition of Mizrahim within the Israeli social formation as a whole in the early 1950s. Ballas’s novel have been devalued by Zionist literary critics⁸⁰ or coopted by the post-Zionist Left (Mizrahi and Ashkenazi alike, both in Israel and the US), but this reception history should not distract us from the more fundamental question of how to understand the relation between literary form and the historical conditions during which it is produced. Note here that insisting on the historical conditions, on what at this moment in 21st-century literary criticism should have been taken for granted, attests to the ideological displacement of post-Zionist critics, a displacement which should make these readings an object of critique, rather than its subject. For the asymmetry to which “Mizrahi” novels are subjected is exposed when we notice that when post-Zionist critics read Zionist novels they do not argue that they emerge primarily as a “response” to other literary forms, let alone as a response to Mizrahi novels, but rather as a response to the historical project of Zionism itself. Challenging the Zionist nationalist “cover story,” Hever argues for instance:

In contradistinction [to the Zionist position] that subsumes literary phenomena under the edicts of the Zionist meta-narrative, one that erases or bypasses *phenomena* that undermine or heed the eloquence of this narrative, it is possible to posit a postcolonial reading of Hebrew and Israeli literature: this is a reading that seeks *to detect [le-ater] the violent, colonial context* of the production and reception of literature – the context of the centrality of the *ownership of territory* and therefore the representation of its *conquest*. This kind of reading [enables] seeing the literary text as concealing *the violence of the colonial act...*⁸¹

And yet when considering Ballas, Hever argues that although he accepts the Oedipal allegorical code of Zionist novels, “Ballas breaks and fragments it:”

These malformations [*shibushim*] are apparent already in the fact that the Oedipal code is unable to overcome the narrative heterogeneity of the stories. [Ballas’s stories] are not interpolated by the causal continuum of identity formation, but fragment the universalist aesthetic assumptions that are the foundation of the national story in the 1960s.⁸²

While we have seen above that the Zionist story smoothes over the *historical* act of Zionist violence, here Ballas’s text is grasped only as an *aesthetic* response not to history, but to yet another text. The Zionist text whose status as a “model” renders Ballas’s text a “malformation” and thus blocks in advance the relation between Ballas’s text and the historical period. To put this more clearly, while Zionist novels are interpreted in relation to a Zionist history, Ballas’s novel is interpreted in relation to *literary* history. Note also the second remarkable displacement in the first sentence: while in the passage above the “heterogeneity” is the heterogeneity of the *historical colonial act* as Real that breaks the aesthetic “cover,” here the “heterogeneity” is displaced into the literary text as a *literary property* that the Oedipal code – as if an agent in and of itself – cannot erase. In other words, instead of accounting for the historical reasons that this heterogeneity and multiplicity appear in Ballas’s novel, they are grasped as its natural property, as if the text were an autonomous living organism that resists the Oedipal schema.

To see that such a claim is groundless and symptomatic of the political horizon of post-Zionist critics, it will suffice to note that while all critics, both on the right and on the left, would

⁸⁰ Gershon Shaked, *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit 1880-1980*, Vol. 4, 1993.

⁸¹ Hever, *Ha-sipur*, 213, my emphasis.

⁸² *Ibid*, 259.

agree that Zionist novels arise out of the Zionist form of life, many will be hard pressed to find any contemporary and concrete form of life corresponding to Ballas's so-called Arab-Jewish imaginary other than in an ideologically-imagined Arab past. Note again how the historical social conditions under which Ballas' novels were produced - the Israeli capitalist mode of production in the 1950s - are deliberately obscured so as to pave the way for an ideology that promotes Arab-Jewish dialogue. All this is done not in the proper name of the post-Zionist (ethical) Left whose critics advance such a liberal humanist stance, but rather in the name of the universal new Israeli identity that salvages and "does justice" to the "other," to a so-called forgotten Mizrahi writer.

Let me then offer an alternative critique that will correct the post-Zionist ideological displacement, accepted everywhere today, and return the inquiry to where it rightfully belongs, which is the relation between the social life of Mizrahim and the literary forms that imagine this life. Our object of inquiry, therefore, completely changes, and instead of reading "Mizrahi" novels *vis-à-vis* the so called Zionist meta-narrative, we interpret the changes to their forms while considering three principal and interrelated in the period stretching from 1948 to the present. First, the historical changes in the social conditions of Mizrahim. Second, the overall changes to Israeli society as a total social formation. Third, the changes in the social conditions under which Israeli literature (and culture more broadly) is produced. These three axes: social position, social formation and the cultural field offer a far more nuanced approach to literature and promise to extricate us from the narrow and parochial readings of the Israeli Left, as well as provide insights into literature as a form of social thought. Since I have already offered a reading along some of these lines in the previous chapter, I reconsider now only those aspects that will become important for my reading of the trilogy as whole.

To return to *The Transit Camp*, this novel, as I suggested, is among the few novels that imagine Mizrahim as a collective, while at the same time narrating the emergence of a political structure that will represent that collective and speak in its name. While in the previous chapter, I discussed the failures of this political system as well as the orientalist tendencies of both the narrator and critics on the basis of which such a system is valorized, I would like now to highlight the fact that in this novel there is nonetheless an attempt to imagine Mizrahim and the state of Israel in the form of a concrete social antagonism, ending up, as we have seen, with the police violently repressing the immigrants and subduing their revolt. A quick survey of those "Mizrahi" novels⁸³ (not to mention Zionist ones) that have been popularized and canonized in Israeli society will show how rare this narrative is, especially when we consider the fact that even the most violent clashes of the 1970s between the Mizrahi Black Panthers and the state, clashes that are acknowledge to have played a pivotal role in generating a Mizrahi struggle and welfare reform, never entered into Israeli literature. This fact is even more significant when we recall that the other core antagonism in both Israeli society – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – is depicted time and again in literature and film. The absence of a representation of the Mizrahi struggle as a collective endeavor is perhaps the most striking evidence for collective repression and the degree to which the categories of the "nationalism" and "capitalism" remain distinct in this regard.

The plurality of characters and plots in *The Transit Camp* is then not a formal response to the Zionist allegory but rather a formal symptom of the historical conditions during the early 1950s, where Jews from Arab lands were pushed/encouraged to immigrate to Israel *en masse* (around half a

⁸³ The post-1948 list is of course long, but those best known are: Sami Michael, *Shavim ve-shavim yoter* (1974); Lev Hakak, *Ha-asufim* (1977); Amnon Shamosh, *Mishel Ezra Safra u-vanav* (1978); Eli Amir, *Tarnegol kaparot* (1983); A.B. Yehoshua, *Molkeho* (1987); Ronit Matalon, *ze'im ha-panim eleynu* (1995); Dorit Rabinian, *Simtat ha-sbke'diyot b-omerijan* (1995); Dudi Busi, *Ha-yare'ah yarok ba-vadi* (2000). Sarah Shilo, *Shum gamadim lo yavo'u* (2005); Sami Bardugo, *Yetomim* (2006). An important exception here is Yehudil Hendel's *Rehov ha-madregot* (1955).

million people), an enormous and singular historical event that practically ended a thousand years of Jewish life in the Muslim world. And since it brought about the abrupt displacement of an entire form of life, it is this condition of *crisis*, of extreme circumstances, that resists and disrupts conventional forms of narration.

Appealing to a Lacanian idiom for a possible conceptual rendering of this literary/historical phenomenon, it is as if the plurality of characters and plots within the camp constitutes an on-going trauma/crisis or Real (*for* the characters and not as a representation of a real event)⁸⁴ that the principal characters are attempting to manage and contain by putting in place a *symbolic* political structure of representation. As I suggested in the previous chapter, this relation between crisis and the symbolic structure within the imagined world of the camp is duplicated on the level of formal narration in which the authorized omniscient narrator (official structure) tries to manage and contain local and random narrators (unsanctioned speech) offering us transgressive sexual and political anecdotes.

One conceptual key to *The Transit Camp*, to its historical signature as it were, is then not its so-called Arab-Jewish content critical of Zionism but rather this fracture in the composition principle itself that makes visible, as it were, the attempt of novelistic forms to engulf other forms of narration, as if we see the novel form rising to inscribe non-identical raw materials in its logic in the very moment that it narrates them.

But all this does not as yet touch on the most fundamental formal, rather than conceptual, quality of *The Transit Camp*. For saying that *The Transit Camp* narrates a collective crisis in the very moment that it is being structured and named is to implicitly talk about temporality, which I would like to bring now to the fore and make explicit. One way of putting this will be to observe that the novel unfolds in what Fredric Jameson calls, in his discussion of Sartre, an “open present,” in which events and characters are not yet mediated by their name and concept.⁸⁵ It is unclear to as yet, for example, as it is unclear to Yosef himself (and other characters) what kind of character he will end up becoming, and this condition has an existential and urgent meaning because it is the fate of the collective itself that is in the balance. It is as if the crisis of the collective, appearing not in the reduced form of a few typical characters but rather as a group in the moment of struggle itself, disrupts the ordered temporality of the novel such that conceptually the act of naming is prolonged and postponed until the struggle has reached its end. In a way, this is not dissimilar from a few of the storylines we find in Balzac’s great novels, but what is nonetheless different and therefore somewhat unsatisfactory about the category of an “open present” is that it locates in a certain kind of narrative what is ultimately the property of the crisis itself, namely an event that alters the fabric of temporality as well as conceptuality. As Jameson notes, the most paradigmatic instances of this occurrence are revolutions or wars where we “‘see’ history as a process – and it is also in these crises that ‘history’ is most vulnerable.”⁸⁶ This precise sense of “process,” of a collective crisis unfolding, allows saying that the characters of this unique novel are *not yet* “Mizrahim” in the historical meaning

⁸⁴ I am stressing this point because I would like to avoid the misunderstanding that I am suggesting here that the Real of the social antagonism is literally represented in the novel. This is why it is a Real *for* the characters within the imagined world of the novel. As is well known the concept of the Real is a “late” development in Lacan’s thought, one that did not receive, as is customary with Lacan, a systemic elaboration. See his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1981. For elaborations on Lacan’s concept of the Real see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989.

⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Realism and Affect.” Unpublished paper, delivered at UC Berkeley, February 27th, 2012. Jameson’s understanding of this notion of the “open present” leans on its opposite number, “preterite,” that serves Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of Guy de Maupassant. I will, however, not enter into Sartre’s account there since he does not work with a category of crisis, a category that is central to my own understanding. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 125-126.

⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 2009, p.588.

of the term. It is not simply that they are “immigrants” as I argued in the previous chapter; they are immigrants in the very moment of struggle, only the outcome of which will determine whether or not they will fall into the social place and category - ethnicized working class - that Zionism is preparing for them. Again, to forestall any misunderstanding: nothing in this novelistic portrayal claims naïve referentiality. Rather, the depiction of the antagonism/crisis on a collective level allows for this open time. Put more thematically, it is as if the story of the (soon to be intellectual) individual Mizrahi depends on the outcome of the concrete collective antagonism, one extending to the very *boundaries of the imaginary world, constituting a “Mizrahi world.”* This is why Ballas’s Yosef Shabi could be grasped as a heroic or romantic figure who constantly attempts to “save the world” and fails. Although this romantic relation repeatedly imagines Mizrahim in a “state of nature,” what is significant and irreducible to its orientalist and “enlightened” imaginary, is precisely the fact that the individual Mizrahi cannot understand himself without representing the collective in a concrete antagonism which constitutes its world. As we shall see, this “collective antagonism as world” will never appear again to the same degree in novels that take Mizrahim as their primary content, let alone in any other Israeli novels; it will not so much disappear as become reduced to an *internal perspective within Israeli society*, a reduction that will clear the way for the spiritualization of Mizrahim, as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood might put it, in the form of an identity or culture, which will then take a different literary form altogether.⁸⁷

To observe the change from world to perspective, from antagonism to culture in its relation to the history of the Israeli social formation let me now turn to the second installment in the trilogy, *Tel Aviv-East*, where we see the continuation of the collective antagonism, this time not inside the transit camp, but in the Mizrahi neighborhood (*Shkhanat ha-Tikvah*) in Tel-Aviv.

3.

Tel-Aviv East (Tel-Aviv Mizrah) is set in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Tel-Aviv, in a post-transit camp era when the immigrants have officially turned into Mizrahim and were distributed in development towns or in underdeveloped neighborhoods on the periphery of metropolitans.⁸⁸ We are led to understand that the period is the mid-1960s, significantly before the 1967 war, which means that the ruling party, MAPAI, facilitates a statist politico-economic regime. The dominance of a MAPAI-centrist state will become very important later on, but for now I begin by situating the main events and characters.

Ten years after his arrival to Israel from Iraq, Yosef is now a vice-principal of the neighborhood school. He is also an MA student in Education whose thesis will provide much of the ideological ground that subtends the world of this novel. We also meet again Shaul Rashti and his

⁸⁷ The disappearance of a collective antagonism will be accompanied by the emergence of a Mizrahi subject that gazes over the world and especially over other Mizrahim as an external (usually “vulgar”) object in order to constitute himself/herself as part of a desired new Israeli identity. Yosef Shabi is perhaps the first prototype for this “othering” Mizrahi gaze that, contrary to contemporary post-Zionist readings of Ballas, is far from being non-Western, but is utterly “enlightened” in its relation to social life. What will change then over time is not so much this orientalist perspective but rather the world it inhabits and its relation to this world.

⁸⁸ Ballas, “*Tel-Aviv Mizrah*,” in *Tel-Aviv Mizrah – Trilogy*, 2003. If we follow Ballas’s short autobiography, we learn that he wrote the sequel *Tel-Aviv Mizrah (Tel-Aviv East)* while and immediately after the publication of *The Transit Camp*, in the second half of the 1960s, although due to the rejection *Am-Oved*, the novel was published only in 1998. See Ballas, *Be-guf rishon*, 2009.

wife Salima, as well as Saleem, Yosef's younger brother, only a child in *The Transit Camp*, but now a young man engaged in his first attempts to find employment. However, the second most important protagonist in this novel is, of course, the image of the collective itself. Unlike the first novel where Ballas had Yosef imbedded with the rest of the immigrants in the camp, here the author seems to offer us a more *incidental* intersection of Yosef and the other residents of the neighborhood who, due to a flood, are pushed out of their homes and find temporary shelter in his school.

It is already possible to notice that this ruse, this "flood" *motivation*, as Victor Shklovski would say, making the residents of the neighborhood go out into the street *en masse* due to a natural disaster, an accident, already presupposes a preliminary difficulty in representing the collective. Here we see the first reversal in the compositional principle of the novel, for if *The Transit Camp* presupposed a default collective life form and architecture (the tent camp) from which the novel branched out into the "personal sphere" of the individual tents, here, quite the opposite, it is the personal lives of the residents (their individual apartments) that are presupposed such that one needs to invent a "motivation" to gather the collective and bring it into the open. In other words, if in *The Transit Camp* "personal life" and "intimacy" were experienced as a lack, something to be desired, in *Tel-Aviv East*, in the modern city, it is precisely "collective life" that becomes the exception and the *political* problem that the novel attempts to solve, albeit in displaced figures as we shall see:

On the way home he passed through the market and was surprised to see that most of the stores were closed... but the streets were full of people and they huddled alongside them. The entire neighborhood speaks of the [flood] situation... it is a chance to express oneself, to unburden oneself, and to deviate from the routine. He continued walking without stopping. Group conversations at street corners and cafes made him run away. In these conversations he listens more than he talks, for what could he say? What answer does he have? Everyone has answers, but they are not asked to give answers. They are asked to resign themselves to the answers of the [Zionist] regime. To demand? Protest? Demonstrate? That's all they can do, and in the end they will revert to their affairs and the regime will have its victory.⁸⁹

Here we see then not only Yosef's intellectual position *vis-à-vis* concrete matters of daily life (he has nothing to say), but also what Sartre would call his "bad faith." He not only gives up the fight even before fighting it, he also projects his own surrender onto those people, who, as we shall see in a moment, are still capable of posing a threat to the regime. We see, further, that Yosef as well as the narrator understand this collective appearance in the street as an exception to "routine," a fact that by default seems to highlight the sphere of personal life as the norm. Yosef then continues to offer us the larger historical reasons for his own resigned attitude:

In the past, when he was in the transit camp, he believed that it is possible to defeat the regime. He believed in the force of a mass movement to generate revolutions and topple a fortified mechanism [*manganon*]. Revolutions indeed happened and will happen again and repressive mechanisms collapsed and will collapse in the future, but every revolution creates a new mechanism, and every mechanism will aim to preserve itself, buttressing its position and crushing ordinary people. He learned this truth when the crimes of Stalinism were revealed in the USSR and he was left with a big question mark. He left the party in disappointment and sadness, but could he bid farewell to the ideals in which he believed?⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ballas, *Tel-Aviv Mizrah*, 217-218.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 218.

Although conveyed in abstract terms, as a thought, we see here how Yosef ties together a political project, temporality, desire, and the larger geo-political balance between the receding influence of the USSR, and the rising influence of the USA, which will subtend this novel as well as the next. For it is clear that once Yosef stops believing in a mass struggle, a struggle that rejects the entire social system and hence its symbolic structures, not only does his sense of time shift from a Marxian temporality of revolution to a Nietzschean temporality of eternal return, but he also couples this shift with the withdrawal from praxis (the Communist Party), which leaves his ideals groundless, becoming now mere abstract ideals. And indeed, these ideals then migrate from the site of revolutionary praxis (positioned *against* the system as such) to the site of education (the state school as a *part* of the system), and eventually move all the way to the site of the abstract as such (the university and his MA thesis imagined as *parallel* to and *autonomous* from the system/state) that has no relation to praxis:

He did not generate the change he wanted [in the school], and after understanding that it is not in his power to change anything when the entire system is flawed he turned his energies to [his MA] studies and writing a thesis. The distance between him and the neighborhood people grew steadily, but nonetheless he lives among them and their world is his as well.⁹¹

We will discuss the thesis in a moment, but what is of import here for literary criticism interested in the conceptual and formal aspects of literature is the dialectical relation between the form of thought and the scope and sites of struggle during a particular historical period. For it should be clear that Yosef's aesthetic "distance" does not simply condition his personal *attitude* towards his world but also structures and constitutes his *entire world*. In other words, the narrator's gaze casts the world of the novel and everybody in it from this position of resignation and impotence.

Put more abstractly, the minute the Mizrahi struggle no longer challenges the total form of life ("the mechanism"), this total form ceases to be grasped as an external limit and is naturalized into a limitless world whose defeat is unimaginable. And as this form of life turns from an *object* of thought to an unconscious *condition* of it, this transformation changes in turn the subject's cognition of the social terrain so that what was a whole struggling against another whole turns into an internal (Mizrahi) particularity subsumed under a dominating (Israeli) generality.

Thus, we can see the difference between the first and second novels with more precision now. For while the world of the *Transit Camp* is one where, due to the crisis, the undecided fates of the characters in struggle against the Zionist-capitalist regime reaches the very limits of the social world as if, like those legends, the trees themselves speak and nature itself is alive, the world of *Tel-Aviv East* is cast, in contrast, from the position of the resigned Mizrahi for whom, since the struggle has been given up, the world itself ceases to speak; it ossifies into its name and falls into the sites ready for it in the Symbolic order, which is to say that it accepts the law of the state, *qua* system, and can think, act and dream only in accordance with its preconditions.

Once we grasp this dialectical relation between struggle, social conditions and thought then we start to see how it constitutes every aspect in the object-world of the novel. For example, the residents of the neighborhood, unlike the immigrants in *The Transit Camp*, are no longer imagined as an external political threat to be repressed by the armed branch of the state, the police, but on the contrary as an internal "welfare" and "cultural" problem, the solution to which *presupposes* the state and seeks its intervention. Here is the new chair of the neighborhood committee, Menachem Gingi, explaining how he is taking care of the residents of the neighborhood whose homes were recently flooded:

⁹¹ Ibid, 183.

What interests me is the welfare of the neighborhood. You saw yourself how I worked for those who were hurt due to the flood. Who went to city hall and raised hell? Who arranged for compensation? I do what I can do... ultimately we are *dependent* on the institutions: city hall, the ministry of interior, education. Without them nothing will move. So we apply, demand, pressure, sometime we succeed, sometimes we do not. [To Yosef] Can you say that you do not do the same? Are you happy with the state of education? So you try to fix things, to improve them from the *inside*.⁹²

Once the world of the novel springs to life out of the impossibility of a collective struggle taking the system as its aim, that is, once the constitutive conditions of social life are repressed, the world is given into the classic division of subject and object, thought and action, intellectual and manual labor, the Mizrahi intellectual and the Mizrahi pragmatist, Master and Slave. For already in the passage above we see how Menachem Gingi is figured as the practical (“vulgar”) Mizrahi (refigured in the third installment of the trilogy as Yosef’s brother, Saleem, a successful American businessman), while Yosef is always figured as pure thought and intellect. But these local and characterological Mizrahi divisions, permeating the entire trilogy (and I would say Israeli literature in general) also divide the world of the novel as a whole, for we cannot miss the fact that the largest spaces of this world are divided between sites of abstract thought (the education system and the university) and the site of practice (welfare struggle for housing). Later on, we will see how even this division into thought and matter, as it were, disappears in the third installment where, in a truly postmodern shift into immateriality, all sites are sites of representation, and even the antagonism itself is displaced onto a film screening and a painting canvas. To anticipate the discussion in the next section, this will happen not simply due to the unavailability of struggle, but also due to the separation of the state from civil society and the rise of a private economic sphere whose forerunner is here precisely Yosef’s brother, leaving Israel in his youth and returning as a successful businessman.

Before we continue with this binary world, it is important to note that as in *The Transit Camp, Tel Aviv East* is still able to imagine a third voice or position, a subaltern position existing alongside these two, but one coded as an illegitimate option. Again, as I proposed in the previous chapter, in order to glimpse this third epistemologico-political position, which the novel circumvents, we would need to read it against the grain and pay attention to those fleeting moments in which we see the subaltern Mizrahi emerging through the ideology of ethnicity and pluralism. As in *The Transit Camp*, such a moment is tightly tied here to the difference between official politics and unsanctioned violence (always tinted by the image of the “mob”).

We saw earlier how the chair of the neighborhood committee, Menachem Gingi acts “inside” the institutions. The residents themselves, however, seem to have another idea in mind. In a public argument held in Gingi’s office, Yehouda says:

Menachem, let me tell you something from the heart... I speak directly and everyone knows me: I swear by the lives of my children, if I want to do something, no force could stop me! And I am telling you, everyone will come with me, with the children, with the women. What will they do to us? Put us in jail? We are not afraid. But I am silent because of you. I say Menachem should lead us, but if you do not want to, then we will do it ourselves.

“We will go to city hall!” a few people called out.

“Walla, we’ll break everything,” someone shouted enthusiastically.

⁹² Ibid, 280, my emphasis.

Menachem lowered his head. They are capable of it. They already rioted in the past and burned down two Egged buses [of the national transportation company]. They might do it again. They have nothing to lose. But will it help? Will they get anything?"⁹³

If these threats sound familiar it is because just a few years after the publication of this novel, in 1971, the subaltern Mizrahi, now self-defined as the Black Panthers, indeed marched to city hall and threatened to “break everything” if their demands would not be met. As Kochavi Shemesh, one of the leaders of the Black Panthers explained, “I distinguish between the government and the state, but you cannot intimidate me by [reminding me] of what will happen if we destroy the state, because we do not feel like we are partners [*shutafim*]... We belong here, but we are not partners” [*shyahim aval lo shutafim*].⁹⁴ Furthermore, running for the national parliamentary elections in 1973, the Black Panthers wrote in their platform: “in [Israel] there are two classes: the satiated and the oppressed. There is no discrimination of this or that ethnicity [*eda*]. There is a discrimination against a whole class, the oppressed majority, most of which is Mizrahi...”⁹⁵ It should be clear then that a radical Mizrahi voice, one articulating its demands as a class rather than as a culture is not only distinctly and categorically different from the culturalist and pluralist imaginary subtending Ballas’s novels (as well as post-Zionism today), but it also explicitly directs its critique against such culturalist conceptions. As Shemesh explains: “Our first revolt was against the Mizrahi ([ethnic] organizations). We saw them as enemies... a tool that the administration uses to oppress all Mizrahim, as in divide and conquer.”⁹⁶ These scenes and pronouncements in *Tel Aviv East*, similar to those in *The Transit Camp*, are a rare occasion since the subaltern is time and again mediated either by intellectuals or political intermediaries like Gingi.⁹⁷ The statement “I [the subaltern] am silent because of you [the Mizrahi representative]” is the paradigmatic relation between those subjects who presuppose the state as a condition of possibility and those who take it as a direct object of critique/struggle.

To return to the implications of imagining the world from the subject position of a resigned Mizrahi who takes the state as a *fait accompli*, we will note the new social category that appears in this novel, namely the children of immigrants and their fate as the new Mizrahi citizens. Here is the first appearance of Yosef’s students:

He wishes he could sit and study instead of correcting exams and expend his energies on children for whom studying is a form of punishment. When he was a boy he wanted to be an engineer, a builder of palaces! Many flowers bloomed in his heart then, but now, at the age of thirty two, these flowers turned into dry weeds. Twelve years in this country taught him disillusionment. Did he ever think of being a teacher of children? After the camp and military service, after the party activity and the belief in great ideals, he found himself standing in front of questioning, provoking eyes, even hostile at times. Since then, these eyes do not let go of him. How many children he taught over the last seven years in this school? All of them, it seems. In the street, in the market, in the cinema houses, on the roads and at

⁹³ Ibid, 220.

⁹⁴ Cited in Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Ha-ma'avak ha-mizrahi be-Yisra'el: Ben dikui le-shibrur, ben bizdabur le-alternativah 1948-2003*, 2004, p.163.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 174.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 149.

⁹⁷ Since political representation is perhaps unavoidable I distinguish between mediation and representation. Gingi’s Mediation is here inscribed in an unequal relation of force between two social positions such that the condition of intelligibility of the weaker position depends on the terms of the stronger. So, ironically, the weak can speak only on the condition that it will be misunderstood.

the bus stops, the same faces emerge, faces that have already grown older, but the same provoking, somewhat hostile eyes still wonder about him with no end.⁹⁸

It would not be unjust to describe this moment as Yosef's colonial guilt. Here he is in the position of the enlightened intellectual (who would rather study than teach) in front of the "native" ("raw material") population whose portrayal here alludes not only to similar scenes of pedagogy in the colonial context, but also brings to mind the imagery of a man in a hostile jungle surrounded by the eyes of suspicious animals. Be that as it may, what is more significant here is the fact that as much as the parents are imagined as an object of state welfare, their children are grasped as an object of state culture. For if during the first decade of Israel's establishment, the immigrants identified as Iraqis, Moroccans, Tunisians and so forth,⁹⁹ that is, they positioned themselves in an external opposition to the politico-cultural category of the state ("Israeli"), now, in the second and third decades, their children are grasped as "Mizrahim." Given that they are now citizens of the state from birth, the state is their always-already political ground, they have their culture as a predicate of the state-as-subject rather than as subject. In other words, "Mizrahi" can be understood as culture, as predicate, only after the state as a totalizing political category (subject) has been ceded. To give a sense of what this means, I quote a remarkable statement made by David Ben Gurion, who was to become the first Prime Minister of Israel, at the moment of the first Yemenite immigration in 1912: "We are faced in this case with Jews of two stations: in first standing - Jews in general with no adjective attached, and in second standing - Yemenite Jews."¹⁰⁰ It is not simply that the Yemenite Jew is marked and the Eastern (Ashkenazi) Jew is not, for conceptually this tells us little about the particular historical condition that makes this assertion possible. What makes the Jew from Yemen a "Yemenite Jew," and the Jew from other Arab lands a "Mizrahi" is not only the fact that the Eastern European Jew has power over them, but also what all of these groups have in common, which is not, as one might think, their "Jewishness," for this abstract communality is already the effect of the advent of the overall political form – Zionism – that provides for the common term (the subject) that allows for them to be placed on the same conceptual plane and compared in the first place. Rather, what they have in common is precisely the political substance – the state¹⁰¹ – for only when the state occupies the exclusive and preliminary position of Subject, an amphibian condition that is both historical and conceptual, can the pluralist abstract thought solve the problem of social domination by displacing it into its predicates – Ashkenazi and Mizrahi.

He spent the afternoon at home and decided to remove any troubling thought from his mind and concentrate on his thesis chapter on pluralist culture and the proposal for adjusted curricula for the neighborhood school. For cultural pluralism to succeed – he wrote – two conditions must be met: complete equality between the groups of a society and a *voluntarist* belonging of members to their group. Both of these conditions are not obtainable without a fundamental revision in the curriculum that will *reflect [teshakef]* each group's *data [netunim]* and will cancel inequalities between what is taught about the culture and history of the absorbing group, i.e., European Jewry, and what is taught about the culture and history of Eastern Jewry [*yots'ey ha-mizrah*]... [The thinking that the Mizrahi student is in need of the values of

⁹⁸ Ballas, *Tel-Aviv East*, 169. See also 243-244, where Yosef admits to his love object, Rina, that he does not have a positive attitude towards the residents of the neighborhood but he "carries this transit camp in his heart."

⁹⁹ See Chetrit, *Ha-ma'avak ha-mizrahi*, 117 (*Intra-Jewish Conflict*, 79 in the English translation).

¹⁰⁰ Ben Gurion, "One Constitution", *Haahdut* 1912, cited in Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1882-1914*, 1996, p.91.

¹⁰¹ Although technically speaking, this statement is pre-state, the logic of "predication" holds here as well. For the minute the Zionist movement establishes as the central political Subject, it immediately spiritualizes, and culturalizes all other groups it codes as "others."

the elite culture, i.e., the dominating, monolithic one] disregards the group's consciousness to which the student belongs and therefore it disregards the essential data that will allow an understanding of the individual... "A neighborhood school," he wrote in conclusion, "with a curriculum fitted to the composition of the population in the neighborhood might be an effective and consequential tool in shaping the cultural world of the individual that will not stand in contradiction to the culture of his group, and at the same time will not be alienated from other groups in society. In this way the school will serve as a fundamental route towards the cancelling of the gaps between the groups and creating that desired integration (*bishtalvut*) that will be based on equality and mutual respect."¹⁰²

It is easy enough to see that Yosef has both a positivist and an idealist conception of Israeli society: the former tendency leads him to aggregate social groups in isolation, in themselves, while the latter furnishes their pre-determined identity, existing prior to social interaction. Yosef never considers the possibility that "Mizrahim" and "Ashkenazim" are social categories possible only under the condition of the Israeli state, and thus, understanding the latter as a mere incidental place of encounter between these already pre-existing groups, his pluralism already *presupposes* the state and thus can imagine solutions to the question of domination only under its categories, i.e., in cultural groups, *qua* predicates, which appear only under the implicit substance (or subject) of the state. The fallacy of such pluralisms (and I would say of Israeli postcolonial criticism as a whole) is not that they are merely cultural; rather, they understand the pre-state immigrants in post-state categories without acknowledging it. It is not surprising then that Yosef's positivist stance must posit a naïve theory of representation in which so called "Mizrahi culture" is directly "reflected" in the curriculum, as if it was in a state of nature the observer registered in his report. This theory of representation in which Mizrahim and Ashkenazim exist in social nature continues to naturalize the relation between consciousness and social reality and must make an appeal to another idealist category, i.e. voluntarism, in which an autonomous individual freely and rationally "chooses" to join his or her (preexisting) group.¹⁰³ Yosef never considers, for example, that belonging to the Israeli state is a coerced relation, not a voluntary one; this fact is ignored, blocked from the thinking subject, because the state is the very condition of the pluralist thought and of the subject that promotes it.

We need to pay attention then to the ways Yosef's concepts of the individual and the group presuppose the historico-conceptual subject of the state, the state school, and the new social relation between the immigrants and their children, which in turn will give us an insight into the literary forms operative in *Tel-Aviv East*. First, we should notice that the immigrants themselves not only do not attend the school, they surely do not need to be "schooled" in their own culture. From here it becomes obvious that the terms "individual"/"group" conceal the mediating structure of the state school that effectively *separates* the immigrant parent and child such that by "group" Yosef really means "the parents," and by "individual" he means the "child." Yosef never pauses to reconsider the condition of his thinking, that is, the state school that already confers on its population the spiritual category of "culture"¹⁰⁴ that is subordinated to the quasi material category of the state.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ballas, *Tel-Aviv East*, 298.

¹⁰³ It is important to pause over the relation between voluntarism and ideality. While "will" is a broader and complex concept that should not be reduced to idealism, I argue that Yosef's understanding of voluntarism conceives of "will" as "free choice" which obscures its preconditions, here citizenship.

¹⁰⁴ Although this might seem like the default conditions in many nation states, it is important to acknowledge that there are schools that circumvent state intervention. In Israel, the entire religious school system has consistently and successfully resisted the secular curriculum imposed by the state. Mizrahim never achieved such a high degree of political and cultural autonomy precisely because the thought of Mizrahi intellectuals (and Ashkenazi ones for that matter),

What needs to be theorized and historicized is then the socio-symbolic relation between the Mizrahim and the state as the subject position from which the world of *Tel-Aviv East* springs to life. Invoking Lacan and Žižek I therefore ask from which *place* does the world of *Tel-Aviv East* (and Israeli society) can be viewed, or can be cast so that Mizrahim and Ashkenazim will face each other as two commensurate state cultures?¹⁰⁶ Here it will be apt to bring into view, as promised, the historical significance of the political party MAPAI, and of the state more generally as the total subject, and with this to bring my reading of *Tel-Aviv East* to a close. For in the 1960s, the Israeli social formation is still of a particular variant of state-capitalism where, since political parties control almost every aspect of daily life, especially economic activity, no clear separation exists between the state and civil society. As labor historian Michael Shalev explains:

The conditions of Jewish immigration and settlement required that the political institutions of the Zionist movement and the Yishuv dominate the mobilization of capital and the purchase of land. Because of their common interest in neutralizing an unfavorable labor market, the Labor and Zionist movements cooperated intensely... [After the establishment of the state of Israel] the ruling Labor Party [MAPAI] adopted a highly interventionist economic stance... The government was committed to assisting the private sector, along with the state-and Histadrut-owned enterprises... the Israeli bourgeoisie was neither able nor willing to bear principal responsibility for economic development, and private industrialists were the first to demand a controlled (protected and subsidized) economy.¹⁰⁷

Explaining the credit side of this unique synergy between capital and government, Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled explain:

As long as the private sector remained dependent on government-allocated credit, it remained for all practical purposes another branch of government and could not attain autonomy. What seemed like a private sector was, in fact, tied to the state's apron strings. No autonomous business sector could emerge and business decisions were made in response to, or as a part of, political decisions.¹⁰⁸

If understood correctly and with a dialectical eye to the relation between material conditions and thought, this historical condition will have a decisive contribution to our understanding of literary form and the conditions of cultural production. To elucidate this point, it will be useful to turn to Jameson's article on Third World Literature.¹⁰⁹ Jameson argues for a similar socio-historical condition in which the public and private are not yet separated as they are in the First World and consequently there is no clear divide between the psychological level (usually desire) and the political one (usually a collective project). This conception is very helpful in thinking in general terms about

accepts the state as a legitimate cultural force while orthodox intellectuals refuse it. Thus, we see that in Israel the most radical agents of resistance are precisely not on the Left.

¹⁰⁵ Yosef's enlightened thought then spiritualizes Mizrahim and very much like the way we think of religion it grasps "Mizrahiness" as a form of cultural practice or even beliefs to which one voluntarily gives assent. And, as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood argue with regard to religion, this spiritualization, this textualization of the Mizrahi, is predicated on a prior political conditions that have secured the position of Subject. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 2003; Saba Mahmood, "The Politics of Freedom: Geopolitics, Minority Rights, and Gender." Public talk given at Barnard College on November 5th 2009. See online at: <http://vimeo.com/7576055>.

¹⁰⁶ See Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 116.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Shalev, "Liberalization and the Transformation of Political Economy," in Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir (Eds.) *The New Israel: Peacemaking and Liberalization*, 2000, pp.130-131.

¹⁰⁸ Shafir and Peled, "Introduction: The Socioeconomic Liberalization of Israel," in *The New Israel*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88.

the relations between social spheres and cultural production, but, given Israel's particularities, it calls for an important addition. To do so let us recall the three spheres constitutive of Hegel's conception of the modern state - the family, civil society and the state - and translate them into three categories: the personal, the private and the political.¹¹⁰ What Jameson does not stress enough then is that the *reason* for the imbrication of the personal and the political is that in Israel of the 1960s there is no independent and autonomous civil society¹¹¹ (no private sector in Shafir and Peled's words), that is, there is no intermediary social site to mediate the personal and the political. Given the effective control of political parties over economic life, what we understand as civil society of private interests is unable to develop. Due to this historical conjuncture of state and capital, the (sanctioned) Mizrahi imagination can spring to life - and hence it is inscribed - only in the field and form of the state. Thus, the novel takes the only social content available to it, namely, as a quasi-collective housing struggle for welfare and an alternative school curriculum that would offer alterations to state culture which is conflated with Ashkenazi culture.

To see the significance of this historical moment it will be useful to position it in relation to the one that followed it, a transition which will take us to the third installment in Ballas's trilogy. And if my reading of *Tel-Aviv East* began with the text and ended with the articulation of the broadest historical conjuncture, let me reverse the order so as to provide continuity and start here with the new neoliberal historical conjuncture, effective more or less since 1985, and then move to show how it subtends the world of *Outsiders*. For since the implementation of the 1985 Emergency Economic Stabilization Plan, it is not simply that the welfare state has receded, but the very relation between state and capital has been redrawn. Due to aggressive processes of privatization and the deregulation on foreign capital's entry into Israel, the private sphere has gained autonomy from political parties (and during the last ten years has virtually dominated the political sphere), inducing now the model of a three-sphere system.¹¹²

The principal goal of liberalizing economic reforms in Israel, as elsewhere, has been **state contraction**, a fundamental alteration of the division of labor between markets and the state... To the extent that [privatization] is achieved, the state's ownership, regulatory and distributional roles are diminished in favor of the market and the private sector...¹¹³

¹¹⁰ G.W.F Hegel, *An Outline of a Philosophy of Right*. Ed. Stephen Houlgate, 2008. See especially the part "Ethical Life," 154-323.

¹¹¹ Although this statement might be almost self-evident to Israelis, for those unfamiliar with Israeli reality, or with third world states more generally, it might seem to exaggerate the overlap of the political and civic spheres. To see this more clearly, I suggest the following observation: Israeli social formation is not so very different from other regimes in the Middle East where political and military groups control and limit civil society. Western scholars will have no problem accepting such a claim about Iran, Egypt or Syria for example. Thus, the disbelief arises from a certain bias towards Israel as a "Western democracy." Surely even in such regimes there are some freedoms, but the point is to see that there is no social space that can claim autonomy from military and political influence because these social forms are directly imbricated. To soften this tight overlap, we could say, with Althusser, that "in the last analysis" the civic sphere is determined from above. This social reality begins to change in the 1990s.

¹¹² This structural shift was recommended by the IMF, World Bank and the United States and went against the interests of some political groups in Israel, especially those tied to the state. It is for this reason that today the major historical struggle is waged between the receding Ashkenazi elite, tied to older forms of state economy, and the new capitalist class advocating neoliberal policies. These two tendencies are crystallized respectively in the Labor party ('Avoda) run by Sheli Yehimovitch and Yesh 'Atid run by Yair Lapid.

¹¹³ Michael Shalev, "Liberalization and the Transformation of Political Economy." In *The New Israel*, 134, emphasis in original. Although with time, especially over the last ten years, we have witnessed a complete reversal in the relation of dominance such that if in the centrist state every economic relation was effectively political, now every political relation is effectively economic.

With the emergence of an autonomous, or at least a semi-autonomous private sphere, separated from both the family and the state, we see emerging the expected ideology of individuality, but, unlike the manner in which this has been interpreted in Israeli literary criticism, it is not simply an apolitical individuality. Such an explanation still upholds the older and by now defunct two-sphere society and hence is blind to the fact that while such an ideology proclaims autonomy from politics, that is from collective investments, it does so not by vindicating the personal category (family or romantic relations), but rather the private category. While the form is individualistic, the ground or content of this emergence takes place in civil society, and hence takes on its characteristics or forms. So from the 1980s, the Mizrahi question still remains caught in abstraction and gives rise to pluralist solutions, but since it springs to life not in the sphere of the state (Yosef's school/housing) but rather in civil society, it is constituted by the attendant conceptual and social content of such a sphere. Let us first follow the shift on the thematic surface of *Outsiders* as it were and then move to suggest some conceptual and formal observations.¹¹⁴

4.

Once we arrive at *Outsiders*, the thematic landscape of Ballas's imaginary world changes completely. The Mizrahi collective is all but gone and we are to follow only the individual itineraries of a few Mizrahi characters, mostly Iraqi, as they roam in and out of Tel Aviv's apartments. Although Ballas keeps adhering to his multi-character plot, the generational shift, discussed in the previous section, now takes center stage. As much as we follow Yosef and his generation, we also follow his son, Doron, a young man working in a photography shop and his circle of Tel-Avivian friends and colleagues. The generational difference is of course not static or additive, but rather coded in a historical and social schema in which Yosef and with him the state-centric, modernist Israel recede to the background as "past," while Doron's, neoliberal, postmodern Israel takes the foreground and is associated with the "future." The father-son axis is then compounded with the foregrounding of what was always a latent feminine/feminist and capitalist aspect of the trilogy, and we are introduced to Yosef's old failed love object, Esther, as well as to his brother, Saeed. In this installment, both come into their own as full-fledged characters: the one as a journalist/writer on Women's issues, writing in the first person, the other as a successful American businessman offering a job opportunity to Yosef's son. Moving to the political level, the time period during which events take place in *Outsiders* is October 1994 and November 1995, beginning sometime after the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, and concluding days after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. This period was preceded by the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 and is considered by many to be a period of hope and prosperity. As Lev Grinberg explained in his study of this period, once the political level of Israeli society, understood as its "outside" was seen as resolvable, all of a sudden the social ("internal") antagonism flared up and took center stage.¹¹⁵ Here we see then a variant of Shafir and Peled's argument about the autonomization of civil society, except that what Grinberg does not accentuate is that these "internal" discourses are now played out not on the grounds of the state, but on the grounds of the private sphere and the new privatized news, television shows and NGOs, and hence such discourses presuppose its forms. But how do the new emerging civil society and its socio-poetic logic manifest themselves in *Outsiders*?

¹¹⁴ Ballas, "Outsiders." In *Tel-Aviv East – Trilogy*, 2003.

¹¹⁵ Lev Grinberg, *Shalom medumyan, si'ah milhamah: Kesbel ha-manbigut, ha-politika veba-demokratya be-Isra'el 1992-2006*, 2007, pp. 175-204.

Since it is impossible to do full justice to the novel's movement between diverse characters and story lines, weaving in the previous two novels in the trilogy, what I will do in order to answer this question is to concentrate on how temporality, both as represented time, (time as depicted object) and as compositional principle, organizing the time of occurrences in the novel (time as subject). I argue that there are two contradictory temporalities underlying the novel whose interpretation would lead to a better understanding of the relation between the new Israeli civil society and its other.

I begin with one line of events in Doron's story. At the outset we are introduced to Doron in the photography shop, to his romantic relationship with Smadar, his warm and familial relations with the owners of the store and his group of friends, most of whom are artists. Another story line, however, develops in tandem when two curators, Nili and Shay Tamar, putting up a retrospective of the painter Orna Lavi, ask Doron to photograph the paintings for the gallery's catalog. After attending the opening night, Doron returns the next day to the empty gallery and gazes at the paintings whose themes depict Israel in the forties and fifties. I would like to pause over the object of the paintings and Doron's gaze:

People in gardens, a few of whom sit on benches, others stroll and all are surrounded with green trees and a fountain. "Dizengof Square." It's the square, gone now, after being raised on pillars, allowing cars to speed beneath it. "Demonstration," is the name of another painting that represents people walking side by side, their arms raised, their mouth open; a young woman is carrying a sign at the head of the protest, saying: "bread/employment." Other paintings carry their own name: "Carmel Market," "Café Tamar," "Herzel Street" and in the background Herzelia gymnasium in faded lines, for it too is gone now. Tel-Aviv along the years. History. *Chapters in the history of the city*. But there is also a "transit camp": a frizzy-haired girl next to a water tap and a bucket underneath. In the background tents and angry skies; there are also construction workers on top a building and immigrants descending from a plane, and portraits, a lot of portraits. She [Orna Lavi] is a painter from a different period, a forgotten period that is now brought back in a kind of nostalgic forgiveness.¹¹⁶

Now, as Doron says what we see in the paintings is a representation of Tel Aviv's history in which architecture figures predominantly as the measure for historical change. In the same time we see also chapters in the history of Israel, especially the mass immigration waves of the 1950s and the historical transit camps in which immigrants, including Doron's father, Yosef, were housed. If we look closely at the details of the paintings and Doron's thoughts it would seem that history have been gathered from the surface of the world into the canvas, in which time now has turned into space in a double sense. First it is in the depicted object of the painting in which Tel-Aviv's architecture has become a measure for time. Second, the canvas as a repository of time is replicated and mirrored in the site of the art gallery itself. For it is that place in the world where the characters, as well we as readers, *encounter* history, as a completed event in the past. The artwork then does not simply represent history but seems to stand in for it, as a social site individuals can enter and leave, and gaze into as a text to be deciphered privately. The first observation I would like to make then is that for Doron time and history are not made but given, not least important in a text to be read. This sense of history as time given, as text offered for a private subject, is especially heightened when we consider its opposite and notice first that most of the figures in the canvas appear in the plural as groups of people, immigrants or workers. Second, some of them are depicted as protesting, working and arriving in Israel, that is to say, in the moment of some historical collective act, which now seems to be the object a nostalgic desire. It is nostalgia not only for the past and for the collective, but also for the sense of history as making and doing. It seems then that the scene in the

¹¹⁶ Ballas, "Outsiders," 334-335, my emphasis.

art gallery emits two senses of time: time made in the painting vs. time given in the art gallery and its retrospective. The relation between the times needs to be articulated. While the object of the painting are events, for Doron they have turned synchronous. His thought is now placing each moment in the past next to the other in a contiguous manner. Thus, what is being staged here, in a convention of the *mis-en-abyme*, is the *synchronization* and *textualization* of time.

To elaborate on the difference between this sense of time given as text and time made as an event, I would like to leave Doron at the gallery for a moment and enter the object depicted in the painting that will take me back the 1950s and 1960s and the aesthetics of the first period of Israel's state formation. I propose first, that the notion of making time should be related to the historical sense of making the state. To be sure states are always made, and I will comment on this fact later on, but I argue that given the imbrication of the private and the public, the state is felt and understood to be a collective project where no simple separation exists between subject and object, state and citizens. This historical sense of making history also pertains to making the time of stories, and critic Gershon Shaked explains that in this period narrating some principle act pervades the literature of that period. Shaked conveys this sense in a quote from S. Yizhar's *Midnight Convoy* [*Shayara Shel Hazot*] "there was a desire to be at the heart of all acts, to do them, to take, organize. To put forward some project."¹¹⁷ Based on Shaked's studies, I would like to propose a qualified generalization which is that in the most well-known novels of this period such as those of Moshe Shamir, Yizhar and a few others, this desire to be at the heart of the act translates into stories at whose heart unfolds an antagonistic event which is constitutive of the world itself. That is to say, in which the world and the characters come to be or not through it. Before continuing, I would like to stress the distinction I wish to make here. The novels of this period are usually read as stories about an antagonism between the protagonist and the Israeli collective and indeed one could find different ideological positions accepting or rejecting collective identification. I would like to stress, instead, their temporal characteristic as an antagonistic world constituted through an event. Emphasis on the event crosses ideological lines in this period, as both those who criticize Zionism and those that affirm it narrate their stories in this way.¹¹⁸ The relation between events and characters brings to mind Aristotle's *Poetics*.¹¹⁹ As is well known, what defines the *poiesis* of the work is precisely the narration of necessary or probable events whose narration (what Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White once called *Emplotment*¹²⁰) reveal to us a universal and necessary truth. To tie this understanding to nomination, conceptuality, and universality, I would like to recall that Aristotle also argues that the truth of the characters (that is, their names, or identity) should not be given in revealing speeches, that is, in conceptual language, but in revealing necessary acts. The universality, which tragedy then gives us is embedded in the act itself.

Returning to Doron at the gallery, I would like now to propose that the synchronization evident in his gaze is tightly tied with the removal of the antagonistic event whose time has been gathered from the world and deposited in the painting. Further, I would like to continue and propose that the textualization underlying Doron's gaze also underlies the world he inhabits. For not only that he circulates in a mini artists' colony where almost all the characters are text producers, and

¹¹⁷ Gershon Shaked, *Gal Hadash ba-siporet ha-ivrit* [*A New Wave in Hebrew Literature*], 1971, p. 17

¹¹⁸ It is also important to observe that contrary to the received tradition of dividing Israeli literature to decades and styles, such temporal characteristic crosses these divisions. The same antagonistic temporality then can be found in the allegorical stories of the 1960s of Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua as well as in the "Mizrachi" novels of the 1970s and 1980s such as those of Sami Michael and Eli Amir.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1986.

¹²⁰ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol I, 1983, Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 1973.

the object of almost all conversations are literary or cinematic texts, but the social relations of this world, existing in given-time, have also been textualized.

To make this point, I note another theme in the novel. Contrary to the previous two novels in the trilogy that cast an antagonistic world divided into two, between Mizrahim and the Zionist institutions, *Outsiders* weaves a plural world. So among Mizrahim and Ashkenazim there are references to the new Russian immigration, women's rights, and gays and lesbians. All of them are now considered as outsiders to what Doron calls a "normative society." Here is how this new pluralist reality appears in his thoughts.

"Outsiders. Tami [woman] is an outsider too. Of course! Torn between two worlds... Amnon Zaks [gay] enjoys his status as an outsider. He does not hide who he is, but does not boast his identity either. He is an outsider in a normative society... [Said, the Mizrahi] is an outsider as well. Of course!... *And in fact, who isn't an outsider...?*"¹²¹

And Doron's thought continues to include, although somewhat obliquely, the "Ashkenazi" who has turned into an outsider as well. I have added the categories in brackets so you could have a sense of the process of abstraction; how the "differences" of the different identities are acknowledged only at the moment that they have been underlined by a new social, albeit still vague, category - "outsiders." As I suggested earlier that civil society is being textualized, I would like to rewrite Doron's social observation by understanding it via Roman Jakobson's now classical definition of the poetic function. For it should be evident that the process of leveling off, in which we see on the level of the line not differences but a categorical similarity - equivalence - is here precisely the social appearance of the effect that transpires when "the principle of equivalence [is projected] from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." If we continue with the linguistic metaphor then we could say that this imaginary world has the tendency of substituting *langue* for *parole*, resulting in a narrative that offers us a series of categorical abstractions meeting each other not in the diachronic syntagmatic axis, the level of the event as in the painting, but in the synchronic paradigmatic one, that is, the level of equivalence of a civil society released from the state and its forms of absolute difference. Doron is inhabiting then a world in which all identities are given in advance of any event. They inhabit the world of a new civil society as already formed identities who exist *in* time, instead of making it. It is then clear that such a world lacking an antagonistic event is markedly different from the worlds of the earlier period during which the first installments of the trilogy were written. To dispel any misunderstanding, Doron's world is filled with political contestation, but it happens, to appeal once more to Aristotle, on the level of conversation and interpretation of texts, that is, the universality of the world is now no longer given in time but in language. Synchrony is then the time of the genre of the city novel.

Now, as I said earlier the notion that the Israeli state is no longer made but read is an interesting but not very viable interpretation. States and temporality are constantly made or shaped. So it is important to notice that the sense that the world is synchronous belongs only the subject of the new civil society. It will be necessary then to look for another temporality underlining a different subject located outside civil society as its "other." Here I appeal to Fredric Jameson and Roberto Schwarz's concept of "generic discontinuities" and note that the novel unfolds not only in the genre of the city novel but also in the genre of a mystery novel involving an investigation of a stolen object.¹²² Doron is the protagonist here as well. Now, if the city novel associates the state as a

¹²¹ Ballas, "Outsiders," 386, my emphasis.

¹²² See Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature"; Roberto Schwarz, "The Importing of the Novel to Brazil and its Contradictions in the Work of Alencar." In *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, 1996, pp. 41-77

missing past appearing in the artwork, then it will be appropriate that the stolen object will be indeed a painting the curators of the retrospective stole. That is to say the absence of the state is here represented in the absence of the painting and its time.

What counts most here is that if the city novel unfolds in a synchronous temporality, the investigation is not so much a causal development of events but of pure coincidence (in Hebrew *mikriyut*). If we read the novel closely we will see time and again how the main events just happen by accident. Here is Doron reflecting on the coincidental manner he found himself involved in the theft mystery due to a car accident with the curator, Shay Tamir:

“[S]ometimes coincidence creates the most interesting stories. Shay Tamir, driving like crazy, could have caused a much more severe accident. He could have been killed, or get his secretary hurt. But it happened that he hit specifically him [Doron], and that he always has a camera with him, and that the camera captured the woman in the car. And the next day they [happened to] meet in the art gallery and at the same time his wife, in consultation with the owners of the gallery, decides to commission him [for preparing the catalog] and then she finds out that he was involved in an accident with her husband. A chain of accidents...¹²³”

I hope it is clear that in a synchronous world, one lacking an antagonistic event the only experience of time available to the characters is random coincidence of which they can make no sense. Note also that the temporal relations between the two times is not additive. Rather, they are positioned in a particular relation to one another. For if the overall city novel moves synchronously, in a spatial mapping movement of characters with no time, the mystery genre, moving coincidentally enters as a *disruption* of synchrony, which here was just represented as an accident. With this comment I would like to bring synchrony and coincidence to their highest point of articulation in the novel and bring this reading to a close. If in the world of *Outsiders* the political antagonistic temporality has been replaced by infinite exchange of empty signifiers based on equivalence, and is composed of individuals living their private apolitical lives, then into this imaginary world time must enter from nowhere as a catastrophe, an event that for the subject living in synchrony appears as pure chance. Here I would like to recall that the novel ends with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by a man associated with the extreme political right. Let me note the double character of this important scene. In terms of social and novelistic content, the political event disrupts the dream of a post-statist world in which people are no more than consumers and symbolic exchangers of texts. In terms of form, the assassination appears as an antagonistic event in the synchronous world of the characters. And here I would like to make a final comparative comment about the difference between the imaginary worlds of the first two installments (and in extension, of the statist period more generally) and that of the third. I have suggested that in the first two novels, in which the state is embedded in civil society, the stories of each might be said to be organized around a constitutive antagonistic event, which generates the time of the imaginary world. In the third installment, in which civil society becomes autonomous, the event returns only *within* the world, localized as content. Synchrony organizes the world of Tel Aviv while the event disrupts it, appearing as its temporal “other.” Thus, I pose the question: if the subject of synchrony is an autonomous civil sphere belonging to a globalized and worldly Israeli society, who is the subject of the event, of time made rather than time given? The key lies in the identity of the lone assassin, the political far right,

¹²³ Ballas, “Outsiders,” 366. See also “Time and again I ask myself, whether without that coincidence in which I sent the letter to “The Family” [the section in the newspaper devoted to women’s affairs] I would have stopped writing?... Is everything a matter of luck? Coincidence, we float on the waves of accidents, float and sink and struggle in the waves of coincidence.” Ibid, 332. See also, 390.

whose life form is still imbricated with the state. It is a heteronomous form of life for which the symbolic separation of universality and particularity has not yet occurred.

Now, it is customary today to articulate the tragedy of contemporary Israel as an antagonism between the secular Israeli and the religious Jew, Tel Aviv vs. Jerusalem. However, I argue that this is not a precise interpretation. The antagonism is not a matter of secularism vs. religion but rather precisely between an autonomous civil society in which economic relations of equivalence dominate vs. a heteronomous form of life, heteronomous because still embedded not so in a heavenly providence, but in an earthly one, the state. These two forms generate two times, which should have competed at the heart of the novel. But since the literary field is now outside the state, the world of *Outsiders* as a whole is cast from the position of civil society in which synchrony is the dominant time. It then allows heteronomy to appear only as an anomaly at its seams, here at the end of the novel, and in Israel at its borders.

Loubards and Beurs

Algerian migration flows to France are said to begin at the end of the 19th century, their numbers growing extensively after World War II when the French government found itself in dire need for working hands for the large-scale reconstruction of France.¹ As is well known, until the 1950s Algerian migrants were mostly peasants, single men arriving from the rural parts of Algeria, and staying in France for short periods of time. Between 1952 and 1954 the character of the immigration changed when the families of migrants began joining them in France and in the course of time the temporary migration turns into permanent immigration. By 1968, a third of the Algerian community lives in France for some thirteen years; they marry and lead their lives in France, send their children to French schools and these last come to be designated as “La deuxième génération issue de l’immigration” (here: “second generation”).² This generation comes of age in the 1970s, at the years when the rapid post-war growth (“Les trente glorieuses”) begins to decline and France enters what some call the “postindustrial era,” neoliberalism, and the onset of a new stage of globalization. As their parents are employed in those industries heavily impacted by the 1973 oil crisis and processes of de-industrialization, unemployment among immigrants and their families are particularly high, reaching almost 30-40 percent among youth and women.³ They grow up in overpopulated, mostly segregated ghettos - HLMs, ZUPs - especially in Lyon and Marseille, and due to diverse reasons, almost three quarter of them drop out of the school system.⁴ The crisis of the immigrant population reaches new highs with the rise of the nationalist agenda of the *Front National*, recurring deportations, and police violence. In the summer of 1981, this xenophobic atmosphere leads into one of the most spectacular episodes of urban violence in the history of France, dubbed the “rodéos of Minguettes,” during which *banlieue* youth, Arab and non-Arab, burned 250 cars in greater Lyon. The youth are named *loubards*, *voyous*, *lascars* – hooligans and rogues. Reacting against this violent episode, certain groups of “second generation” youth, together with the help of Christian and other ecumenical support organizations, begin to fight back deportations and police violence by initiating non-violent hunger strikes, which, at their most effective, recruit the public support of Socialist Party presidential candidate, François Mitterrand.⁵ In May 1981 the

¹ Georges Tapinos, *L’immigration Étrangère en France 1946-1973*. Travaux et Documents 71.

² Abdelmalek Sayad, “Les trois ‘âges’ de l’émigration algérienne en France.” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15 (June 1997): 59-79; Ahsène Zehraoui, *Les Travailleurs algériens en France: Etude sociologique de quelques aspects de la vie familiale*, 1976;

³ For studies on the history of immigrant labor see Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 1990, pp.221-243; Maryse Tripier, *L’immigration dans le classe-ouvrière en France*, 1990, pp.84-102 ; For sociological studies on the “second generation,” or Beurs see Maria Llaument, *La Détermination sociale de l’échec : les jeunes issus de l’immigration face à l’école et au travail*, 1985 ; Adil Jazouli, *L’action collective des jeunes maghrébins de France*, 1986; Adil Jazouli, *Les Années banlieues*, 1992; François Dubet, *La Galère: jeunes en survie*, 1987 ; For accounts of activists see, Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs: Chronique d’un mouvement avorté*, 1994; Mogniss H. Abdallah et Le Réseau No Pasaran, *J’y suis, J’y reste! Les luttes de l’immigration en France depuis les années soixante*, 2000; Saïd Bouamama, Hadjila Sad-Saoud and Mokhtar Djerdoubi, *Contribution à la mémoire des banlieues*, 1994; For a more journalistic accounts see, Ahmed Boubeker and Nicolas Beau, *Chroniques métissées: L’histoire de France des jeunes arabes*, 1986; Farid Aichoune, *Nés en banlieue*, 1991; For political and legal aspects see Catherine Withol de Wenden and Rémy Leveau, *La Bourgeoisie*, 2007. For a short history of the designation ‘Beur’ and literary analysis see Sylvie Durmelat, *Fictions de l’intégration: Du mot Beur à la Politique de la mémoire*, 2008; Alec G. Hargraves, *Immigration and Identity*. In *Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Community in France*, 1997.

⁴ Catherine Withol de Wenden and Rémy Leveau, *La bourgeoisie*, 2007.

⁵ For a history of the hunger strikes see Priest Christian Delorme account and others in *Alternatives Non Violentes* 42 (Fall 1981). Mitterrand’s letter is quoted there in full.

Socialist Party wins the elections and by October of that year a law is passed that allows foreigners to form and join associations, a veritable step towards the political inclusion of Arabs in the French state, and enabling what sociologist Saïd Bouamama called a shift from “Arabes en France” to “Arabes de France.”⁶ Concomitantly, mostly in Paris, the “second generation” comes to be known as Beurs, which is said to be a double verlan inversion (arabe – rebeu – beur). “Beurs” gained national and historic significance thanks to the 1983 “Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racism” (“Marche des Beurs”).⁷ Crossing France from Lyon to Paris on October 15th, initially with only fifteen marchers, the march arrived at Place de la Bastille in December 3rd with one hundred thousand supporters. That evening Mitterrand, now President, met with eight organizers of the march and despite much disillusionment to come and many new beginnings, Beurs won their formal place in the history of France. With time, the successful politicization of the Beur within the confines of the French Left changes the meaning the “second generation” such that it is being transformed both discursively and materially from the violent image of the *loubards* into a more civilized, cultural identity.

The politicization of the Arab community, the transformation of the “second generation” into Beurs, the split between *loubard* urban violence and Beur civility and the relation of these three to Beur literary production, its aesthetic categories and literary forms make for the object of inquiry of this chapter. Reading anew Beur novels, neglected activists’ testimonies and alternatives histories, I propose a new historicization of Beur identity, showing how it emerges out of a negation of alternative forms of existence and resistance. Contrary to current scholarship, situating the Beur exclusively in the field of French nationalism as a positive exemplar of hybrid culture, I argue that the over-investment in the autonomy of culture and of language ends up in making illegible questions of work and state power, which provide the conditions for such autonomy in the first place.

1. *Loubards* into Beurs

Although beginning to appear in the late 1970s, novels written by the “second generation” gain popularity only in February 1983, ten month before the march, with the overnight success of the novel *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* by Mehdi Charef. In 1986 nine novels were published and one novel in particular, *Le gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag, caught the attention of French readers. At this point, the literary production of this generation is officially referred to as “Beur literature,” and it is this label that is circulating in the French literary market, French academia and eventually in American academia. In 1997, surveying the themes and scope of this literature, Alec Hargreaves counts sixty six novels by thirty four writers, all grouped together under the title *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, a book that becomes, as many other of Hargreaves’s studies, a standard bibliographical item in Beur scholarship. It is worthwhile posing the question why “Beur” ended up being the official designation, both in France and the US, and not the many other possible labels such as “second generation,” “loubard,” “lascar,” “Algerian,” “Arab,” “French-Algerian” etc.?

As I will show in a moment, Beur identity, its content and form, was actually only one possible itinerary for the “second generation.” According to Saïd Bouamama, several histories of the Algerian immigration intersected in the early 1980s, but the 1983 march, a “founding act,” leveled the historical field. Here is Bouamama:

⁶ For the history and significance of the law see de Wenden and Leveau, *La bourgeoisie*.

⁷ See Bouzid, *La marche: Traversée de la France profonde*, 1984.

Une histoire dense précède la Marche, que ce soit en matière d'immigration, de jeunesse des cités, ou des deux. Ce passé important n'a pourtant été d'aucune utilité au moment de la Marche, et surtout dans les années qui vont la suivre. Rarement un mouvement n'a disposé d'autant de racines et d'autant d'expériences diverses... Pourtant, la Marche de 1983 ne tient pas compte de toute cette histoire. Dans le même temps où le "lascars" sont médiatiquement transformés en "Beurs," l'occultation de la mémoire se met en place... Pour réaliser une telle occultation, un événement hors du commun était nécessaire. Pour aboutir un tel oubli, un moment sans précédent... était indispensable. Une initiative pleine d'enthousiasme était la seule à même de prétendre jouer fonction d'événement fondateur, relativisant le passé et prétendant ouvrir l'avenir.⁸

What Bouamama is then enabling here is a complete reversal of the way we understand the Beur. If in American scholarship, the Beur is conceived as a marginal figure, decentralizing the French center, usually in terms of national identity, then here Bouamama asks us to consider the opposite, i.e., that it is the Beur, or more precisely, the legitimate and civil entry of Beurs into French society, that displaced other identities, other possible ways of action, representation and narration. The marginalization of Bouamama's study, by far one of the most important alternative histories of the Beur movement, is a symptom of this very process. If we are to recover both this displacement and the alternatives it displaced, we need to shift our critical perspectives and read Beur novels against the grain. To do so, I turn first to the moment before the Beur was invented, to 1981 and the *rodéos* of Minguettes.

As I mentioned above, the decade preceding the march was marked by the effects of the 1973 oil crisis that officially ended the post WWII golden age of French economic growth. According to sociologists' accounts, North African or Maghrébi youth emerged into French society in these years around two main social sites: education and employment. Rejected early from the educational system and pushed into a harsh labor market, they faced the reality of high unemployment, "flexible" work, and short-term employment typical of the new phase of late capitalism.⁹ Thus, distinct from an earlier generation of immigrants who were still able to organize thanks to the socialization processes inherent in organized labor, Maghrébi youth were unable to develop stable social relations and a life form grounded in work.¹⁰ As a consequence, petty delinquency and clashes with the police were on the rise.¹¹ This heightened violent atmosphere produced the "*rodéos* of Minguettes," the first eruption of French urban violence, during which 250 cars were burned. Sociologist Adil Jazouli, one of the first sociologists to write about the Beur social movement, explains that the spectacular nature of these events, made sensational by the media, was perceived as a new and unprecedented phenomenon in France. He explains:

⁸ Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs* 39-40.

⁹ See Adil Jazouli, *L'action collective*, 1986; Maria Llaument, *La Détermination sociale de l'échec : les jeunes issus de l'immigration face à l'école et au travail*, 1985. For some details on labor losses see the studies by Gérard Noiriel and Maryse Tripiet in footnote 2.

¹⁰ See Jazouli, *L'action collective*, 197. For accounts of the decline of the French labor movement see Alain Touraine, M. Wieworka and François Dubet, *The Workers' Movement*, trans. Ian Patterson, 1987. For the specificity of the immigrant workers' experience within the French working class see, Maryse Tripiet, *L'immigration dans la classe ouvrière en France*, 1990.

¹¹ For a major study of youth as delinquents see François Dubet, *La Galère: jeunes en survie*, 1987. For a film about clashes between immigrant and police see MIB [Mouvement de l'Immigration et des Banlieues] chronique 2001-2002, dir. Reynald Bertrand, 2003. For a more recent and extensive account of urban violence, class and ethnicity see Loïc Wacquant and Sébastien Chauvin, *Parais urbains: ghetto, banlieues, État*, 2006.

La violence massive de ces événements était telle que pour la première fois dans l'après-guerre en France, on a parlé de la "révolte des ghettos" et que les risques de dérive vers une sorte de guerre civile apparaissaient possibles. A la différence d'autres violences populaires, comme les révoltes des sidérurgistes lorrains en 1978 et 1979, le danger des rodéos apparaissant surtout dans le fait qu'ils n'étaient pas contrôlés, même partiellement, par aucune force politique ou sociale capable de servir de garde-fou.¹²

I would like to note how the perpetrators of these acts were designated. Reporting on one of these later incidents, one of the television news shows in September 1981 signed off their story about the *rodéos* saying: "c'est peut-être le début d'une escalade dont rêvent précisément les loubards."¹³ We are in 1981 and in Lyon, quite far from the Parisian Beur and much before the 1983 march. So how does a *loubard* turn into a Beur, and why do we not have *loubard* literature but do have a Beur one? If to push this counter-history further, if Begag's *Le gone du Chaâba* is an initiation novel about a boy growing up in a Lyonnaise *bidonville* why do we not have *Le loubard de Minguettes*, another quartier in Lyon, not too far Villeurbanne where Begag grew up?

Bouamama, who participated in and organized political activities during the 1980s, argued in 1994 that the shift from *loubards* or *lascars* to Beurs was a highly politicized one, designating an ideological rewriting:

Avant la marche de 1983, les jeunes issue de l'immigration n'existent pas pour la société française. Plus précisément, leur sortie de l'invisibilité sociale a connu deux périodes contrastées: la première, connotée négativement, s'enclenche avec les rodéos de l'été 81. La seconde, connotée positivement, démarre avec la Marche.

Entre-temps, les méchants casseurs et délinquants se sont transformés en "gentils Beurs." S'il y a effectivement une nouvelle réalité sociologique avec l'émergence d'une génération née de l'immigration, les contours et les ruptures sont loin d'être là où le discours politique et médiatique les ont situés pendant et après la Marche.¹⁴

Bouamama's overall narrative exceeds the scope of this chapter. What is of import and relevance in his account to our understanding of Beur literature is his claim that with the popularization of the Beur movement, their "arrival" to civil society, a gap was introduced between the manner in which Beurs were represented (whether in the media or in political discourse) and their conditions of living in the *banlieues*. After the march, Bouamama argues, "une mode Beur s'instale et envahit les médias. Les jeunes des cités ne se reconnaissent pas dans ces exemples de "réussite" et dans ces individualités que l'on projette comme héros positifs. Le discours tenu sur les Beurs est un décalage complet avec la réalité des jeunes des cités."¹⁵ So first I note that while Beur scholarship tended to focus on the break between the "first generation" (the immigrant parents) and the second, the gap (*décalage*) in representation corresponds here quite differently to a growing rift *within* the "second generation."

I will demonstrate below how this gap appears and disappears in Begag's novel, but first I would like to make more explicit the terms of the gap: while locally, in the different *banlieues* of

¹² Jazouli, *L'action collective*, 84.

¹³ Journal, TF1 09/16/1981. 20:14- 20:16.

¹⁴ Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans*, 68.

¹⁵ Bouamama, *Dix ans*, 78. Mogniss H. Abdallah, an activist, documentarian and one of the founders of the alternative journal Im'media (Immigration Media) argues along the same lines and identifies this break more in class based terms: "[U]ne nouvelle élite, la "Beurgeoisie", recueille les faveurs du pouvoir. Elle a pour mission de se substituer aux "voyous du mouvement" [the *loubards*] qui entretiennent la révolte dans les cités, et celle d'envoyer un message positif et fraternel à la société." Abdallah, *J'y suis, J'y reste!*, 67-8.

France, “second generation” activists drive forward social struggles for housing, education, labor, and other material concerns, the Beur question, discussed now nationally and promoted by Socialist Party-backed national associations such as *SOS Racisme*, took on a more moral and culturally ethnic tendency. Pierre Bourdieu, criticizing the association during a public event in 1985 argued:

il y a deux façons de mentir, l’une de gauche, l’autre de droite. La gauche transforme les problèmes politiques en problèmes moraux. Quand un pouvoir politique fait de la morale et non plus de la politique, c’est suspect: pas de prêchi-prêcha, il faut transformer les conditions économiques et sociales.¹⁶

This bifurcation of moral and cultural questions and socio-economic conditions is not limited to the sphere of politics and arises even before the politicization of the Beur question. In an early sociologist study on the “second-generation,” Maria Llaumett, concerned with the growing bifurcation of “cultural” and “socio-economic” aspects, cites this following statement from the members of the Lyon group, l’Association d’Expression des Jeunes Immigrés (A.E.J.I):

L’appartenance de nos familles à ce qu’on appelle la classe ouvrière, notre exclusion sociale, nos cités de béton quadrillés, surveillées, encadrée en permanence, constitue le code de notre identité... s’interroger sur notre “identité (comme il est de mode dans les enceintes universitaires) *en faisant abstraction* de ce qui nous entoure et nous étouffe, aboutit à une impasse. Ce culturel n’existe pas en soi...¹⁷

And in 1985, Llaumett writes again: “En effet dans l’utilisation partielle et *aseptisée* du terme ‘Beur,’ on escompte la dimension socio-économique de la situation des jeunes maghrébins, dimension qui disparaît en occultant l’exclusion dont ces jeunes sont l’objet.”¹⁸ As we saw in Bouamama, the split between culture and class, or identity and socio-economic conditions is also mapped on the break between personal success, or personal identity and a more collective project. “Second generation” activists articulate the need for the latter in much urgency. Kaïssa Titouss, the president of Radio Beur in 1983 concludes an interview saying: “L’intégration individuelle pour les Arabes n’existe pas. Il faut concevoir l’intégration collective...”¹⁹ In the concluding remarks of her programmatic article about the Algerian immigration, Farida Belghoul, a Beur activist leader and a novelist, argues that for the “second generation:” “La recherche d’une identité collective devient alors un impératif absolu.”²⁰

However, when the “Beur” arrives to US academia and is turned into an object of study, this bifurcation and complexity is erased. Here is how Hargreaves opens his study.

This is the first full-length study to be devoted to [Beur] writers... it focuses on the key problematic which has preoccupied Beur writers: the articulation of a sense of personal identity, forged in the particular circumstances which are those of an ethnic minority in France... For most of them the question is less one of collective identity (how do nations and other groups build up and share in a sense of community) than of personal identity (how can I fit together into a coherent whole the different parts of my experience, which often conflict with each other because of my participation in a mixture of communities and

¹⁶ Ahmed Boubeker and Nicols Beau, *Chroniques Métissées*, 98.

¹⁷ Maria Llaumett, “Les jeunes d’origine étrangère: De la marginalisation à l’intégration” *Presse et Immigrés en France* (January-February 1983), 21, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Maria Llaumett, *La détermination sociale de l’échec: les jeunes issue de l’immigration face à l’école et le travail*. CIEMI (1985), 38, my emphasis.

¹⁹ Kaïssa Titouss, “J’ai claqué la porte de SOS-Racisme.” *Quo Vadis* (Fall-Winter 1993): 47.

²⁰ Farida Belghoul, “Que sont en France les algériens devenus.” *Actualité de l’immigration* 97 (July 8th, 1987): 97.

cultures?) This uncertain sense of identity is the central theme in the writings of Beur authors.²¹

The discrepancy cannot be clearer. My point, however, is that it is not that Hargreaves is wrong, quite to the contrary; many Beur novels do indeed revolve around questions of personal identity. But given the historical and political context I have just outlined, we should ask why when questions of class, collectivity and violence constitute the history of North African youth in France, the novels represent mostly questions of “cultural identity,” one articulated as a matter of biography and personal identity. In other words, Beur scholarship tended to mostly repeat and reproduce the literal content of these novels, instead of submitting them to a critical gaze, asking what is the relation between what we see in the history of the Beur and what we do not see in the novels. In the following sections, I will show how the bifurcation of the *loubard* and the Beur appears in Azouz Begag’s novel in a displaced manner. Before I do so, however, I would like first to offer a brief reading of Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* and show how, quite contrary to the position of current scholarship, it offers us materials and forms grounded in the *loubard* rather than the Beur, giving a figure to questions of work, and economic conditions rather than cultural identity.²²

2. A *Loubard* Novel

Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* was the first commercial success of Beur literature.²³ I should note, however, that it was published in February 1983, significantly ten months before the official “entry” of the “second generation” into the French public sphere with the arrival of the march to Paris. As such, it is on the cusp of the popularization of the Beur and thus might offer traces of earlier contents and forms.

As if taking its cue from the history of the *rodéos* two year earlier, *Le thé* is about a group of *loubards*.²⁴ As such it differs from many Beur novels that construct their world around a single and central Beur character, one developing over time and relativizing all other characters and events in relation to its Self. In contradistinction, Charef’s novel does not construct clear narrative hierarchies, offering, instead, more and more characters and episodes to the reading eye such that one reaches the conclusion that the object of the narrative is explored not so much in the way of temporal development of one character, but in spatial expansion of multiple characters and urban terrain. It is, however, not an additive expansion, moving simply by adding, but a dialectical movement that resituates previously introduced characters as it proceeds to introduce new ones. So, for example, although the novel begins with Madjid and Pat as the center of the loose gang – Farid, Bengston, Thierry, Jean-Marc, James, Bibiche, Anita – both of them seem to be displaced by the parallel narrative of Josette, her son Stéphane and Madjid’s mother, Malika. Furthermore, once Solange, Madeleine, Balou, and Naima are introduced, then Pat and Madjid lose their centrality and seem to be quite equal to other characters. What differentiates them, it seems to me, is not any qualitative

²¹ Hargreaves, *Beur Fiction*, 1.

²² See for example Mireille Roselo’s reading of Charef’s novel in her *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*, 1998, pp.41-64.

²³ Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*, 1983.

²⁴ The proper name even makes an appearance in a late scene. “A l’Alhambra, la séance de minuit est généralement un film porno. Tous les loubards du quartier s’y donnent rencart.” Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*, 133.

difference (as with Begag's Azouz as we shall see) but a quantitative one – we simply hear more about them. If Beur novels usually have a Beur subject that renders secondary characters peripheral, here it seems that the obverse obtains: secondary characters move more and more towards the center, displacing Pat and Madjid and creating a heterogeneous field of narration. This spatial and collective expansion receives one of its most intricate and developed forms in a passage describing the routine of all the characters on a Saturday. Beginning with the spatial object “Le Samedi, la cité montait d'un ton,”²⁵ the narrator oscillates between indoor and outdoor locations (elevator, balconies, a cafe, a market, the interior of a house), between all the residents of the *quartier* and particular characters such as Malard, Pat's father, Levesque and Malika; and it moves freely between the minor event – walking a dog – to the expansive description of the yearly August vacation on the beach. As it proceeds in its expanding and contracting movements, narration picks up speed, and slowly collective disembodied voices emerge, as we can see in the last lines of these passages.

Aux fenêtres et balcons, c'est le ballet du balai, le grand nettoyage hebdomadaire. Paillasons, tapis, descentes de lit claquent au vent, vomissent leur poussière, et tant pis pour le voisin du dessous...

Au bout du cinquième aller et retour, l'ascenseur se bloque, vu l'affluence. Jurons et insultes résonnent dans l'escalier, mais il y en a aussi qui se saluent, qui se fendent d'une politesse: faites donc, passez! Passer, des fois, dans une flaque de pisse, et l'on s'excuse en tirant son chariot plein de victuailles, et l'on sourit, gêné, l'air de dire:
“L'habitude, c'est pas grave!”²⁶

This tendency of the narrator's voice to turn itself over more and more into its plural objects of narration - youth, kids, residents, girls, vacationers – turns at times into indirect discourse in which the subject of speech itself is plural. See how in the next example the plural object “Les jeunes du béton” turns into the subject of narration, using “tu,” as if the gang itself is giving directions on pick-pocketing.

Les jeunes du béton descendent carrément sur la Côte d'Azur. C'est que quand il s'agit de tirer un larfeuille, vaut mieux que ce soit un gros... Puis sur la Côte, les nichons sont classes. Les petites caissières de chez Mammouth (celui qui vend de désespoir par paquet de six pour le prix d'un), celles qui s'éprennent pour des starlettes et jouent à la Neuillylienne ou à la Seiziémoise, ont des nibards plus bandants que les belles-doches de Bretagne. Quand tu tires pas, tu mates.

Tu te fais une petite coupe de cheveux à la Travolta, tu fauches un maillot de bain au marché sans oublier le tube de pommade à bronzer, tu t'allonges sur le sable, et les calots en forme de canne à pêche, tu guettes tous les sacs à main de belle signature, surtout ceux qui sont restés seuls du fait que la donzelle est partie se mouiller les Roberts. Alors y en qui reviennent tour de suite, vite fait, parce qu'ils ont la flicaille au cul, et d'autres qu'on revoit que six mois, un an après: ils couraient pas assez vite.²⁷

These moments also reveal the class perspective of the narration not only by not distinguishing between Arabs and French (consistent throughout the novel) but primarily by casting the whole scene in a degraded form of class struggle – stealing from the bourgeoisie - and class imitation - the

²⁵ Charef, *Le thé au harem d'Archib Ahmed*, 125.

²⁶ Ibid, 125-126.

²⁷ Ibid, 127-8.

girl cashiers pretending to be starlets of the 17th arrondissement. The tone then follows suit and is full of derision and at times contempt so very different from Azouz Begag's famous polite irony.

Now that I have identified this heterogeneous form on the local level, let me articulate its corollary on the more global level of plot. The structure of *Le thé*, not following one character, but several of almost equal importance, seems to be exhibiting two major narrative forms: the anecdote/episodic structure and a small-scale plot. While the former is more or less equally distributed among all characters and is cast either as recollections or mini portraits, the small-scale plot is saved only for Josette on which I will say a little more below. Both forms, however, extend the spatial expansion of the novel, as if charting more and more parts of the cité. Given this type of spatial movement and the fact that the "heroes" of this movement are *loubards* or *lascars*, it will not be too much to suggest that *Le thé* exhibits some traits of a picaresque, that episodic form following the exploits of the *picaro* (rogue). Here is one possible definition of the genre:

[The Picaresque] is usually employed to describe episodic, open-ended narratives in which lower-class protagonists sustain themselves by means of their cleverness and adaptability during an extended journey through space, time and various predominantly corrupt social milieu.²⁸

As a category, however, the "rogue" tempts the reader to simply spot it in the novel instead of thinking about the relation between its characteristics and the formal aspects it forces on the narrative. As a social category, the rogue is a figure of violence and cunning, but it seems that its most relevant "content" is his relation to work, and more specifically the fact that he has none. Hence, the temporal routine coming with a job is absent from the life of the rogue, allowing for the temporality of wandering that imposes an episodic structure. The episodic structure of *Le thé*, then, should be traced to the fact the *loubards* do not work. This lack is the source of its heterogeneity, allowing them to wander the cité in search of money and as a consequence to survey it. So contrary to most Beur novels in which, as Hargreaves tell us "work" is virtually absent from the imaginary world, here it is made, precisely by its lack (unemployment), the very "mover" of narrative events.²⁹ While the lack of work is the underling condition of the episodic structure of the *loubards*, the character that has a plot line, even if a limited one, is Josette: the only character that had a job, lost it, and attempts to find another one.

To sum up this brief reading, I would say that with one exception, never do we read here about personal cultural identity, and when such a statement enters the novel it has very little to do with the world of the *loubard*, its structure and form. For all Charef's commercial sense, exoticizing the Arab for the sake of French society, *Le thé* is almost uniquely heterogeneous in its structure, never constructing any qualitative differences between characters and for that matter between Arabs and French, his narrator's eye is ever trained on questions of work, and unemployment that escape most Beur novels.

Between 1983 and 1986, during the apogee of the Beur social movement, the *loubard* novel will be rewritten by Azouz Begag's Beur novel, now organized around a central and homogenous Subject, moving in a hierarchical world in which the Beur takes center stage and other characters the

²⁸ Richard Bjornson, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction*, 1977, p.4. See also how the description of the *picaro* resembles the discourse on the Beur but here his traits are derived from his class ambiguity: the *picaro* is "characterized by an ambiguous or non-existent link with his father, this outsider (or "half-outsider") inherits no place which can be considered a home, no trade by means of which he can sustain himself, and no social position to provide him with well defined relationships to other people." Other recurring traits are: "ambiguous links with the past, departure from home, initiation, repeated contacts with a dehumanizing society and its pressures to confirm..." Ibid, 6-7.

²⁹ Hargreaves, *Beur Fiction*, 50

periphery, rewriting questions of work as questions of culture. Before moving to a reading of Begag's novel, I would like first to generalize further the differences between *loubards* and Beurs.

3. *Loubards* and Beurs II

I have discussed above the bifurcation of culture and socio-economic conditions or class, but what I did not stress enough is the difference in the discursive fields and social sites in which these two unequal halves are played out. This difference holds one of the keys to the imaginary worlds of Beur novels.

It will be commonplace to note that the question of French culture is articulated, whether in academic debates in France or the United States, vis à vis nationalism, or national identity, where it is said to be discursively produced, an arbitrary sign one can subvert, corrupt and resist by discursive means. Conversely, such a position offers the same insight as to "Arabness" and by doing so seeks to resist the essentialist and racist tendency to lock Arabs into some absolute and natural difference.

To generalize such theoretical moves, it could be said that they seek to separate the habitual suture of "France" and "Frenchness" and advance a double strategy – on the one hand such a theoretical position *particularizes* "Frenchness," decentralizing and demoting it to only one identity among others in the French nation, which can now be imagined as a multicultural one. On the other, it *universalizes* "Arabness" by claiming it a place in state institutions – schools, museums, government, etc. - opening it up to all citizens. To put this in linguistic terms, the noun or substance "France," is shifted into its predicate, such that in the multicultural reading it is a noun that can be declined into French-Algerian, French-Moroccan etc. In a more radical, poststructuralist reading, the noun "France" is utterly lost and all we would have are competing predicates or identities with no substance, or fixed boundaries. We can find such an example in Gil Hochberg reading of *Georgette!* by Farida Belghoul. Working with Judith Butler's elaborations on the abject, Hochberg concludes by saying:

If we get lost trying to make sense of Georgette's... condensed, mad, and idiosyncratic narratives; if we are blinded and dazed by endless transfigurations of identity, spinning adjectives... delivered through the use of incorrect or archaic syntax, mismatched linguistic registers, or grammatical errors [it is because] these failures are the means by which... Belghoul redirect[s] the disruptive force of racial abjection in order to invite us to question "the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility" (Butler, *Bodies* 3). More specifically, in revisiting the so-called "problem of immigration" through the failed narratives of the outcast... Belghoul remind[s] us that this problem is in fact "produced" through a continual process of signification that locates in the immigrant the border of the legitimate national subject.³⁰

Wide spread and accepted as they may be, such readings, by turning the question of domination into a question of discourse and language, confuse French nationalism with the French state. What is being foreclosed in this kind of socio-linguistic readings is the fact that for there to be a perceived difference in content through which both sides consider themselves *culturally* different, some shared measure has to be already in place, allowing for the sides to speak, understand, and misunderstand

³⁰ Gil Z. Hochberg, "The 'Problem of Immigration' from a Child's Point of View: The Poetics of Abjection in Albert Swissa's *Aquid* and Farida Belghoul's *Georgette!*" *Comparative Literature* 57. 2 (2005): 175, my emphasis.

one another. This shared measure, or form, is precisely the state and the concept of citizenship that allows for a *preliminary* abstract communality, and hence the abstract *equivalence* of both sides even before any word has been uttered. The abstract equivalence between Beurs and French citizens is precisely what distinguishes the “second generation” from the first, their migrant parents, who did not enjoy political rights. It could be said that before the 1980s the difference between the migrant worker and the French citizen was one of absolute *inequality*, precisely because there was no measure, no form in place (the state) to equalize both sides.

Beur scholarship and poststructuralist readings more generally see this arbitrary abstract equivalence, which is of a kind with Saussure’s principle of paradigmatic equivalence, in which all signs are placed on the synchronic axis of identity, and proceed to undermine imaginary differences. But working with a linguistic model, they fail to see the formal *condition*, i.e., the state that allows for this discursive and symbolic equivalence to arise in the first place. To put this again in linguistic terms, in terms of “substance” and “predicate,” if we consider the state to be the substance and both “French” and “Beur” to be predicates, we will see that while they are different predicates, different in content, they are equivalent, or identical in their form, i.e., as “predicates.” But the “state as substance” is obscured because we conflate the predicate/content of the state (French nationalism/culture) and the substance of the state, which has no properties (state power). It could be said that the state as substance has the characteristic of Lacan’s Real – it enables the existence of equivalent properties (of Symbolic differentiation) while it itself has none. In other words, by unhinging “French” from “France,” the predicate from the substance, we turn “Frenchness” into a text, an arbitrary sign and subject it to discursive analysis. What we must not fail to see is first that the felicitous textualization of identity, French or Arab, is not simply a matter of the nature of identity in general, but is rather dependent on historical conditions (in this case, the transformation of the “second generation” into citizens) which enable us to see the arbitrary relation between the state and nationalism. Second, by textualizing identity we still leave unexamined the substance of the state, which limits and conditions the effects of discourse. The difference between nationalism-as-text (Symbolic) and state-as-power (Real) affect the very categories of intelligibility as well as prompt very different strategies of resistance.

To explain how the difference between subject/substance and predicate can be related to the qualitative difference between the *loubards* and the Beur I turn to one of Hegel’s formulations that distinguishes between two qualitatively different forms of linguistic negation, “simple” and “infinite.”

In this as [simple] negation there still remains the relation of the subject to the predicate, which is thereby something relatively universal, the determinacy of which has only been negated (“the rose in not red” entails that it still has color...)

The negative-infinite judgment, in which no relation at all between subject and predicate in on hand any more, is usually cited in formal logic *merely as a senseless... curiosity*. Nevertheless, this infinite judgment is in fact not to be considered merely as a contingent form of subjective thinking. Instead it ensues as the very next dialectical result of the preceding, immediate judgments (of the positive and the simply negative whose *finitude* and lack of truth explicitly come to light in it.³¹

We can already see in this very abstract discussion how it is possible to map the Beur’s cultural criticism of French nationalism on the first “simple negation” where only the predicate is negated but the subject remains intact, and the violence of the *loubard* on the second “infinite negation”

³¹ G.W.F Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 2010, pp.247-8. Original emphasis removed. Emphasis added.

where no relation would exist between subject and predicate, allowing perhaps for a new subject to emerge. Hegel is very helpful in allowing us to see how this act of negation might seem “senseless” at first much like the way the 1981 urban violence of the *loubards* was perceived.³² Now, Hegel’s discussion does not remain abstract. As if thinking of hooligans and rogues he immediately proceeds to give a concrete example of “infinite negation.”

Crime can be regarded as an objective example of the negative infinite judgment. Whoever commits a crime, more precisely a theft, does not merely negate, as in the civil juridical dispute, the particular right of someone else to this specific matter. Instead, he negates the right of that person altogether... he violated the right as such, i.e., the right in general.³³

So *loubards*, being on the margins of society and engaged in criminal and at times violent acts are positioned against state institutions - the police - and outside of them – the school system, for example. Thus, being outside and against the state, *loubards* resist its very substance; they refuse it and its law altogether. To return to the distinction between “equivalence” and “inequality,” *loubards* are situated in the latter, being an absolute other of the state, refusing to recognize it. I will expand on this aspect below. The Beur, as a cultural identity, already accepts the law of the state, its form and boundaries and contends only its contents, its “predicates” – for example, the content of this or that law, but not the Law itself. Further, the Beur is positioned on the level of “equivalence,” and he is an “other” only in so far as he differs in content from other contents of the state. And last, it is precisely by accepting the state as its substance and Law within which this identity receives its meaning that the Beur turns into the predicate of this substance, i.e., an identity that can exist only as content and text. Let me now show how the qualitative difference between the *loubard* and the Beur appears in Begag’s *Le gone du Chaâba*.

After the successful publication of his novel in 1986, Begag gave an interview for *Lyon-Libération*, a Lyonnaise newspaper, and explicitly tied between his relation to the Beur social movement (*Le mouvement associatif*) and the manner this relation has informed a central scene in his novel. To provide some context it will suffice to say that in this scene the French teacher, M. Grand, gives his young students a cruel test in hygiene. He asks the students to show him their socks so he can inspect their cleanliness. While young Azouz, the semi-biographical protagonist of Begag, acquiesces, his friend Moussaoui refuses and the altercation between him and the teacher develops into one of the most violent and disturbing scenes in the novel. Having this context in mind let us examine how Begag translates young Azouz’s behavior in class into his own political attitude. The journalist begins by saying that Begag:

a toujours l’impression d’être “à côté,” devant les mouvements qui veulent rassembler sa communauté, et qu’il soutient.

And Begag immediately continues:

Je [ne] suis pas associatif [read: part of the social mouvement] du tout. Je pense au petit Azouz à l’école, en train de fayoter. Lui, il enlève tout de suite ses chaussettes quand le maître lui demande. L’autre [Moussaoui] refuse: ‘T’es pas mon père.’ Je sais qu’il à raison de

³² In their study of French and American urban violence, Loïc Wacquant and Sébastien Chauvin argue that such acts are logical and rational responses to neoliberal divestment from social services and the neglect of the universal responsibilities of states to their citizens. See Loïc Wacquant and Sébastien Chauvin, *Parais urbains: ghetto, banlieues, État*, 2006.

³³ *Ibid*, 248.

ne pas vouloir les enlever. Et moi l'intégré, j'ai honte d'être à côté du mouvement déclenché par l'élève rebelle, d'avoir le mauvais rôle.³⁴

Although I do not suggest reading Begag's novel as an allegory of the Beur social movement, it is quite evident that Begag does so here. He moves quite seamlessly from Moussaoui's fictional refusal of authority to the Beur social movement: "j'ai honte d'être à côté du mouvement déclenché par le élève rebelle..." More importantly, what we glimpse here is that for Begag, Moussaoui (and not only the "French") is the "other" and his direct refusal of authority is unthinkable in the horizon of the Beur who seeks entry into French civil society and social ascent. Let us look more closely at this act of refusal in the novel:

[Moussaoui] hésite quelques instants, pose son regard sur la fenêtre et, finalement, se décide à parler en fixant le maître.

- Mes chaussettes, je les enlève pas, moi. Pourquoi que les enlèverais, d'abord? C'est pas le service d'hygiène ici? Et pis d'abord, vous êtes pas mon père pour me donner des ordres. J'enlèverai pas mes chaussettes. C'est pas la peine d'attendre ici!³⁵

The scene deteriorates very fast and Azouz, now a witness, records Moussaoui's battle of words with M. Grand. Although a source of guilt for Azouz, Moussaoui's behavior is mediated through M. Grand as an extreme and illegible eruption of violence. Azouz describes Moussaoui's actions as "beyond belief" and "grotesque," his smile as "sickly" and his demeanor as one of a boxer, "Muhammad Ali." Concomitantly, he reports that M. Grand calls Moussaoui a "lunatic."³⁶ What I would like to note here is the peculiar relation between Azouz and Moussaoui. Although Azouz ironizes French culture *for us*, by putting it on display (*mettre en scène*) he eventually obeys French authority *in* the imaginary world. Most readers of Begag's novels praise his ability to defamiliarize "French hospitality" as it were, but by collapsing culture and state, the Symbolic and the Real, they neglect the cardinal fact that one can ironize the law while utterly obeying it. On the other hand, Moussaoui has no recourse to irony, nor to depth and interiority that are the preliminary conditions for ironic reflection which is reserved only for the Beur. Very much like the first generation Algerian immigrants existing only *for* the gaze of the French, Moussaoui exists only as an object in the gaze of the Beur subject. And yet, because for Moussaoui the encounter with the teacher is not an encounter with "culture," with the Symbolic, but with the authority of the state, with the Real, his acts turn illegible, or more precisely they appear as something outside signification all together, as violent nature. The break between the Beur and the *loubard* carries over also to the bifurcated meaning of being "Arab" in France. Here is how the scene develops after class:

[T]oi, t'es le pire des fayots que j'aie jamais vue. Quand il t'a dit d'enlever tes chaussettes, qu'est-ce que t'as dit? Oui, m'sieur, tout de suite...

-Eh ben c'est parce que c'est le maître! Et pis d'abord je m'en fous parce que ma mère elle m'a donné des chaussettes toutes neuves ce matin...

-[Nasser continues] Il t'a mis deuxième [in the essay ranking], toi, avec les Français, c'est bien parce que t's pas un Arabe main un Gaouri ["French" in Algerian dialect] comme eux.

-Non, je suis un Arabe. Je travaille bien, c'est pour ça que j'ai un bon classement. Tout le monde peut être comme moi.

-[The other said] t'as une tête d'Arabe comme nous, mais tu voudrais bien être un Français.

³⁴ Michel Cressole, "Le Gone du Chaâba réédite ses exploits." *Lyon Libération* (25-26 October, 1986): 42.

³⁵ Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 100-101.

³⁶ Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 80-81.

-Bon, allez, laissez-le tomber, fait Moussaoui. On parle pas aux Gaouris, nous.³⁷

And after this conversation, Azouz moves to a flashback, in which we read about his circumcision. At the end of this recollection, Azouz says, “Non, cousin Moussaoui, j’ai passé mon diplôme d’Arabe. J’ai déjà donné”³⁸

Despite the childish nature of the conversation quoted above, it intimates two very different conceptions of being “Arab,” one of which, however, is obscured because this whole conversation is cast from the point of view of the Beur. I begin with Azouz and his circumcision. His “Arabness” being denied, Azouz displaces the movement of the novel away from the moment of the present struggle with the teacher and into the past where his “Arabness” is secured prior to any encounter with French authority. By doing so, Azouz seems to suggest that “Arabness” is a self-sufficient cultural practice that has nothing to do with the teacher, or with the French state. However childish, Moussaoui has a more relational understanding of what “Arab” means. It arises for him from the concrete struggle in the class where being Arab means refusing the authority of the teacher. Since for Moussaoui the Arab is locked in a struggle with the French, the identity of both depends on the outcome of the struggle. It is due to this fact that acquiescing to the teacher’s authority means also not being Arab *in this sense*. Now we can see better how for Azouz, the meaning of “Arab” already forfeited the struggle with the French state, has already accepted that “Arab” is a cultural practice that is exercised independently of state authority. To go even further, it is as if for Moussaoui the struggle with the teacher still inheres in the anti-colonial situation, where an Arab nation would directly resist the colonizer. The use of “Gaouri,” which means “French” in Algerian dialect, strengthens this national, anti-colonial interpretation of being “Arab.” In contradistinction, for Azouz “Arab” has a more post-colonial meaning, in which “Arab” has turned into cultural practice, which already assumes the state and its authority. To explain what has happened to the meaning of “Arab” under the French state, I turn briefly to Hegel’s definition of “limit.”

Something is what it is only *within* its limit and *due to* its limit. Hence one must not regard the limit a something that is merely external to existence; rather it permeates existence as a whole. The construal of the limit as a merely external determination of existence is due to the conflation of the quantitative with the qualitative limit.³⁹

If we grasp the French state as “limit” in Hegel’s sense we will see that it is not merely outside the citizen, Beur or other, as external limit, it also makes the citizen what it is. However, the point here is not to be tempted with taking the limit as the content of French culture (what Hegel understand as “quantity”), but rather to understand the state as form (Hegel’s “quality”), that turns its citizens, Beurs or others, into mere content. With Hegel then it is easier to see that while Azouz accepts the state as limit and exposes the bias of its contents (which can be changed, refigured, ridiculed etc.), Moussaoui refuses the state as limit, and attacks it not as culture but as substance, as it were. Before moving on to discuss the manner in which this scene was interpreted in Beur scholarship, I would like to highlight the fact that Moussaoui structures the altercation with the teacher as a rejection of a “father,” that is the law of the father, that here is the law of the state. Moussaoui then opts for “family” (“you are not my father”) over “state.” The point is that no other “father” is available for Moussaoui and after this scene he disappears from the novel, moving in the direction of class descent.

³⁷ Begag, *Le Gone du Chaâba*, 106.

³⁸ Ibid, 113.

³⁹ G.W.F., Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, 147, emphasis in original.

A quelques mètres, j'aperçois Moussaoui, le rebelle. Ah! Il l'a cherchée, son expulsion. Peut-être deviendra-t-il bon mécanicien, qui sait?⁴⁰

Later on, when we will discuss Azouz's own refusal, we will see that he is moving precisely in the other direction of the *loubard*, away from the law of *his* father and towards the law of *the* father (Language and State).

Now, it is crucial to see how this second, anti-colonial meaning of being Arab is being denied in Beur criticism precisely because it implies a very different manner of resistance than the one advanced in postcolonial/poststructuralist criticism. Meaghan Emery begins her reading of Begag's novel with a quote from Homi Bhabha:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it a simple negation or exclusion of the "content" of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth.⁴¹

Quite plainly we see that "cultural ambivalence" is privileged over the "oppositional act" or the so-called acts of "simple negation" (this time in the opposite sense of Hegel's) making gestures such as those of Moussaoui's illegible. This shift from direct opposition to cultural ambivalence is supposedly a natural outcome of the shift from direct colonial rule to the "softer" cultural colonialism.⁴² Cultural hybridity, then, gets into trouble once Emery considers Moussaoui's revolt. Moussaoui, although he belongs to the same sociological category as Azouz, does not fit the hybrid model. Citing Moussaoui accusation of Azouz not being an Arab, Emery concludes:

The manner in which [Azouz] and the others approach the tensions inherent to their dual position, grasping onto smoky absolutes or withstanding this temptation through personal fortitude, ultimately determines who will become polluted by stereotypes [read: Moussaoui] and who will rise above them [read: Azouz].⁴³

In passages like these one can see how political alternatives are acknowledged only to be denied. Just as Azouz codes Moussaoui's acts as illegible, so also Emery's derogatory "smoky" does the work of delegitimation. Moussaoui's revolt is labeled as illegitimate and "sick" (it is polluted) and Azouz's ambivalence, his personal fortitude [read: individualism], is preferred.

I would like to shift registers from the *loubard* back to the Beur in Begag's novel and discuss its cultural ideology, which will allow us to see more explicitly the relation between the absence of socio-economic questions and language and aesthetics.

⁴⁰ Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 162.

⁴¹ Meaghan Emery, "Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba*: Discovering the Beur Subject in the Margins." *The French Review* 77.6 (May 2004): 1152.

⁴² Postcolonial readings, focusing on "softer" modes of control tend to neglect the fact that racist killings were among the principal reasons for the emergence the Beur movement. Lists of racist crimes are a recurring phenomenon in Beur literature. See for example the chilling list of deaths at the end of Bouzid's account of the 1983 march, *La Marche*, 1984, pp.153-155. See also the list concluding the anthology of articles *Beur Generation* by *Sans Frontière*, 141-144, counting the deaths during the summer of 1983. See also the interview with Kaïssa Titouss, *Quo Vadis* 44, as well as testimonies on this issue by activists in Saïd Bouamama, Hadjila Sad-Saoud and Mokhtar Djerdoubi, *Contribution à la mémoire des banlieues*, 1994, pp.50-51.

⁴³ Emery, "Discovering the Beur Subject in the Margins," 1158, my emphasis.

4. A Beur Novel

As is well known, Azouz Begag's novel narrates the trials and tribulations of young Azouz, a "second generation" Algerian, born and raised in a *bidonville* (shantytown; Le Chaâba) in Lyon. The novel traces Azouz's social and cultural shuttling between the Algerian *bidonville* and the French school and traces his progression out of the marginal socio-cultural site of his Algerian home and into the recognized and established site of French culture, here primarily the school. In light of the discussion on Charef's picaresque novel, which followed a group of *loubards*, I would like first to suggest that *Le gone* is written in a different genre, that of a bildungsroman (*roman d'apprentissage*) at the end of which Azouz grows out of the subaltern dependency of his father's generation and becomes an independent individual and autonomous Subject. The medium of this felicitous transformation from illiterate subalternity to literate subjectivity is the French school system, i.e., education, and more specifically, Azouz's ability to write well-written essays and stories. This emphasis on writing should already suggest that the process of Azouz's autonomization and subjectification passes through apprenticeship in language, and by extension in form and aesthetics. But this apprenticeship is not limited to Azouz's essays only, appearing as an object among other objects in his world and developing on the diachronic axis of the novel; it also structures his gaze as narrator on the level of the synchronic axis and thus conditions the mode of appearance of all objects in his world. This overlap of the diachronic and synchronic axes is due to the fact that *Le gone* uses a first person narrator that is situated both as actor *in* the world and as an omniscient observer outside of it.⁴⁴

Now, as we learn from Pierre Bourdieu, fundamental to the success of any aesthetic endeavor is the "affirmation of the primacy of form over function, of mode of representation over the object of representation..." and other related binaries that privilege self-governing rules over exterior demands.⁴⁵ Seeing the similarity between the autonomy of form and the autonomy of the subject, it is possible to rewrite *Le gone's* storyline and discover its self-reflexive compositional principle – the elevation from immigrant subalternity locked into work to Beur subjective autonomy and class ascent does not go through work itself, as it does for non-Beur characters,⁴⁶ but rather through language and form. In other words, participating in the ideology of "Bildung" and enlightened modernity more generally, the novel stages a world in which the autonomy of the subject is achieved through self-improvement and specifically the practice of form through which one achieves a release from "nature," and "necessity," in this case the hard work of the migrant laborer. In this process, the subject's autonomization is mirrored in the autonomy of form such that the latter lends its properties to the former. That is to say that the more Azouz fulfills the demands of aesthetics and form in his essays, the more he becomes an autonomous subject in the world. And, moving now to the relation to the reader, the more Azouz accomplishes this aestheticization *in* the imaginary world (here through irony) the more it is an aesthetically pleasing text *for us* (and to French

⁴⁴ That this is the case is corroborated in the genetic process. Hargreaves, having access to two earlier drafts, notes that in the original manuscript not only did the plot begin with the story of the illiterate father arriving from Algeria and continued into Azouz's life; it was also told in retrospect, cast from the perspective of the adult Begag, now a successful and literate man. However, contact with the publishing house made Begag edit the novel heavily, cutting out the immigration story, and the retrospective narrator's physical and temporal indicators (Hargreaves, *Beur Fiction*, 160). As a consequence, if in the original manuscript we could have attributed Azouz's manner of narration to the retrospective perspective of the older Begag, now that the narrator has disappeared, taking with him his spatio-temporal indicators, we are left only with his effects or symptoms in first person narration.

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, 1996, pp. 299-300.

⁴⁶ For example, Rabah, his family and a few other characters.

readers who in return to this aesthetic gift grant Begag, and the Beur more generally, entry into civil society). Here is the culmination of this process.

Depuis les louanges de M. Loubon et mon admission facile en classe de cinquième au lycée Saint-Exupéry, on me considère comme un savant à la maison. L'école est finie... Je peux regarder la télévision comme bon me semble, Bouzid [his father] se soumet à mes désirs. Mon père est fatigué. Je suis le seul à pouvoir encore le faire rire de temps en temps, lorsque je m'oppose à ses ordres. A chaque occasion, je ne manque jamais de lui rappeler ce qu'il nous a toujours dit:

-Travaillez à l'école, je travaille à l'usine.

Alors, comme on me félicite pour mon travail scolaire, je m'octroie une liberté quasi complète à la maison. Pris à son propre piège, il ne peut que se soumettre et sourire. Il est fier. Ses enfants ne seront pas manœuvres comme lui.⁴⁷

The entire ideology of the novel as is the ideology of the Beur more generally is here staged. I note first the division between intellectual and manual labor – “Travaillez à l'école, je travaille à l'usine” - which is the condition of possibility for Azouz's autonomy *and* the autonomy of language, and the aesthetic more generally. Marx is very useful on this point:

Division of labor only becomes truly such from the moment when a division of material and mental labour appears. From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it is really conceiving something without conceiving something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethnics etc.⁴⁸

Here, and throughout the novel, this division materializes (in Hegel's terms it is externalized) in the split between Azouz and the “first generation,” as well as other characters of the lower classes. The profound change between the two generations can be better evaluated when we realize that this division of labor between Azouz and his father is historically new for it was impossible for the “first generation,” which was locked into work. As sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad explains:

Qu'est-ce donc un immigré? Un immigré, c'est essentiellement une force de travail, et une force de travail provisoire, temporaire, en transit. En vertu de ce principe, un travailleur immigré (travailleur et immigré étant, ici, presque un pléonisme), même s'il naît à la vie (et à l'immigration) dans l'immigration, même s'il est appelé à travailler (en tant qu'immigré) sa vie durant dans le pays, même s'il est destiné à mourir (dans l'immigration) et en tant qu'immigré, reste toujours un travailler...⁴⁹

Among the reasons that enable this release from work and consequently the division of manual and intellectual labor is precisely the entry of the “second generation” into the state, and its education system that materializes this division in actual, social-spatial form in which intellectual labor (the school) is separated from manual labor (the workplace) and consequently separates not only thought and education from work, but also the children of the immigrants from their parents. Again, if we follow Sayad we will see this is a new historical phenomenon. He argues that by the end of the 1970s, the immigrants were on the one hand almost completely excluded from French society, and

⁴⁷ Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 228-9.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology.” In Eugene Kamenka (Ed.) *The Portable Karl Marx*, 175, emphasis removed.

⁴⁹ Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, 1997, p.61.

on the other isolated and disconnected from their native country. This dual rupture provides for the relative autonomy of the Algerian community in the sense that despite their existence in a foreign country they have distinct forms of socialization, which are able to reproduce themselves. He explains:

Parce que la tradition d'émigration lui a permis de tisser, en son propre sein, un réseau de liens de solidarité sans lequel il lui eût été impossible de se perpétuer, la communauté émigrée est un quelque sorte assurée de pouvoir trouver en elle-même toutes les conditions de sa propre cohésion... [elle] donne-t-elle aussi les moyens nécessaires à sa reproduction.⁵⁰

In other words, for the “first generation,” intellectual labor” could not have been separated from “manual labor;” it was fused into the body of the immigrant and the body of the community, without abstracting itself to separate institutions that teach thought, language and “culture” *as such*. This is one of the reasons, as we learn from Charles Bonn and Susan Ireland, that when the immigrant came in contact with French society his language was limited to the genre of testimony, a genre that does not separate language from practical use, form from function.⁵¹

Further, the division of manual from intellectual labor provides for the autonomization of thought, now released from its material constraints and returns to face these constraints - work - as the “nature” from it was released, and more specifically in the immigrant’s case, its past in relation to which the Beur grasps himself as the future. Last, by being released from work, thought, and culture in the sense of “Bildung,” now becomes so autonomous it is redirected towards the self - self-improvement - against nature, desire, violence and so forth. Important to note here that this process is not in an additive relation to its surroundings as if Azouz grows autonomous alongside his parents and friends. For as Azouz becomes an agent of thought and culture his surroundings, especially his father, come to be perceived, under his gaze, as unpredictable violent nature. On the heels on the passage quoted above, Azouz notes:

Parfois, il [Bouزيد] me semble qu’il s’habitue à sa nouvelle vie... Mais, le lendemain, il injurie Emma, la maudit d’avoir voulu déménager et s’enfuit trois ou quatre jours dans son ancienne maison, nous abandonnant sans le sou. Bouزيد est devenu imprévisible.⁵²

I would like to show now how this process of subject autonomization through education in the state school also carries with it the autonomy of language and the textualization of Arab culture.

The novel stages Azouz’s mastery over language in school and his autonomy at home a few moments before the scene I quoted above and I would like to stress the different relation Azouz and his father adopt towards the signifier, Allah, the Muslim god. To situate the scene, I recall that earlier in the novel Azouz’s new teacher, M. Loubon, teaches the students a few words in Arabic. The scene is invested with singular meaning precisely because the new teacher recognizes Azouz’s Arab culture and for the first time Azouz is encouraged to speak about it without being afraid that his classmates will mock him. Written in the key of belated recognition, the scene is a significant turning point, a relief both for the reader, and Azouz who have suffered endless humiliations from

⁵⁰ Abdelmalek Sayad, “Les trois ‘âges’ de l’émigration algérienne en France.” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 15 (June 1997): 76-7.

⁵¹ Charles Bonn, “La lecture de la littérature Algérienne par la gauche française: Le ‘cas’ Boudjedra.” *Peuples méditerranéens* 25 (October-December, 1983): 3-10; Susan Ireland, “First-Generation Immigrant Narratives.” In *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, 2001, pp. 23-43. I provide a detailed discussion on the shift from testimony to fiction in the next chapter.

⁵² Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 229.

his teachers for being Arab. To understand the significance of Arabic in this scene it is important to understand the Subject using it. For what is noteworthy about M. Loubon is that he is a *pied-noir*, those descendants of French immigrants to Algeria who were born in Algeria and then repatriated to France especially after 1962, with the victory of the FLN. M. Loubon is then Azouz's perfect opposite number; he is a French born in Algeria while Azouz is Algerian born in France, both are kinds of hybrids, and this similarity is foregrounded in front of the entire class. But more important than the structural similarity of their biographies is their relation to Arabic and Arab culture. For M. Loubon, a son of French colonizers, Arab culture is not a form of life in which he participates, but a play he watches, a text he reads and deciphers. Similarly, for Azouz, as a "second generation" child, Arabic, and Arab culture are dis-embedded from their mode of life, in this case the peasant life of his parents in Sétif, and become an abstract object of knowledge in the school. Azouz recognizes that his "culture" has turned into a text, a sign to be mastered, but only obliquely. He says twice:

-Azouz! Vouz savez comment on dit "le Maroc" en arabe? me demande tout à coup M. Loubon alors qu'il était en train d'écrire au tableau quelque phrases de style conjuguées au subjonctif. La question ne me surprend pas. Depuis maintenant de long mois, le prof a pris l'habitude de me faire parler en classe, de moi, de ma famille, de cette Algérie que *je ne reconnais pas main que je découvre de jour en jour avec lui*.

Modest, le prof. Il est en train de *m'expliquer mes origines*, de me prouver ma nullité sur la culture arabe et il ose dire qu'il parle arabe presque aussi bien que moi!⁵³

Now that this abstraction is in the open, it will be as important to note the social relation between M. Loubon and Azouz. Although M. Loubon befriends Azouz, their relationship is still inscribed in the site of the school and in the form of scholastics and abstract instruction in which knowledge as Bourdieu reminds us is "isolated from any practical situation."⁵⁴ We see this displacement from practice to abstract knowledge when Azouz says a few words in Algerian dialect/slang, while M. Loubon returns them to him in Modern Standard Arabic, used mostly for writing and formal exchanges. This scene culminates when the teacher writes "Allah" on the board.

-Vous savez ce que cela veut dire? me relance-t-il en dessinant des hiéroglyphes.
 J'ai dit non. Que je ne savais pas lire ni écrire l'arabe.
 -Ça c'est alif, un *a*. ça c'est un *l* et ça c'est un autre *a*, explique-t-il. Alors, qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?..
 -Ala! Dis-je main sans saisir la signification de ce mot.
 -Pas Ala, dit M. Loubon. Allah! Vouz savez qui c'est Allah?..
 -Oui, m'sieur. Bien sûr. Allah, c'est le Dieu des musulmans!⁵⁵

To fully understand the significance of the abstraction of the word Allah, and the autonomization of language performed in the site of state school, it will be useful to recall Paul Valéry's now well-known example of Latin grammar, "*Quid nominor Leo*," which, as Valery explains, does not designate a "lion" as much as the fact that the sentence is "an example of grammar." Citing Valéry's example in the context of his study on mythologies, Roland Barthes expounds further:

I am a pupil in the second form in a French *lycée*. I open my Latin grammar, and I read a sentence... *quia ego nominor leo*... on the one hand, the words in it do have a simple meaning:

⁵³ Ibid, 213, 214, my emphasis.

⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1990, p.32.

⁵⁵ Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 214.

because my name is lion. And on the other hand, the sentence is evidently there in order to signify something else to me... it tells me clearly: I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate a rule about the agreement of the predicate... I conclude that I am faced with a particular, greater semiological system, since it is co-extensive with language...⁵⁶

As is well known, Barthes proceeds to argue that the “greater semiological system,” which he calls the “form” of myth empties the history of the signifier and fills it with a narrower ideological meaning. With Valéry and Barthes in mind, I would like to shed light on the two displacements of the word Allah. First, similar to Valéry’s “I am lion” being an example of grammar, Allah *stands in* here an example of Arabic language and more obliquely of Arab culture. Second, shifting now to Barthes’s emphasis on the “greater semiological system,” we should notice that in the abstract scene of instruction where knowledge is mediated by the secular state, Allah again *stands in* for Islam.

To see how the scene of instruction abstracts “Allah” into a mere signifier, I return to the conversation between Azouz and his father, with which I began this discussion. Azouz notifies his father, Bouzid, that he has been recognized as the best essay-writer in class, and in response Bouzid asks him to invite his teacher home for dinner or at least give him gifts: money or wine. Azouz, knowing that his father misrecognizes the formal and state-sanctioned relation between him and his teacher, refuses profusely. Bouzid proceeds to say:

Dans ses yeux, une étrange lueur a scintillé, puis il m’a dit de sa voix la plus mystique... Il a parlé alors à voix basse comme s’il allait me confier quelques secrets prophétiques:

-Tu vois, mon fils...

-Non, Abboué.

-Laisse-moi parler, dit-il. Je vais te dire une chose sérieuse.

-Vas-y, Abboué.

-Tu vois, mon fils... Dieu est au-dessus de tout. Allah guide notre mektoub⁵⁷ à nous tous, a moi, à toi, a ton broufissour binoir.⁵⁸

J’ai souri légèrement.

-Faut pas rire de ça, mon fils.

-Je ris pas, Abboué!

-Tu crois que c’est par hasard si toi, un Arabe, tu es plus fort que tous les Français de l’école? Et ton broufissour! Qui c’est qui lui a appris à écrire Allah dans notre langue?

-Il a appris tout seul, Abboué!

Alors là, Bouzid a pris son air le plus grave pour conclure:

-Non, mon fils. Allah. C’est Allah qui nous mène. Personne d’autre.

Puis il a suggéré:

-Tu devrais aller à l’école coranique les samedi matin...

Alors là, je me suis rebelle:

-Ah, non, Abboué, j’ai déjà assez de travail à l’école...

Bon, bon. Comme tu veux. Mon fils. C’est toi qui décides.⁵⁹

Several important attitudes towards language and subjectivity transpire here. First, unlike for Azouz, the relation between Bouzid and Allah is not linguistic or textual, but rather a practical one; “Allah” is a holy entity commanding respect such that, as anthropologist Saba Mahmood would say, for the religious Muslim no arbitrary separation here exists between the meaning of God and the word used

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1972, pp.115-6

⁵⁷ “Destiny.” Literally, “written.” See discussion below.

⁵⁸ “*Pied-noir* professor.”

⁵⁹ Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, 225-6.

to describe it, between signifier and signified.⁶⁰ Second, it is easy to notice that while Bouzid talks about a *heteronomous* relation between Allah and the world, where everything is decided in advance (destiny), Azouz insists on the teacher's, and his own *autonomous* relation to the word Allah – the teacher taught himself that word. Third, to complete the inversion, we should note the shift from the Arabic "*mektoub*" to the French "*écriture*." For Bouzid, the heteronomous subject, everything in the world is *mektoub*, which literally means "written," as is "written in advance in the book of God" and therefore signifies "destiny." Here it is God who is the writer and Bouzid's life is the written text. Upending the relationship, Azouz, as the autonomous subject, has become the writer who can write his own destiny precisely by learning how to write. The shift from heteronomy to autonomous subjectivity passes here not simply through secularization, but also through a categorical shift in the very nature of the sign. Finally, it is important to note the shift in what Lacan calls the "Master Signifier." We are encouraged to read the scene as Azouz's rebellion against patriarchy and religion, but it is important to note that while Azouz rejects both the Law of the father (Bouzid) and God as masters, he submits to new masters; for he turns himself into a subject of Language, and a subject of the teacher which, as it is played out in the site of the school, also stands in for the state.

This scene is the culmination of the paradigmatic shift in Azouz's subjectivity and crystalizes the complex relation between the autonomy of the subject and the autonomy of the signifier. On one level, the autonomization of the Beur subject rehearses the journey into enlightened modernity, growing out of so-called pre-modern social relations and superstition - patriarchy and religion – through the medium of the secular state and its education system. On a second level, it is a categorical shift from one kind of semiotic relation to another.

Now it is easier to see the full relation between the division of manual and intellectual labor, which allows Azouz to both become an autonomous subject and a bearer of culture and the absence of questions of work and class from this Beur novel, and the Beur discourse generally with which I began this chapter. For it is precisely the separation of the question of work (socio-economic conditions) from culture and cultural identity, the separation of the immigrant and the *loubard* from the Beur, the separation of the conditions of thought from the practice of thought that allow the Beur to become a civil subject in French society, and not least important exercise his aesthetic autonomy. This aesthetico-historical process merits a longer discussion, but I hope that with this chapter I have taken a step in that direction.

⁶⁰ Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide." *Critical Inquiry* 35.4 (Summer 2009): 836-862.

Beurs Bearing Gifts

1.

In the previous chapter I discussed the relation between Beur activism and Beur literature, a discussion whose main objects or levels were primarily “political” and “social.” I would like now to shift my focus to a higher level of abstraction, that of historical period, and discuss its relevance to Beur literature.

I already mentioned in the previous chapter the centrality sociologists, historians, and Beurs themselves give to the 1973 economic crisis that has unleashed a long process of de-industrialization and as a consequence affected both first and second generations of North Africans living in France.¹ I propose to understand these events by making reference to Ernest Mandel’s historical term “late capitalism” and Fredric Jameson’s concept for its corresponding cultural logic – postmodernism. As the 1980s debates over postmodernity exceed the scope of this chapter, I will foreground only one of its philosophical tenets – the problematic relation between the subject and totality. As is well known, Jean-François Lyotard has argued for the demise of the *grands récits*, the delegitimation of meta-narratives such as the progressive liberation of humanity or the “people” through knowledge/science, which had its political (France) and philosophical (Germany) variants.² Such delegitimation of meta-narratives in postmodernity then finds its equivalent, among other sites, in the breakup of unifying national narratives, or myths of origin, into smaller narratives of which the Beur should be understood as an instance. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in post-68’ France, alongside the weakening of the labor movement there was also a discernible emergence of autonomous groups and movements not directly associated with the traditional Lef; a new historical reality that was accompanied with a parallel shift in historical thought. Relevant to Beur sociology is, for example, the critique of Alain Touraine,³ who advocated a shift from a Marxist sociology (based primarily on production) to one more suitable to a so-called post-industrial society, taking as its main object new social movements and their actors.⁴ Touraine’s influence is evident in a major sociological study on Beurs by Adil Jazouli:

¹ For a general account of changes in forms of labor as an effect of crisis and growth during the 1970s and 1980s see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London Tokyo*, 1991, (relevant here is chapter 9); For the specific impact on immigrants in France see Marie Llaumett, *La détermination sociale de l'échec*, CIEMI, 1985; For a comprehensive account of immigration, labor, riots and political changes in France see Loïc Wacquant and Sébastien Chauvin, *Parais urbains: ghetto, banlieues, état*, 2006.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, pp. 31-37.

³ He was the first, prior to Daniel Bell, to make use of the term “post-industrial society.”

⁴ “I believe that we are entering into a type of social situation defined by the growing ability of collectives to act upon themselves, especially in those places where power no longer resides in the imposition of forms of work but primarily, and mostly, in the setting of a way of life, forms of behavior, and needs. One could speak of a hyper-industrial society in the sense that large organizations, beyond the realm of production, slowly assert their domination over nearly all aspects of social life... If this hypothesis is correct, we must expect the emergence of new actors and new social conflicts everywhere.” Alain Touraine, *The Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Postindustrial Society*, 1988, p. 25. It was published in French in 1984 and had direct influence on the conceptualization of the Beur movement by Adil Jazouli. Compare however, Mandel: “This new period was characterized, among other things, by the fact that alongside machine-made industrial consumer goods (as from the early 19th century) and machine-made machines (as from the mid-19th century) we now find machine-produced raw materials and foodstuffs. *Late capitalism, far from representing a ‘post-industrial society,’ thus appears as the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time*, to which one could further add the increasing mechanization of the sphere of circulation... and the increasing mechanization of the superstructure.

La plupart des travaux disponibles à ce jour s'intéressent principalement aux mécanismes sociaux qui produisent, mais surtout reproduisent, les inégalités de toute sorte dont souffrent les jeunes d'origine maghrébine, en particulier dans le domaine de l'école, du contrôle social et de la délinquance...

D'emblée, notre travail s'inscrit donc dans une démarche analytique qui refuse de séparer le système et les acteurs, de réduire les conflits sociaux à de simples conflits d'intérêts ou de ramener l'analyse des faits sociaux à des surdéterminations d'ordre économique, politique ou idéologique.⁵

To be sure, Jazouli's sociological criticism, based on that of Touraine's, should not be read as a nominal renunciation of the validity of these structures (as the interviews with Beurs reference such structures directly⁶), but rather as expressing a concern with the autonomy of Beurs. Such agency seems to escape larger and more synchronic categories such as class, social reproduction, and so forth and turn Beurs into passive objects in an all-dominating system. For Jazouli, this "blindness" to agency is then corrected by turning to Beurs themselves, listening to what they have to say, and following their actions. As a consequence, this new optic allows, for example, resituating negative categories such as youth delinquency and urban violence within a longer temporal axis, which in turn allows rewriting them as proto-collective actions.

Now, the shift from "structure" to the individual interview or local action has consequences for literary criticism as two different interpretive modes are involved here: one would read a Beur novel in relation to a larger historical moment, say postmodernity (as I propose here), while the other would read it on its own terms, following a more immanent critique where the text itself provides the context of its interpretation - here French nationalism/culture.⁷ This second manner of interpretation would end up ascribing to the text those same qualities Jazouli ascribes to Beur youth: agency, resistance, critique, and so forth.⁸ What this means is that the meaning of a literary text will depend on the level of historical reality to which it is related; only that now, in postmodernity, these levels no longer correspond to one another in any simple or straightforward way - structure or subject / ethnicity or class / nationalism or globalization - such that part of the burden of literary criticism is the difficulty to account for the general historical conditions that actually obtain.⁹ This difficulty is precisely one of the characteristics of postmodernity or globalization. As Jameson argues via Althusser:

Althusser's formulation remobilizes an older and henceforth classical Marxian distinction between science and ideology, which is still not without value for us. The existential—the positioning of the individual subject, the experience of daily life, the monadic 'point of view' on the world to which we

Late Capitalism, 1978, pp. 190-1, emphasis in original, quoted in Jameson "Foreword," in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, p. xiv.

⁵ Adil Jazouli, *L'action collective des jeunes maghrébins de France*, 1986 pp. 32, 36.

⁶ "On a beau dire, dans cette société, il y a des classes sociales, et selon que tu appartiennes à une classe ou à une autre, un flic ou un juge te traitera différemment... Moi, je ne suis pas marxiste, ni rien, mais je crois que c'est vrai qu'il y a une justice de classe, t'as pas besoin de militer pour comprendre ça il n'y a qu'à ouvrir les yeux (Malik, Metz) quoted in Jazouli *L'action collective*, 55.

⁷ This is the dominant mode in which Beur literature is read today. See footnotes 4, 7, 12 in the previous chapter for a few examples.

⁸ As I argued in the previous chapter, a homology between Beurs and Beur literature is misleading and the two should be thought or mediated through the history of their social struggles.

⁹ See for example such a staging of a struggle between interpretive paradigms in Paul Silverstein: "[A] structural Marxist approach tends to deny migrants agency, treating them as pawns of larger-than-life structural forces... Immigration, while clearly a central factor within larger economic and political configurations, needs to be understood as a structural form of cultural practice accomplished by social actors with their own, non-universalizable intentions." *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation*, 2004, p.25.

are necessarily, as biological subjects, restricted—is in Althusser’s formula implicitly opposed to the realm of abstract knowledge, a realm which as Lacan reminds us is never positioned in or actualized by any concrete subject but rather by that structural void called ‘le sujet supposé savoir,’ ‘the subject supposed to know,’ a subject-place of knowledge. The Althusserian formula in other words designates a gap, a rift, between existential experience and scientific knowledge...¹⁰

And completing this argument later on in the book, Jameson sketches out the following contradiction:

There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience. It is evident that this new situation poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art...¹¹

Unlike Lyotard, however, Jameson argues that this break is a symptom of postmodernity whose meta-narratives have not so much disappeared as “gone underground,” became unconscious, and thus totality is still a necessary concept, although it is not a positivist one.¹² This short discussion of Jameson’s argument and its suitability for the Beur movement would be incomplete without mentioning that for Jameson the “structural” is understood as History (and not as science per se) and that this gap bears directly on the work of art – in postmodernity it is precisely the relation to history that is no longer available to art.¹³

I would like to translate Jameson’s theoretical contradiction into the Beur context. Perhaps it is already evident that what Jameson designates as “existential” or “individual experience” corresponds to the immediate and lived experience of exclusion, racism and discrimination of Beur youth – racist killings, deportations, labor discriminations – that take on, a very local nature. When this content “enters” literature it is usually regarded by critics and writers alike as a degraded form of writing.¹⁴ As for the “structural,” these will be the history of the immigration and the historical moment in which France finds itself during the 1980s, usually presented in expository writings. We can see a similar split in the political category as well. According to activists accounts the Beur movement was split between two ideal positions: “*repli communautaire*” and “*overture*.” The former was limited to a Maghrébi movement only and insisted on strict autonomy (with no political allies from the French Left), while the latter advocated seeking alliances on the Left and opted for a general civil rights discourse.¹⁵ This split also took on an organizational divide between those activists and associations

¹⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991, p.53.

¹¹ Ibid, p.411.

¹² Fredric Jameson, “Foreword,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984, pp. xi-xii.

¹³ This is the main point of the programmatic essay opening the book and is dramatized by the difference between the painting of shoes by Vincent Van Gogh and Andy Warhol. Jameson also criticized the position of the Frankfurt school (and that of Althusser as well) which have argued for the critical capacity or semi-autonomy of the work of art, arguing for the expansion of culture to all levels of society and becoming itself a form of economic development. To overcome this absence of history Jameson speculated that the concept of the aesthetic must be rethought through a function it now seems to have lost – the pedagogic – and suggested what he called “cognitive mapping,” a form of art whereby, putting to use Lacanian terms, the experiential will be reoriented towards the Real via the Symbolic.

¹⁴ In these novels, as one critic wrote, “fiction plays a modest role. These texts tend to contain autobiographical echoes and to offer personal accounts of individual destinies.” Tahar Djaout and Fatou Mbaye, “Black ‘Beur’ Writing,” trans. Fatou Mbaye. *Research in African Literatures* 23.2 (Summer 1992): 219.

¹⁵ See Adil Jazouli, *L’action collective*, 145-146, as well as Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs: Chronique d’un mouvement avorté*, 1994, pp. 90-91. See also Farida Belghoul, “Que sont en France les algériens devenus.” *Actualité de l’immigration* 97 (July 8th, 1987): 97; Jocelyne Cesari, “Les leaders associatifs issue de l’immigration Maghrébine: Intermédiaires ou clientele.” *Horizons Maghrebins* 20-21 (1993): 92.

who advocated a more limited action “*sur le terrain*” and those that have attempted a move toward a national movement and coordinated action between different locations.¹⁶

The Beur movement then seems to be squarely within the postmodern, or what we might call today globalization: theoretically, the Beur might be read either as a symptom of a larger structure or as an autonomous subject (*un petit récit*); politically, Beurs were split between two strategies (Maghrébi/civil rights) which affected also their manner of organization; and in terms of narrative – an aspect I will develop in this chapter – we can see a split between the testimony and the structural account.

I suggest then reading Beur literary production through the split or break in representation between experience (identity) and structure (the conditions of possibility of one’s identity). In what follows, I discuss Farida Belghoul novel *Georgette!* and the manner in which its style, taking the form of an interior monologue of a child, renders unavailable for representation the social and historical conditions of Beur identity. To explain this style, I first outline the emergence of a Beur literary field that seems to restrict the Beur writer to two positions: testimony or literature, or more abstractly to aesthetic and non-aesthetic writing. I argue that Belghoul’s critique of the genre of the testimony both in an interview and in her novel, while it ushers her into the “aesthetic,” can be seen as a condition of possibility and motivation for her hermetic style.

2.

As suggested above, 1986 designated the height of Beur literature, a significant moment where nine novels were published all in the same year, almost doubling the current corpus (which between 1978 and 1985 included at least eleven novels) and indeed making it into a “corpus.”¹⁷ Following this development, the journal *Actualité de l’immigration* interviewed several of the writers, but instead of the expected enthusiasm of the new writers one is quite surprised to find their acerbic criticism of “Beur literature” both as a corpus and of its quality. Hocine Touabti says, for example, that “il serait illusoire de prétendre qu’une littérature Beur existe;” Farida Belghoul begins by saying “La littérature en question est globalement nulle;” Leïla Sebbar concludes by saying “La littérature ‘beur’ n’existe pas.”¹⁸ Irony will have it, however, that these writers and most of the novels published by and in 1986 are precisely those with which Beur literature is identified the most; they are considered among

¹⁶ Summarizing its position on the fourth national meeting of the Maghrébi associations in Angres in May 9-10th 1987, *Texture*, an association with Marxist tendencies, drew three conclusions: 1. “Il n’aura pas d’auto-organisation sans assises de terrain, sans travail concret dans des associations sur leur quartier et leur cités. 2. Il n’aura pas d’auto-organisation sans débat politique clair, ce qui ne signifie pas nécessairement une unite sur tout. 3. Il n’aura pas d’auto-organisation si celle-ci n’est pas pose à tous les echelons (local, regional, national).” See *Le Citoyen* 3 (August-September, 1987).

¹⁷ In order of publication: Mengouchi and Ramdane, *L’homme qui enjamba la mer*, 1977; Hocine Touabti, *L’Amour quand même*, 1981; Slaheddine Bahiri, *L’Espoir était pour demain*, 1982; Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*, 1983; Ahmed Zitouni, *Avec du sang déshonoré d’encre à leurs mains*, 1983; Ahmed Kalouaz, *L’Encre d’un fait divers*, 1984; Akli Tadjer, *L’ANI. Du “Tassili,”* 1984; Mohammed Kenzi, *La Menthe sauvage*, 1984; Leïla Houari, *Zeïda de nulle part*, 1985; Nacer Kettane, *Le Sourire de Brahim*, 1985; Adda Boudaoud, *Renaître: j’ai vaincu mon alcoolisme*, 1985. Leïla Sebbar, whose status as a Beur writer is sometimes disputed, published five novels up until 1986: *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square*, 1981; *Sbêrazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*, 1982; *Les Chinois vert d’Afrique*, 1984; *Parle, mon fils, parle à ta mère*, 1984; *Les carnets de Sbêrazade*, 1985. This is not an exhaustive list as there might well be other novels published during this period that did not enter any bibliography.

¹⁸ *Actualité de l’immigration* 80 (March 11th, 1987): 22-27.

its finest examples such that what the writers in 1986 perceived as merely the beginning of a literature – hence to them it was premature to call it that – was actually its apogee. And indeed, after 1986 although we see more and more Beur novels on the market they somehow recede back into the margins and regain significance, much like Minerva's owl, only in thought, that is, in criticism, in French, American and Canadian academia.¹⁹ This reversal, however, is less interesting than perhaps the misrecognition on the part of the writers. Why can't they perceive the quality of their novels, or perhaps I should ask what does the category of "quality" prevent them from seeing?

These short interviews - a document like few others in this corpus – revolve around the value of the novels, and because the writers perceive them as "globalement nulle," as having no quality, they also do not merit being called literature at all. To be sure, I do not wish to initiate a discussion on "value," not because I think it is irrelevant - it will become important in a moment - but because I am more interested in "value" as a place-holder for some other category, whose unavowed significance directs my discussion elsewhere.

In these interviews, and in Beur scholarship in general, one finds again and again an opposition between the degraded form of "testimony" and the more elevated and highly regarded one of "literature."²⁰ I will turn to a few short examples and then return to the interviews with what I hope is a better understanding of what the writers mean by "value."

In 1983, Charles Bonn, the major critic of Algerian literature written in French rebukes in no uncertain terms both the French Left and several writers (Algerian and Beurs) of a certain secret pact:

La parole de l'immigré s'exprimant directement est cependant possible, dans l'horizon d'attente de la gauche française concernant le Maghréb, à condition qu'il respecte le pacte référentiel, que le récit soit un "témoignage brut," de préférence recueilli au magnétophone et "transcrit scrupuleusement." C'est-à-dire que cette parole de l'immigré se transforme en un *récit-objet*, un "document," ethnographie...

This is said both about a few novels by Rachid Boudjedra and an autobiography by an Algerian²¹ – examples that serve the main interest of Bonn. Immediately following this judgment, Bonn also comments in passing about his minor interest, the Beur literature that has just begun to appear. As we are in 1983, the fire is directed at the new writer:

¹⁹ The reason for this is not a natural movement of ascent and decline but, as it seems to me, one conditioned on the political action of Beurs being at its most radical at the end of the seventies and reaching its dissolution in the late eighties with the failure to establish a national autonomous movement and being co-opted into institutionalized politics. At that moment the literature loses its visibility as well. To be sure, *Kiffe kiffe demain* by nineteen-year old Faïza Guène published in 2004 was an overnight success, translated into more than twenty languages, and made Guène into the new Beur writer. Reading the novel, however, one will find in it nothing of the experimental forms, at times somber and harsh, characterizing some of the earlier writers. What is most evident in it is the perfection of a Beur style into a kind of "global marginal literature" made accessible and legible worldwide by a "dialect" of commodities and Hollywood film titles and TV shows.

²⁰ See for example, Monique Gadant, "La littérature immigrée," in *Les Temps Modernes* (March-April-May, 1984): 1988-1999; Tahar Djaout, "Une écriture au 'Beur' noir." *Notre Librairie* 103 (October-December, 1990): 35-38; M'hamed Alaoui Abdalaoui, "Entraves et libération: Le roman Maghrébin des années 80." *Notre librairie* 103 (October-December 1990): 14-34. Regina Keil, "Entre le politique et l'esthétique. Littérature beur ou littérature franco-maghrébine." *Poétiques Croisées du Maghreb* (1991): 159-169; Fathia el-Galaï, *L'Identité en suspens: à propos de la littérature Beur*, 2005.

²¹ The autobiography is titled *Une vie d'Algérien, est-ce que ça fait un livre que les gens vont lire* and its author is designated simply as Ahmed. From Susan Ireland's account of its plot it seems it was edited by the publishing house. See Susan Ireland, "First-Generation Immigrant Narratives," in *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, Eds. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx, 2001, p. 28.

Le succès récent du *Thé au harem d'Arabi Ahmed*, de Mehdi Charef (1983), peut d'ailleurs s'expliquer également, même s'il s'agit aussi d'une oeuvre littéraire, par ce mythe du "témoignage brut."²²

Now such appraisals of Charef or of any other writer, for that matter, are valuable only so far as they are limited to what Pierre Bourdieu calls a literary field in which literary positions or styles are mapped according to an underlining but historically changing structure of cultural institutions and struggles.²³ Bonn's insight is of interest in that it identifies the "place" of immigration with the "zero degree of writing," as it were, which is altogether *outside* the literary field, serving as its "other" and due to this quality seems to furnish the alienated French bourgeoisie with a direct sense of the real. This insight will become important later on. More significant, what underlies Bonn's object of criticism is the category "raw testimonials" and whose opposite number appears a moment later. Discussing *Habel*, a novel by the "greater" Algerian writer Mohammed Dib who is "known to be marginalized" by the French Left, Bonn argues forcefully that the critics pay too much attention to the immigrant status of the hero and to the immigration theme in general while the real object of the novel, that "other" of "testimony," is quite different:

Ce thème [immigration] ne peut en aucune manière être isolé, dans le roman, et encore moins rendre compte de l'essentiel de ce roman. La situation d'immigré de Habel n'est que l'un des aspects de la passionnante réflexion sur la marginalité de l'écriture, sur le statut des différentes paroles de notre modernité et sur le rapport tragique entre parole et réalité, qu'on se refuse à voir dans ce livre... *L'invention du signifiant* est donc implicitement refusé à l'Autre"...²⁴

In the opposition that Bonn sets up between the undue success of "raw testimony" à la Charef and the publicly unrecognized "reflection on writing" by Dib, one cannot but notice the underlying opposition between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic (or functionalist/referential). "L'invention du signifiant" is not simply a style for Bonn but a placeholder for aesthetic autonomy, which is being denied to the ethnic subject. In this instance, it seems that French criticism is tying the ethnic subject to the referent, to history, and denying it the possibility of invention as such.²⁵ Bonn seeks to correct this impression and takes on, not accidentally, the role of "aesthetic redemption," that is, fighting for the ethnic subject's right for aesthetic autonomy. Whatever we think of Bonn's position, for him the field of possibilities is dichotomous: the ethnic writer can write either testimonials or pure literature.

Now, three years later, in 1986, Bonn's split between testimony/aesthetic autonomy that separated the new emerging Beur writers from the more established Algerian writers (Dib, Kateb) is projected inward into Beur literature proper and aesthetic autonomy is found there as well. As Abdelkader Djeghloul explains:

Farida Belghoul a su le dire [i.e., the social condition of Beurs] avec une radicalité littéraire exceptionnelle. Certes, l'aspect autobiographique reste dans *Georgette!* comme dans la plupart de ces romans l'élément déclenchant de l'écriture. Mais à la différence des autres elle fait éclater la linéarité du récit. L'originalité de ce roman est qu'il se situe en deçà du principe de réalité, au moment décisif où

²² Charles Bonn, "La lecture de la littérature Algérienne par la gauche française: Le 'cas' Boudjedra." *Peuples méditerranéens* 25 (October-December, 1983): 7

²³ See for example Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel, 1996, especially pp. 47-112. But see also the earlier "Champ intellectuel et projet créateur," *Les Temps modernes* 246 (1966): 865-906. For one of its elaborations see Gisèle Sapiro, "Forms of Politization in the French Literary Field" *Theory and Society* 32.5/6 (December 2003): 633-652.

²⁴ Bonn, 8-9, emphasis in original.

²⁵ An Algerian writer that escaped this predicament is of course Kateb Yacine.

la marge s'ébauche. Une fillette de sept ans, qui ne se nomme jamais et n'est jamais nommée, en est la narratrice et introduit le lecteur dans un univers ubiquitaire où la temporalité se dissout dans la fixité des fantasmes et l'immobilité mouvante du rêve... [Belghoul] dit et conjure à la fois la béance du sens dans une langue française renouvelée, enrichie d'un sabir qui n'est pas utilisé comme contrepoint folklorique à la norme usuelle mais qui restructure en profondeur, subvertit la langue et crée un style. Si la publication de *Georgette!* en 1986 a constitué un événement littéraire, il n'en demeure pas moins que par son contenu, à certains égards nihiliste, ce roman va à contre-courant de la grande majorité des textes écrits par des beurs...²⁶

Djehgloul's championing of Belghoul rests on the distinction between folklore and what he calls style.²⁷ Very similar to Bonn, Djehgloul also seems to think that previous writers are outside of the aesthetic, while Belghoul is the first writer to produce a work of art. But what kind of artwork is it? Given that the "testimony" is considered the zero ground of Beur literature, aesthetic autonomy is pushed towards its extreme and must take on not simply any style, but precisely the self-referential, or modernist one. Note how the "univers ubiquitaire où la temporalité se dissout dans la fixité des fantasmes et l'immobilité mouvante du rêve..." brings to mind the worlds of a Kafka or a Beckett. In other words, if the ethnic writer is always read as "referential," the modernist style operates like anti-testimonial.

It seems to me that Djehgloul invokes the now familiar signs of a modernist text. So we read about the "temporal" (broken linearity), "consciousness" (liminality of reality and dream) and the "critique of reason" (the gap within meaning). The reason I enumerated these by now quite clichéd terms is because their appearance one after the other in Djehgloul (and later on in American criticism²⁸) seems to push all the right buttons, as if the critic is not "discovering" *Georgette!* but rather decoding it according to a dominant modernist idiom. The sense of déjà-vu is not because Djehgloul is wrong, quite to the contrary, it is because by now, seventy years after the apogee of literary Western European modernism (which serves Djehgloul as an implicit standard), *Georgette!*'s literary symptoms cannot but be read as repetitions and, as Jameson would say, pastiche. But the question must be asked: why is it that in spite of what cannot be read other than repetition (or late modernism), Djehgloul is celebrating *Georgette!* as a "literary event" and a "new style?" Again the answer is located in Djehgloul's distinction between folklore and artwork. It seems that the "belated" entry of the Algerian immigration not so much into French society (as it was present there "unconsciously" from the beginning of the 20th century) but rather into French cultural production in 1980s licenses a retelling of the story of modernity and modernism itself, only now with the new ethnic subject. Djehgloul's passage is a mini literary history all on its own, setting up the temporal opposition between tradition and modernity.

With this context in mind, I would like to return to the writers' interviews with which I began. I suggest that their acerbic judgment of Beur literature presupposes the legitimacy of aesthetic

²⁶ Abdelkader Djehgloul, "L'Irruption des Beurs dans la littérature française." *Arabies* (May 1989): 87; Farida Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 1986.

²⁷ If the reader would wander about Djehgloul's reference to the "autobiographical aspect" of the novel and the relation between this aspect and Belghoul's critique of testimony, I would simply say that surely even the most abstract novel could be traced back to an imagined origin. Further, disregarding the fact that Djehgloul does not provide any substantive examples of such autobiographical aspects, I would like to note that the tenor of his critique lies precisely on the refiguration of these alleged materials in the modernist style, thus only strengthening the point I am trying to make about Belghoul's rejection of biographical style she finds in other novels.

²⁸ See for example, Gil Z. Hochberg, "The Problem of Immigration from a Child's Point of View: The Poetics of Abjection in Albert Swissa's *Aquid* and Farida Belghoul's *Georgette!*" *Comparative Literature* 57.2 (Spring 2005): 158-177; Sylvie Durmelat, "L'apprentissage de l'écriture dans *Georgette!*." In *L'Écriture décentrée: La langue de l'Autre dans le roman contemporain*, Ed. Michel Laronde, 1996, pp. 33-54.

autonomy. Any deviations from this norm results in the judgment “no/low value,” which drives out the so-called “testimonials” from the domain of the aesthetic. This tendency is apparent in Farida Belghoul’s account:

D’un point de vue littéraire [Beur literature] ne vaut rien ou presque. Difficile de la confronter, dans cet état, à l’algérienne ou la française plus anciennes, qui sont d’une grande diversité et qui atteignent des sommets... L’écriture ‘second génération’ croit que la vie est un roman. En conséquence, elle ignore tout du style, méprise la langue, n’a pas souci esthétique, et adopte des constructions banales...

Cette écriture donc témoigne exclusivement d’une condition en s’adressant à un interlocuteur qui se trouve en France. Cet interlocuteur est global et très occulté... Ainsi, les ‘oeuvres’ se situent, le plus souvent, dans la sphère politique et sociale; contre le gré des auteurs peut-être. Cette position de l’écriture va contre la littérature. Car c’est bien de littérature tout court ou il doit être question.²⁹

As in Bonn and Djeghloul, Belghoul’s situates Beur literature in a tight force field. It is confronted with its “ideal” – the more established Algerian and French literatures that set the standard very high and in comparison to which Beur literature is reduced to nothing (notice the ironic quotation marks Belghoul puts around “oeuvres”).³⁰ Charting the field and marking the different positions possible, Belghoul continues to establish her own: “cette position de l’écriture [read: reception] va contre la littérature. *Car c’est bien de littérature tout court ou il doit être question.*”³¹ It is a remarkable statement: note how the weight of French society, the history of colonialism, and the ideology of aesthetic autonomy all pressure this statement into a life and death imperative – the ethnic subject *must* write pure literature or else they [the French] will question its status as literature. Arthur Rimbaud’s edict “il faut être absolument modern” returns here, but as I argue in reverse, not as the avant-garde seeking transgression and boundary (an outside) but as an “entry,” as *legitimation*. Leïla Sebbar says this very clearly. After conceptualizing the Beur as situated in the very violence of life, she concludes:

Mais écrire dans la langue de la France n’est pas simple. Il n’y a pas de neutralité naturelle et le légitimité est toujours à gagner, si fragile... le française et une langue de conquête qui il faut s’approprier et si la haine l’emporte, il n’est sure que le travaille littéraire, travaille d’amour dans la violence, peut-être, soit possible. Une langue qui n’est pas la langue maternelle peut-être maîtrisée, pas torturée, ni réduite. Il faut être poète, inventer une langue, réellement, le poète aime la langue qu’il écrit.³²

Here, as much as Beur literature is a site of making conscious the situation of the immigration, one that takes the form of criticism, it is also a project of legitimation by way of *form*. And this is why Belghoul upholds a rather conservative conception of literature, the romantic one:³³

²⁹ *Actualité de l’immigration* 80, p. 25.

³⁰ This repeats in Touabti as well: “Le niveau (of Beur literature) en est tellement moyen, voire affligeant, qu’on ne saurait sur quels arguments s’appuyer. Donc exit. Fort heureusement, il en va tout autrement de la littérature d’expression française produite là-bas, au pays. Force est de constater qu’on y possède de sacrées peintures. Ibid, p.24.

³¹ My emphasis.

³² *Actualité de l’immigration* 80, p. 27, ellipsis in original. This is why Sebbar, like Bonn, argues that Belghoul is the best Beur writer. See below.

³³ To be sure, one should not take my argument here as a definitive statement about 18th century Romanticism and the relation between its conservative and more progressive aspects. To engage in such a discussion will far exceed the scope and intention of this chapter.

La littérature est un travail solitaire: c'est, à mon sens, sa spécificité. Et l'écrivain doit être son premier lecteur. Depuis des lustres, l'avenir de l'écriture est assuré par sa qualité. Uniquement. C'est ainsi qu'elle traverse ou non le temps. C'est une loi qui est juste. C'est rare, il faut en profiter.³⁴

Belghoul's adherence to the romantic conception of the individual artist and to the category of aesthetic quality should not be taken for granted. First, the conception of literature as solitary work is quite new. If to follow Raymond Williams, it has emerged, at least in England, with 18th century industrialization, bringing about a long process of separation between society and culture in which the artist-genius begins to function not as a simple member of society but as its mirror and critic.³⁵ Why would Belghoul – considered the most radical Beur writer – adhere to this individualized conception of art and artist when Arabic poetry, for example, up until the modern period, despite its biases against popular genres and in favor of elite genres, provided an alternative model in which poetry was composed primarily in public and as part of daily life? Why does the Beur, the so-called hybrid with his one foot in France and one in Algeria, never find recourse to alternative non-Western conceptions of literature?³⁶ Second, to appeal to the category of quality and to find it a fair law is ironic indeed. Not only do we see in Belghoul's interview how easily such a conception assigns all Beur literature to the aesthetic trash can, one would imagine that a position critical of French society, debunking as it is the immediacy and naturalness of categories such as “French culture” “nationalism” “Arab” etc. would go on to consider such categories as aesthetics, literature, individual production, which are as much a matter of political struggle and hegemony.

The contradiction then between Belghoul the activist and Belghoul the writer is flagrant. While Belghoul acts as the spokesperson and primary organizer of the national march, *Convergence 84*,³⁷ a harsh critic of French society, not least of other more conservative positions in the Beur movement, she reverts in her interview to a conservative conceptions of art – “depuis des lustres” – quality, aesthetic judgment, solitary work and so forth. So if their political existence is based not only on a rejection of the symbolic forms of French society, but also on the imperative of collective action, one could ask how is it that the political and the aesthetic never correspond to one another? Why does Belghoul (like other Beur writers) never question the category of “Literature” itself and see it necessary to invent, as with their new identity, a new category of representation that will correspond to their collective political demands?

The conception of the writer as a solitary figure and the ideology of art or literature as a separate domain of human freedom are quite ubiquitous in Beur literature and in statements of Beur writers. Leïla Sebbar, for example, in a short story called “La Fugue” models the figure of the young Beurette who runs away from home – from men, family, tradition, etc. – on the *poète maudit*: “Rimbaud a toujours fugé, il a écrit des vers, les plus beaux d'un garçon de 17 ans, et puis il s'est enfoncé très loin dans des déserts absolus, loin dans l'Abyssinie africaine. Les fugeurs sont toujours des poètes.”³⁸ Charef situates writing and reading within the humanist narrative of salvation and overcoming adversity rewarded by class ascent: he has raised himself from his modest beginnings

³⁴ Ibid, p. 25.

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, 1958. See especially pp. xiii-xx, 30-41.

³⁶ Hargreaves, in his more affirmative articles, attempts to deflect Djeghloul's criticism I quoted above by saying that Beur novels such as Ferrudja Kessas' *Beur Story* (1989) incorporate Algerian myths. See Hargreaves, “Oralité, audio-visuel et écriture chez les romanciers issus de l'immigration maghrébine.” *Poétiques Croisées du Maghreb* (1991): 170-176. Unfortunately, if there is an equivalent of Begag's narrative of class ascent, Kessas' would be its feminine variant where the Algerian myth must be both exorcized and retained (as “text” and “guilt”) for the middle class Beurette to be born. In Kessas the preferred idiom is romantic – reading literature is the site of the development of the self that makes possible the separation from the more traditional parents.

³⁷ The second march of Beurs.

³⁸ Leïla Sebbar, “La Fugue.” In *La Beur Génération*, 1985, p. 64.

and entered society through literature.³⁹ Recounting his favorite classical writers and then referring to Henry Miller as a model, Charef admits his *bovarysme*: “porté par son style, sa verve, j’oubliais les bidonvilles, les cités de transit, les H.L.M, le racisme quotidien, si marquant pour l’adolescent que j’étais, pour m’introvertir dans ces rêves littéraires où les mots cachés dans les phrases me réchauffaient le coeur...”⁴⁰

How to understand this contradiction? I argue that given its dominated position in French society, where their speech is, as Bonn suggests, always read referentially, Beur writers must secure (successfully or not) the very aesthetic status of their work, and this legitimation finds its effects in the works themselves.

Now one could argue that speaking the language of the aesthetic in all its variants is only a ruse, a tactic. While putting on the “mask” of art, Beur writers can gain their way “in,” they will enter into the heart of hearts of French culture, but once inside tear the mask and reveal their difference, the terrible truth of being Arab in France. That this might be the case is conveyed in a striking passage in Belghoul’s *Georgette!*

Je suis un petit chat sauvage qui se voit pas. Je me planque derrière un masque sur la figure. Tous les matins, je me fais belle et mignonne, je me colle une peau rouge sur le visage, Je marche vers l’école, mon visage rouge est magnifique. Il brille comme un bijou en or. Les gens sont tous jaloux de ma beauté. Ils devinent pas que c’est une ruse. Derrière, je cache un petit affreux avec des griffes pleines de sang... Je m’approche du premier qui m’embête, il me trouve belle et là, je soulève le masque.⁴¹

It is an interesting ruse; and yet this gift of the aesthetic, this Trojan horse tactic, should remind us of how Adorno and Horkheimer thought about Odysseus. Very different from Achilles, the great warrior who opts for force and is motivated by the glory and honor of battle, Odysseus is known for his cunning, for his preference to win the battle without actually fighting it. But Adorno and Horkheimer understand Odysseus’ cunning dialectically; it never leaves its practitioner unaffected. By ceding to the law of the Sirens, Odysseus can both listen to their song and save his life but only at the expense of his freedom for he must tie himself to the mast.⁴² Turning oneself into a subject of aesthetic autonomy, subjecting oneself to its law, ushers those Beur writers choosing this tactic into French culture but also, as I will demonstrate, restricts their thought and imagination.⁴³

³⁹ “De la lecture et par la lecture, j’ai donc entrepris mon sauvtage. D’abord les livres de classe, les illustrés, la bande dessinée, et les premiers livre de poche accessible.” Mehdi Charef, “J’ai écrit mon premier roman pour eux.” *Migrants et Formation* 56 (March 1984): 53.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53. If a longer version of this chapter I would have insert here a discussion of Charef’s interview in *Apostrophes*, the television show hosted by Bernard Pivot. The specific show was called “La langue française n’est pas xénophobe” (01/04/1984) and Pivot interviewed eight foreign-French writers writing in French. During this interview while Pivot plays the role of demystifier, trying to account for the sociological basis of Charef’s fiction, Charef, as I would argue, is pushed to take the humanist expressive stance.

⁴¹ Fardïa Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 1986, pp. 76-77.

⁴² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmond Jephcott, 2002, pp. 26, 46.

⁴³ So here we get a different outcome of Homi Bhabha’s famous “mimicry:” mimicking bourgeois ideology, the Beur does not end up estranging it but rather turning himself into its subject.

3.

I have suggested above that Djeghloul reads Belghoul's novel through the couplet tradition/modernity (which was also present in the distinction between the first and second generation) and I would like now to relate this distinction to Belghoul's novel.

As I argued above, the implicit opposition between folklore and style in Djeghloul's review is only the appearance of a much more general question of aesthetic autonomy. What is implicit here is that Djeghloul's "folklore" and Belghoul's "testimony" violate the philosophical principle of the aesthetic – they have a purpose or a function, while works of art according to a modern conception should be purposeless. Now, to be sure, Beur novels published by 1987 – before these interviews – should not be regarded as testimonials; they are works of art like any other – that is, they manage or configure a certain historical reality. However, to treat the critics and Beur writers' use of the term "testimony" merely as a mistake will be equally inaccurate. The place-holder "testimony" has a function within Beur literary imagination; it is an imaginary position (invoked primarily in order to be negated) against which, at least for Belghoul, the Beur novel can emerge. Let me elaborate on the meaning of this relation and how it conditions Belghoul's position.

The first and most immediate significance of the term "testimony" as it is used by Beur writers and critics is the fact that it is commonsensical. The critics cited here and others take its meaning for granted and contrast it with aesthetic autonomy, stylization and so forth, which then appears as the more complicated and valued terms. This, I suggest, stems from the reason that testimony is taken to be equivalent to truth, and, as such, transparent and immediate (remember Bonn's "pact of referentiality"). But Beur testimonies gain this status not simply because they are the life stories of a particular person and thus truthful. More generally, since in France of the 1980s' the "Arab" is also the site of acute social discrimination, exploitation, racism, and extreme violence - a reality that French society has repressed ever since the North African immigrant set foot on French soil - the emergence into consciousness of the Beur generation via media coverage turns every individual life story into the very manifestation of a more general truth, of a social unconscious. This historical condition means that Beur stories are always an object lesson, a pedagogic act, in the sense that they move, as Aristotle's *Poetics* would say, from a particular to a general. Here, in the midst of postmodernity, the rise of superficiality and sheer surface, Beur testimonies are *perceived* (they appear) like a sudden vertigo, an acute opening into depth, overburdened with an excess of meaning.

Considering this condition, I suggest that testimony shares some of its characteristics with that form of narration which Walter Benjamin believed had passed from the world with the advent of secularism and the novel - storytelling. Benjamin argues that unlike the novel, untied now from the body of the storyteller and disseminated thanks to the invention of the printing press, "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."⁴⁴ The story of the racist act and discrimination in all its variants, I suggest, is weaved into the experience of the Beur. He is both object and subject of his story - both the revealer of a reality and the object revealed - which in turn becomes the story of those who listen to it as a story on the order of the Real. The experience in which the tale is embedded, as Benjamin argues, means also that it is rooted in daily life and practical matters, and, to take this further, that testimony is a form of use value. At one moment Benjamin even compares storytelling to craftsmanship and argues that the story "does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflection on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." In *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, 1968, p. 87.

storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.”⁴⁵ The testimonies of Beurs are inseparable from the person of the Beur and yet have a use and a general truth. Finally, one of Benjamin’s most remarkable insights into the form of storytelling is its relation to death, the death of the storyteller and those of others:

It is... characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it— suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.
Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.

Citing Paul Valéry, Benjamin explains that the art of storytelling is fading because the advent of bourgeois society has lifted death from everyday life. “Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one... In the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died.”⁴⁶ This might be true of French middle class society, but now remember that the immediate reasons that gave rise to the collective actions of Beurs, to neighborhood committees, demonstrations, clashes with the police, hunger strikes and eventually the 1983 march were dozens of racial killing of Arabs. Thus, quite contrary to what Benjamin argues, here death was not “pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living,” but it is rather immediately present and close to the perceptual world of those living in the *banlieues*. Long lists of racial killings accompany several Beur publications and in sociological studies they are as common as tables of contents. Days before the onset of the 1983 march, the following statement was given to the press:

Être frisé, c’est être la proie des tontons flingueurs malades de la gâchette: dans la banlieue parisienne, les crimes racistes sont nombreux, et pour les amateurs de 22 long rifle, la chasse est ouverte... A ceux-là nous rétorquons: rengainez, on arrive, la chasse est fermée.”⁴⁷

It is death, then, its very banality and ubiquity, that sanctions the Beur testimony even if those deaths do not appear in the body of the stories. It seems then that Beur testimonies have all the characteristics of the quotidian, the practical, use value and experience - in short everything that aesthetic autonomy, as some Beur writers understand it, must contend with, exclude, repress, and refigure in order for the work of art to be born. Leïla Sebbar explains: “on retrouve, dans le textes écrits jusqu’ici par des *enfants* de l’immigration, cette violence de rencontres explosives, contre-nature, grinçante et ricanant. C’est parce que ces rencontres turbulentes, parfois meurtrières, se produisent dans la clandestinité, le scandale, l’insubordination qu’une littérature *pourra naître*.”⁴⁸ Here is brute nature, raw materials, the stuff of insubordinate children (Charef is 35 years old, Begag, 30,

⁴⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 91-92. And elsewhere: “In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman’s relationship...”. Ibid, 108.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Jazouli, *Les années banlieues*, 59.

⁴⁸ *Actualité de l’immigration* 80, p. 27, my emphasis.

Belghoul, 29!) full of potential, which then needs to be reworked, that is, to be entered into the recognizable symbolic forms (a process elaborated in Sebbar's passage quoted above). Sebbar continues: "pour un revenir à ces croisements magnifiques, inouïs, dont des *enfants* de l'immigration sont porteurs, à leur insu le plus souvent... ils sont le fondement d'un *lyrisme à venir*. Mais... pour que on puisse parler de la littérature...il faut préciser qu'ils [Beurs] *commencent à peine*."⁴⁹

I should recall here anthropologist Johannes Fabian's useful distinction between medieval and Christian conception of time and that of European Enlightenment: "The pagan was always *already* marked for salvation, the savage is *not yet* ready for civilization."⁵⁰ Very much like the anthropological discourses Fabian discusses, Sebbar temporalizes other Beur novels, using both the idiom of infancy and the more scandalous one of savage naïveté ("à leur insu"), only that here it is not an analysis distinguishing between two forms of life (say, Europe vs. Africa) but two conceptions of writing such that the so-called testimonies are in their infancy and they have to catch up (reworked, trained, disciplined), in order to "mature" into works of art. Sebbar concludes with a sympathetic tone, saying that these rich and full of potential-novels should not stop at "testimony" and documentaries because "*il ne suffit pas* de raconter sa vie, ni d'avoir vécu sa vie comme un roman... pour faire un livre. La littérature 'beur' n'existe pas, parce que ceux qui s'appellent les Beurs, les *enfants* de l'immigration, n'ont pas *encore* écrit de livres. Ils ont écrit, très vite, *trop* vite, un peu de leur vie..."⁵¹ Here again we see the imposition of the standard, the law of the aesthetic (*il ne suffit pas; trop vite*) wagging its finger at the insubordinate infants of the immigration, those without a real name yet ("ceux qui s'appellent"). Sebbar occupies then, if to appeal to Lacan and Žižek, the law of the father (I should mention that by 1987 Sebbar is the most established, or as Michel Laronde says, the most "confirmed"⁵² writer among the group who quotes/embodies the law and reprimands but also offers rewards). Indeed, Sebbar concludes her interview by alluding to the only real Beur writer that has emerged by then, referring to her, again, not by her actual name but by an infantile enlightened diminution, "cette petite fille sauvage."⁵³ This phrase names both Farida Belghoul who is the "wild infant" of Beur literature (the genius) and her main character, Georgette (who refers to herself ironically as "wild cat").

I have outlined what I understand to be the forces that condition the literary production of Beur writers. I have suggested specifically that equating Beur literature with "referentiality" and therefore placing it outside of the "aesthetic" leads to the legitimation of literature, the rewriting of concrete social content and the invention of a style, at least in Belghoul, that must secure its aesthetic status. Let me now move to Belghoul's *Georgette!* and discuss its form.

4.

Georgette! is a monologue of a seven year-old Beurette whose main three sites are her elementary school writing class, her home where she is mainly a witness to conversations between her immigrant parents and the streets of the city in which she roams.⁵⁴ The ruse of the novel is that

⁴⁹ Ibid, my emphasis.

⁵⁰ Johannes Faber, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 1983, p. 26, emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Ibid, my emphasis.

⁵² Michel Laronde, "La mouvance beur: émergence médiatique." *The French Review* 61.5 (April 1988): 685.

⁵³ *Actualité de l'immigration* 80, p.27.

⁵⁴ We are never told the real name of the narrator. Her father refers to her as Georgette in one moment and we are supposed to read this as a kind of reproach. I will refer to the narrator as Georgette for reasons of convenience.

its condition of possibility - a mastery of language by a child - is impossible. This ruse results in thinning out the denotation layer, turning *Georgette!* into a connotative text whereby we are forced to read Georgette's thoughts symbolically. For example, the scenes where the teacher inspects the fingernails of her students are not to be thought of as a *part* of the French schooling system, but as *standing for* its meaning – discipline and hygiene as an index of French culture. Such a collapse of textual levels brings to mind Ronald Barthes' definition of myth in *Mythologies* and I will try to account for its relevance later on.⁵⁵ For now, I would like to continue vicariously by going through a reading of *Georgette!* that will give us, as if upside down, its ideology.

Gil Hochberg's reading of *Georgette!* seems to suggest that immigration narratives and immigrants struggles, vindicating cultural difference, are mere surface phenomena, an appearance that hides the true "drama," as she calls it, of discursive differentiation. Citing Judith Butler's conception of Subject/Other,⁵⁶ Hochberg sees the Nation (not necessarily France) as Subject and the Immigration (any immigration) as Other, and proceeds by positioning the Other as that which the Subject must not only abject from itself in order to constitute itself, but must always continue to do so. As Hochberg argues via Butler:

It is this dependency of the national subject on the continual production of immigrants as foreign and dangerous others within—in other words, as “a problem”— that Swissa and Belghoul's poetics of abjection allows us to grasp. By presenting the story of immigration as a story of racial abjection, **not cultural conflict**, Swissa and Belghoul, I suggest, tell us the story *behind* and *before* the story of **cultural differences**, reminding us that the latter (like sexual, racial, ethnic, or other differences) are never pre-given, but are always a product of exclusions, differentiations, and feared identifications that found and sustain culturally hegemonic orders and identities.⁵⁷

Understanding the struggle between Subject/Other not as a struggle between two constituted and separate entities but rather as a struggle that constitutes the appearance of entities as it moves, Hochberg's implicit Hegelianism allows us indeed to critique immediacy and grasp the forces that inhere in such terms as culture, identity, roots and so forth. And yet, Hochberg never attends to the crucial question about the socio-historical conditions of possibility of cultural differentiation/conflict and their relationship to discourse: is the constitution of the Subject and the Abject simply a matter of discursive practices, as Hochberg would have it, or should the historical subject not secure those material conditions that make it possible to become an abjecting Subject in the first place? If the Subject is constituted as Subject of discourse through material conditions and not simply through discourse, as I believe is the case, then this would raise important questions as to the significance of discursive subversion Hochberg wishes to ascribe to literary narratives for these remain on the level of discourse only. In short, Hochberg underplays that other Hegelian principle, the one allowing Hegel to step outside Kantian metaphysics and account for time and history. It is the principle that insists on the truth of the appearance, its necessity for any understanding of what, as it were, lies behind it. In his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel seem to have Hochberg's philosophical tendency in mind: “Essence must appear. It appears as existence... Essence does not

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, “Myth Today.” In *Mythologies*, trans. Anette Lavers, 1972, pp. 109-159.

⁵⁶ The abject “designates those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject . . . The [abject] constitutes the site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the subject [becomes].” Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 1993, p. 3 quoted in Hochberg, 66.

⁵⁷ Hochberg, 166, emphasis in italics in original; emphasis in bold mine.

exist outside, or apart of, or behind its existential appearance.”⁵⁸ So the Beurs’ cultural and political struggles of the 1980s vindicating their difference (an outcome of a long colonial struggle, the state of France after World War II, the 1970s economic crisis and so forth) cannot be treated as mere appearance in relation to their real meaning hiding behind them. They must be accounted for what they are in a *particular point in time* and in a *particular society*, and not via utterly abstract categories as Subject, Abject and Other who can be applied anywhere and anytime. And indeed this sense of situatedness within a changing history is present in Belghoul’s conception of the immigration. As she concludes her article about the Algerian immigration, Belghoul acknowledges the common cause of Beurs with the French youth of the *banlieues* but insists, as Hochberg might put it, on their “given” difference:

Ces jeunes partagent un sentiment d’appartenance géographique qu’on peut dans certaine mesure assimiler à “des racines.” De ce point de vue, les jeunes algériens se sentent proches des jeunes français qui, comme eux, habitent les mêmes banlieues et partagent pour une part les mêmes conditions de vie. Ceci, par ailleurs, n’empêche pas que les jeunes algériens détiennent une *spécificité* qui constituera longtemps encore le moteur principale d’une action qui ne peut se confondre avec l’ensemble du mouvement social et politique français, au risque de se perdre.⁵⁹

For Belghoul then, at least politically, Beur identity is not only the sum of its political objectives, most of which they share with the French youth of the *banlieues*, but it is also a specific historical experience that now has become a source of a new identity. To be sure, I agree with Hochberg that the discourse of roots is mystifying but that has nothing to do with the autonomous Beur struggles in the 1980s in which Belghoul partook. As I explained at length in the previous chapter, Beurs demands for “specificity” did not arise primarily from a vindication of a culture that was repressed but rather from a specific experience of social, political and economic discrimination which the French political Left did not recognize. Hochberg’s conventional criticism of “pre given culture difference” belongs more to the discursive field of the American critic rather than to the historical field of the French-Algerian writer.

Furthermore, if we attend to the history of Beurs during the 1980s, we will immediately notice that Hochberg’s reading of the relation between the French Nation and Immigration as a Subject/Other misses the historical determination of Beurs: as “second generation” born in France with political rights (voting, citizenship, right of association), they were not simply an Other to be “abjected” as one could argue about their immigrant parents, but precisely new subjects, potentially *of* the Nation. It is their status as new subjects that was and still is the condition of possibility for Beur literature as a category. Furthermore, once the Socialist Party won the elections in May 1981 and after the 1983 march, one of the challenges to the autonomous Beur movement, quite ironically, was that they have become a potential “natural” electorate for the Left. This political co-optation, this promise of *inclusion*, not abjection, was that which defined the relation between Beurs and the French Nation (the Subject). And this was at the moment when the role of the Other, at least one of them, was occupied precisely by the Nation itself, namely the rise of the *Front nationale* against which the ideological inclusion of Beurs served as a tactic. To be sure, at the moment where Beurs were ideologically welcomed, the exclusion of their parents, the immigrants proper, continued and even became harsher, and the struggles of the immigration continue today in the *sans-papiers* movement. This inclusion/rejection, what Beur activists saw as the breaking up of the Algerian community into those who can integrate and ascend and those to be deported was precisely the determining

⁵⁸ Hegel: *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trans. Gustav Emil Mueller, 1959, p.122.

⁵⁹ Farida Belghoul, “Que sont en France les algériens devenus.” *Actualité de l’immigration* 97, 97, my emphasis.

historical condition that eventually broke up the Beur movement. If we can learn anything from the biography of Begag, it is that the cultural other is quite welcomed in France as long as he is able to speak the language of the middle class, turn the Algerian immigration into a cultural issue, and repress the real otherness, that of social and economic repression.⁶⁰ So to clarify my point, Hochberg is correct to suggest that the struggle of Beurs or their parents should not be grasped as a matter of cultural difference but she is quite wrong in thinking that what produces and maintains this difference as “difference” are discursive practices.

Now, once the Beur is denied its specific history (only through which the Beur and Mizrahi can be so easily compared) and turned into an empty slot of the Other, held merely so as to affirm the identity of the Subject of the Nation, comes its moment of redemption – the insignificant abject is now a source of truth and agency even if limited.⁶¹ Hochberg explicitly redeems the abject at her conclusion but she announces this redemption already in the passage quoted above: “Swissa and Belghoul, I suggest, tell us the story *behind* and *before* the story of cultural differences.” But this does not simply go against a Hegelian understanding of appearance; it goes against Hochberg’s own Lacanian reading as well. She seems to violate Lacan’s taboo on the Real – it resists signification altogether – and hence freezes that which can never be represented as such into an object of observation and study: “as narratives about abjection, these texts [*Aquid* and *Georgette!*] invite *us to look more deeply into the inner world of the abject-being*, where everything is ‘essentially divisible, pliable, catastrophic.’”⁶² For Hochberg, *Georgette!* gives us the Real, how it really happens that a subject is racialized. All of a sudden the famous poststructuralist insistence on absence, and on the surface of textuality, is deferred and the ethnic subject becomes sheer presence and depth, a window to the social truth appearing as such in the literary text.

In a different context, Hal Foster has suggested to understand this moment of critique as projection:

When the other is admired as playful in representation, subversive of gender, and so on, might it be a projection of the anthropologist, artist, critic, or historian? In this case an ideal practice might be projected onto the field of the other, which is then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political.⁶³

In other words, in these kinds of readings the literary text simply turns into an allegory of poststructuralist theory.

However, as I suggested above, Hochberg’s reading of *Georgette!* should be understood in reverse, because it is, after all, correct; it identifies the fundamental compositional principle of *Georgette!* but instead of reading it as the work’s ideology Hochberg reads it as its achievement, (ie., as a text that teaches us something about abjection). In other words, what is most operative in *Georgette!*

⁶⁰ Also, to argue that the Algerians are simply an Other to the Nation is to miss again the specific colonial history of the Algerian immigration. This was and still is one of the main reasons why in spite of similar immigration histories, other Others such as the Portuguese and the Italians – Others on arrival and subjected to a similar racist treatment – were able to integrate faster (turn French) into the French Nation while the Algerians, among the first to arrive, are still fighting their struggles. The structural category of the “abject” is still indeed operative as a conventional slot in France and perhaps in other countries and yet the category of the “abject” turns formal and abstract if it is not opened to history as it is evident that such a concept is more appropriate for the “first generation” immigrants than for the Beurs (and even that with qualifications).

⁶¹ Hochberg, 167.

⁶² *Ibid*, 83.

⁶³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 1996, p. 183.

is that in substituting testimony (the particularity of experience, the personal history, etc.) for its “behind and before,” the historical forces and circumstances that make Beur identity what it is and only through which it appears are repressed. This “behind and before” appears before the reader wrapped up in “raw violence” but not of testimony but of its opposite – interiority. Let me suggest how this is done.

Hochberg’s Lacanian formulation could serve as a good entry point. “These narratives,” she argues, “mimic the fragmented, incoherent, and terrified state of mind of their young protagonists who, in Lacanian terms, fail to transition successfully from the imaginary state into the symbolic order.”⁶⁴ Hochberg’s Lacanian recoding of *Georgette!* seems to offer a kind of mimetic impulse, implying that Georgette’s thoughts are representations of her imaginary.⁶⁵ Hochberg then immediately concludes: “accordingly, these ‘narratives’ are hallucinatory, catastrophic, and abject: they draw us to ‘the place where meaning collapses,’ and it is from this erratic place, located ‘outside, beyond [the laws of the symbolic] and with disagreement to the latter’s rules of the game’”⁶⁶ It is important to note here that the “place where meaning collapses” is also of course meaningful, or else it would have been impossible to read it at all, which suggests that the “collapse of meaning” is itself a form and a trope. For example, in spite of the fact that Hochberg and others argue that the text is hallucinatory, all readers seem to take seriously Georgette’s age (she is 7 years old) and the fact that she is the daughter of (probably Algerian) immigrants living in France. If the text is truly hallucinatory why then are these statements taken to be true? More to the point, although the imaginary might be hallucinatory, we must not forget that it is also a place of pleasure. And indeed not only does Georgette take immense pleasure in her sentences, this pleasure is derived by adherence to the laws of the symbolic quite faithfully. Here are, for example, the first few sentences of the novel:

La sonne cloche... Non, la cloche sonne.

J’aime pas l’école. Surtout, c’est la récréation qu je déteste. Elle est trop longue. A pied, elle dure cinq tours de cour.⁶⁷

Notice the movement of gradual specification in the second sentence. It begins with the general statement using the habitual and quite indiscriminate verb “aimer” and the general object “école.” Then it moves to its qualification with “surtout” and to a more specific object in school, “récréation,” described now with the stronger “détester.” The object chosen is qualified further in terms of time, “trop longue,” and finally the new object (“duration”) is further qualified with a measure, “cinq tours de cours.” To understand such a disciplined order of general concepts and particular ones, of space and time, and of gradual qualifications of verbs to be outside the symbolic where meaning fails and language is perverse is quite impossible. Not only does Georgette take pleasure in constructing this sentence, she is also fond, as is obvious, of measuring – she measures the time of the break with her feet circulating the courtyard. Adorno would have said that Georgette is well within Reason, putting to use its practices of order whether physically (measuring with one’s feet) or mentally (conceptual manipulation).⁶⁸ Also, this ordered conceptual manipulation differs from the associative and free movement of thoughts that we usually identify with interior monologue, and brings it closer to a different genre. I suggest that this passage represents Georgette writing mentally. It is a writing

⁶⁴ Hochberg, 159.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 160. The quotes are from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, 1982, p.2.

⁶⁷ Farida Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 9.

⁶⁸ In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues, for example, that counting is made possible by subjectivity as it necessitates the continuation of thought in time.

practice, which suggests that, quite contrary to Hochberg's reading and others',⁶⁹ Georgette already knows how to write. She is already within the symbolic if to use Lacanian concepts. The first sentence is then Georgette's first mind draft; she erases, as it were, the first sentence and continues with the correct one. She is not simply subverting the symbolic, but rather, as we shall see, defamiliarizing it by adhering to it. Here is another example: after being shoved while standing in line for class, Georgette, imagining she is an old man, reflects: "C'est incroyable dans cette école! Les filles bousculent les vieux et la maîtresse ne les punit pas!"⁷⁰ Now, to see that Georgette is not in the a-historical zone of the "abject," one needs only to put quotations marks around this sentence and see that Georgette takes pleasure in mimicking what adults might say when they feign astonishment: "it's incredible that in this house/school/..." This is a stock "grown-up" sentence that Georgette has picked up and she is reusing to satirical effect. Another example: after her teacher asks her if she wants to go to the bathroom, she remains silent and thinks to herself: "Je me tais. Une glotte enflée, un jaune pipi et un caca puant, c'est pas une discussion sérieuse. J'attends une parole important."⁷¹ One cannot read these moments as hallucinatory but as satirical, where Georgette cites the "genre" of baby talk and mimics it satirically.

These moments and many more like it are, to be sure, only formal training. Georgette is not interested in defamiliarizing language in general, as Sylvie Durmelat has it,⁷² but rather in making strange a specific content, the racist one. There are many such scenes, and it seems that one of the most important variants arrives at the end of Part One when the Arabic writing of her father is coded, ironically, as writing in reverse, a figure that links up with the "backwardness" of the Arab, with madness, or with the savage (which appears later on in the figure of the Native American):

Pourquoi je l'ai laissé jouer avec mon cahier, *mon Dieu*? Ce soir, je raconte tout à ma mère. Elle lui enverra l'bombe atomique sur sa gueule d'idiot. Son écriture pourrie c'est des *gribouillages*. *L'écriture à l'envers* n'existe pas! En vérité, il sait pas écrire et il me raconte des histoires debout... Il pris mon cahier à l'envers, c'est un coup de chance. Sinon, la maîtresse découvre les *gribouillages* d'un gosse sur mon cahier. Elle se casse la figure définitivement sur mon compte. Moi, je suis *déshonorée* à vie. Ma mère se tue au gaz. Mon frère devient fou.⁷³

Now this is definitely a very violent fantasy and one might read it as hallucination outside the order of the symbolic, but a closer look will reveal a different principle. I have emphasized the moments where Georgette cites; how, for example, when she says "mon dieu," one can see that she takes pleasure in using the "adult" convention of self-inquiry and astonishment. At the end she uses the adjective "déshonorée" but out of place – it is a term used to indicate the misbehaving of young girls usually in the context of breaking social norms that bring "shame" to the family. Here it is reversed. Moreover, to know that something is a scribble assumes that one knows what language looks like and how it "should" look like and the same goes for its direction. *Georgette!*, in its entirety, is a defamiliarization of this racist content, but it is done when one is *within* language, while feigning ignorance and naïveté: "Je veux toujours me faire remarquer *comme* une imbécile."⁷⁴ The "comme" presupposes the kind of differentiation typical of the Symbolic, not the Imaginary.

⁶⁹ See Durmelat, "L'apprentissage de l'écriture dans *Georgette!*." In *L'Écriture décentrée: La langue de l'Autre dans le roman contemporain*. Ed. Michel Laronde, 1996, p. 35.

⁷⁰ Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 10.

⁷¹ Ibid, 56.

⁷² See Durmelat, "L'apprentissage de l'écriture," 35.

⁷³ Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 58, my emphasis.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 15, my emphasis. Furthermore, that Georgette knows how to distinguish between dream and reality is evident when she compares between the weird smile of her teacher in her thought and its regular appearance in class: "Je suis dans mon lit ce soir-là... J'ai dans les yeux le sourire bizarre de la maîtresse. Il est gentil et doux (p.11). "La maîtresse

I would like to suggest then that *Georgette* does not defamiliarize the symbolic by an imaginary non-order, but precisely the opposite; it is as if the Symbolic has invaded the Imaginary. Instead of the pre-codified social thought that we expect to find in the imaginary, we have the stereotype language of the social. Negating testimony, Belghoul does away with imaginary individuality (“this is *my* Beur story”), and gives the lie to the autonomous subject by exposing it as a series of conventional statements. This is the negative and demystifying moment of *Georgette!* to which critics cling. And yet, as I have suggested above, flattening out individuality comes with a price, a dialectical unexpected effect. By canceling out testimony, or, as it were, thinning it out so its skeleton becomes as apparent (Hochberg’s “behind and before”), *Georgette*’s consciousness looks more and more like language itself. The compositional principle of the text is the defamiliarization – by displacement and satire – of a racist dictionary: racist sentences, opinions, slurs etc. – whose “natural” meaning is defamiliarized and made perceptible once it is displaced and put in the mouth of a Beur child whose ignorance must be assumed. This compositional principle will start explaining why time or plot do not really play a role in the novel. As the principle of movement is not diachronic but synchronic, more and more variations on the racist theme are produced – dirtiness, Islam vs. Christianity, Arab as backward and reverse, or savage, school as a site for hygiene, French and Algeria as opposing colors (Blue vs. Red and Green), Algerian dress as strange and shameful – and it matters very little when these thematic variations are narrated.

This additive compositional principle brings to mind Roman Jakobson’s definition of the poetic function: it drops the paradigmatic axis on the syntagmatic one, so that instead of temporal movement of different speech parts we get synchronic variations of the same type of speech. This is the source of *Georgette!*’s monotonous movement. To use another linguistic metaphor, it seems that in *Georgette!* Belghoul sets out a paradigmatic analysis of racist discourse, a move that explains now why the denotative layer – the surface of the text – is emptied out and we are directed to read it symbolically. This paradigmatic reading is already present in the first sentence “La sonne cloche... Non, la cloche sonne.” We read this sentence mimetically, as if *Georgette* is thinking, but immediately notice its category: it is a “mistake.” And from this moment on, every time we read about Arabic or Arabs being “in reverse,” we *immediately* move to its category “racist speech.”⁷⁵

The “obviousness” of *Georgette!* has been noted by critics who, although appreciative of its critical capacity, did not fail to see its limits: “Plus mince est le prétexte, plus dramatique est la scène. Quant à l’enjeu – l’écriture – est-il besoin de souligner sa portée symbolique?”⁷⁶ The point here is not to pass into an aesthetic judgment of *Georgette!* but to understand the reason for this symptom – why a text that rejects the transparency, as it were, of the Beur testimonial style in favor of the density of language ends up being even more transparent and obvious than they are? I suggest that this reversal has something to do with the nature of the motivation. Putting racist speech in the mouth of a Beur child necessitated naiveté, but not only of the psychological kind (*Georgette*’s level of awareness) but also of the philosophical one (the text’s level of conceptuality). Belghoul’s modernist idiom proceeds concretely and at times literally. As Alec Hargreaves tells us, Belghoul wanted to write without commentary or explanation,⁷⁷ as if to write an anti-*gone*,⁷⁸ a modernist text

s’avance vers nous. Elle envoie un sourire à tout le monde. Elle montre ses dents à toute la classe *et là*, son sourire n’est pas bizarre. (p. 20, my emphasis). This is not to say that *Georgette!* does not stage an assault on reason but it is done within the symbolic and its boundaries.

⁷⁵ This principle of letting us see the mistake but never commenting on its meaning receives its explicit articulation at one point: “Tout le monde se trompe un jour ou l’autre. Là, par exemple, je le vois bien: elle le tient sous mes yeux à l’envers. Je vais pas dire le contraire tout haut. Dans la vie, le principe c’est de corriger sa faute.” Belghoul, *Georgette!*, 30.

⁷⁶ François Desplanques, “Quand les Beurs prennent la plume.” *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 7.3 (1991): 142.

⁷⁷ Hargreaves, *Beur Fiction*, 142-3.

that will bracket its social and historical determinants whose too burdensome presence - especially in early stage of the Beur movement – will not allow aesthetic autonomy.

In a different context, commenting on Greek epic, Adorno explains the dynamic of naïveté: in order to be true to authentic experience and avoid the falsifying nature of discursive language, the epic narrator clings to concrete objects and describes them in detail. The price the epic narrator pays for this concreteness is self imposed naïveté, simplicity, and blindness:

In comparison with the enlightened state of consciousness to which narrative discourse belongs, a state characterized by general concepts, this concrete or objective element always seems to be one of stupidity, lack of comprehension, ignorance, a stubborn clinging to the particular when it has already been dissolved into the universal.⁷⁹

The attempt to emancipate representation from reflective reason is language's attempt, futile from the outset, to recover from the negativity of its intentionality, the conceptual manipulation of objects, by carrying its defining intention to the extreme and allowing what is real to emerge in pure form... The narrator's stupidity and blindness – it is no accident that tradition has it that Homer was blind – expresses the impossibility and hopelessness of this enterprise. It is precisely the material element in the epic poem, the element that is the extreme opposite of all speculation and fantasy, that drives the narrative to the edge of madness through its *a priori* impossibility.⁸⁰

As if talking about *Georgette!*, Adorno could be seen as describing Belghoul's narrative style quite precisely, only that here the concrete is not an object, but conventional language itself. It is not then the madness of the abject, but of a compositional principle that clings to the letter of the racist discourse without ever being able to move outside to its historical circumstances. And once the outside has been cancelled the narrative movement proceeds erratically, inside itself, as it were, producing more and more variants until it quite arbitrarily must stop (when Georgette apparently dies in a car accident).

As I have argued above, what is most operative in *Georgette!* is the desire to show the social unconscious in itself, untouched by the practical language of the testimonial. To see that this is indeed the case let me suggest a contrasting example where the unconscious is also alluded to as the determination of an action or a thought, but is never spelled out as in *Georgette!*. Here is an excerpt from Jean Paul Sartre's *The Childhood of a Leader*

He sat on the ground at mama's feet and took his drum. Mama asked him, "Why are you looking at me like that, darling? He lowered his eyes and beat on his drum, crying, "Boom, boom, taraboom." But when she turned her head he began to scrutinize her minutely as if he were seeing her for the first time... He decided he would never sleep in [his parents'] room any more.⁸¹

Along the first part of the novella, Sartre dramatizes the gradual opening of consciousness to society – mother, father, sexuality, God etc. This excerpt stages Lucien's vague desire for his mother and its interdiction. Because the desire for the mother is repressed and unconscious and as such can appear only through its symptoms, the scene mimics the structure of consciousness: its kernel - the conceptualization of the desire itself as a thought - is missing, it is never represented as such, but rather catches narrative content (here, the gaze and the decision never to sleep in the parents' room).

⁷⁸ Shorthand for *Le gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag, a novel discussed in the previous chapter.

⁷⁹ Theodor Adorno, "On Epic Naïveté." In *Notes to Literature I*, 1991, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 27.

⁸¹ Jean Paul Sartre, "Childhood of a Leader." In *The Wall and Other Stories*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, 1969, p. 85.

Another example from Mehdi Lalloui's *Les Beurs de Seine* might make this clearer. Early on in the novel Kaci is interviewed for the position of an electrician. Note how the unavowed thought "Beur delinquent" underlies every question but is never allowed to appear as such.

"Vous êtes Algérien, n'est-ce-pas?" avait-il dit en voyant la carte bleue.

"Oui!"

Ouvrant la carte plastifiée:

"Kaci Dablaoui... ah, bon.... Vous êtes né en France... à Argenteuil!"

Silence

"Ah, c'est pas pareil!... Bon, vous avez, d'après vos certificats de travail, commencé à travailler à ... - après un moment d'hésitation - ... à 16 ans."

"Oui."

"Vous auriez pu continuer vos études, non?."

Silence et haussement des épaules de Kaci, comme pour dire "peut-être."

"Une formation sur le tas c'est pas plus mal!... Très bien, Monsieur... euh"

"Dablaoui"⁸²

As with Sartre, the repressed racist thought never appears, but produces events (here, the specific questions of the interview) and eventually history. As Louis Althusser would say, it exists only in its effects,⁸³ and it is only this history that can then work back on its underlying structure - and indeed Kaci is hired and joins the workers' strike at the end of the novel.⁸⁴ In contradistinction, Belghoul brings the repressed racist thought to the very surface of the text as stereotyped speech, being as if the social unconscious itself, and as a result it cannot produce any history, any world.

As with Begag, one of the symptoms of such an absence is the suppression of the scene of work. As we know by now the two primary social sites where Beurs made their appearance *qua* dominated group beginning in the early 1970s were the education system (scholarly failure) and the labor market (unemployment). The latter, however, expresses the hour of truth for Beurs. As Albano Cordeiro puts it:

La parcours – allongé par la crise de l'emploi – qui va de la sortie de l'appareil scolaire à l'insertion (stabilisé) dans la vie active, s'assumant comme adultes (autonomie vis à vis de la famille, décohabitation, décision de constituer une nouvelle famille), constitue pour ces jeunes l'heure de la vérité, de la vraie rencontre avec la société française. Les discours et comportements pseudo-égalitaires qu'ils ont connu à l'école, sont alors mis à l'épreuve. Les amitiés contractées au-delà de leur milieu, dans la période de non-responsabilisation infantile ou adolescente, ne serviront plus d'écran. Le marché du travail se présentera alors avec ses mécanismes de rejet et de sélection.⁸⁵

So while Belghoul demystifies the disciplinary practices and veiled racist discourse of the French school system (what Cordeiro calls the "screen") *Georgette!* never proceeds to that second social site where, although related to the first, the Beur truly enters French society and where a new set of problems present themselves that cannot be limited to racist discourse. To enter the labor market, according to Cordeiro, is then to be "dans le vrai," as Gustave Flaubert once put it, only here it is

⁸² Mehdi Lalloui's *Les Beurs de Seine*, 1986, p.11

⁸³ See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, 2005. See especially "Contradiction and Overdetermination," where the theory of contradiction is rewritten as a structural causality. (p. 101).

⁸⁴ Lalloui's *Les Beurs de Seine*, 133-4

⁸⁵ Albano Cordeiro, "Nouvelle génération de la communauté algérienne et entrée dans la vie active." In *Maghrébins en France: Émigrés ou immigrés*, (Ed) Talha Larbi et. al, 1983, p. 321.

ironically reversed. It is not the Real of middle class familial intimacy, but the hell of a global financial crisis and unemployment.

To return to the sense of obviousness in *Georgette!*, perhaps it will be useful to refer here to Barthes' explanation that myth appears to us as "obvious" and "transparent" because it involves the reduction of the history of the sign to its connotative meaning.⁸⁶ Belghoul puts on display this mythological short-circuit that moves stealthily from Arabic script to its meaning as "backward culture" and through that move breaks the spell of the myth. But at the same moment it seems that, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, to subdue myth, reason needed to take on its form and turn myth itself. In order to dispel, pull inside out, the racist bias, Belghoul had to borrow the structure of myth and as a consequence the history that was unavailable to the myth of the Arab becomes unavailable to Belghoul as well.⁸⁷ To be more specific, when reading such a passage about Arabic script as "reversed" language we are invited to read it in reverse and conclude that this is how Arabic and Arabs are perceived in France.⁸⁸ And yet, the inversion produces the illusion that our task here is complete; we understood what the text asked us to do and it thus operates much like a myth by making us forget what begs the question: under what historical circumstances Arabs (first and second generation) come to be perceived as inferior others and how is it that this racism passes as a natural disposition? Only when such questions disappear, can *Georgette's* thoughts be perceived as the "behind and before" of social interaction.

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⁸⁶ "What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name 'bourgeois,' myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence." Roland Barthes, "Myth Today." In *Mythologies*, trans. Anette Lavers, 1972, pp. 142-3.

⁸⁷ This again brings Odysseus to mind. It is not that *Georgette!* is a naïve text, it is that its aesthetic guile takes on the appearance of naïveté in order to free itself from history, from testimony, but then must pay the price of being blind to it.

⁸⁸ I will not continue to suggest that it also asks us to conclude that Arabs are simply like everybody else for I believe that Belghoul's humanism is an after effect of the estrangement and not its objective.

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