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Imagination and the Abyss in the Middle Eastern Novel: Elias Khoury and The Embedded Memory of Silence in Global Networks

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Abstract: The present paper aims to investigate world literature's struggle for finding an imaginary way out of the hegemonic logic of neoliberal capitalism, the standardization of global narratives, and the commodification of local realities. We will delve into the cultural relation between imagination and collective memory in order to investigate how fictionalization negotiates the accessibility of the past, retaining or dismissing unassimilable memories and representations. The paper will draw on the compelling case of Lebanese writer Elias Khoury, who worked with the fragments of the stories he gathered from a Palestinian refugee camp, during the 1948 Arab-Istraeli war, in two of his major novels, *Bāb al-Shams* (*Gate of the Sun*, 1998) and *Awlād al-Ghītū—Ismī Ādam* (*Children of the Ghetto—My Name is Adam*, 2016). What these novels have in common is a fascination with the role of narrative imagination/storytelling within the dynamics of fractured representational relations on the global stage. Thus, I seek to look into the ways in which transnational imagination integrates or translates historical disruption or experiences of displacement. I am interested in the mechanisms employed by these works of fiction that shed light on how the 'local' becomes comprehensible through universalizing frames or on how the local functions as a spectre within this trans-cultural imaginary. The general aim is to see whether these contexts in which our relation to the story of the victim is constructed through the prevalence of imagination over memory discourses or historical narratives can foster a sense of international solidarity.

Keywords: imagination, world-system, displacement, translation, narrative, silence, history, fiction.

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The paper tackles the ways in which stories of victimization mirror each other through a complex process of inter-validation, transfer, and obliteration. This process will be looked at through the lenses of imagination, bringing into the spotlight the 'dialog' between silenced memories and the dynamics of transnational narratives. I believe that the works of Lebanese author Elias Khoury can provide an insight into these dynamics as they explore various layers of victimhood, and the relations between narrative shapes and conditions of marginality.

Children of the Ghetto, the novel that will be at the centre of this analysis, opens with a *Preface* that weaves together the web of stories, comprising both references to the writer's previous books and to imagined, fictional films. The readers are automatically driven into the frame-story that looks like a personal confession, but, in fact, we are invited to reflect on the hybrid nature of authorship. The author of the *Preface* recounts the events that led to him getting into the possession of the 'notebooks' he later decided to facilitate access to by publishing them. He sees himself as part of the love triangle that opens the lineage of this inherited manuscript containing several other narrative layers into which the authenticity and identity of the characters is both shaped and dismantled successively. Sarang Lee is the Asian student who brings the notebooks to her university teacher in New York (Elias Khoury himself), becoming a character in the narrative of the manuscript she helped salvage against the author's will (who died after having fallen asleep with a burning cigarette in New York, similarly to exiled Palestinian poet Rashid Hussein). The author of the *Preface* claims to have met Adam Dannoun, "a Palestinian pretending to be an Israeli, or the reverse?" (Khoury 11), through Sarang Lee, who had taken interest in the mysterious man with an imprecise, dissimulated identity. Adam has supposedly read *Gate of the Sun*, the novel of Elias Khoury published in 1998, in which the testimonies gathered from survivors of the Nakba blend with fiction and the intricacies of storytelling. Adam is critical of this account of the Palestinian struggle and its treatment as a narrative problem on the grounds that the writer was not a Palestinian and, thus, could not have had access to the perspective of a direct witness. Through this inter-textual play, Khoury incorporates the criticism surrounding his previous book, but, at the same time, he manages to set the stage for what the novel we are about to read seeks to explore, and that is the ethics of imagining and fictionalizing collective trauma. This reference to the main argument brought against *Gate of the Sun*, a novel written by a Lebanese writer about the Palestinian saga, suggestively tells the reader that the book is set out to investigate the ways in which imagination (including storytelling) betrays or stays faithful to the experienced or secondly witnessed historical disruption. The question is how are stories born out of the ways in which we appropriate them. That is why, in this preamble that tells the story of the retrieved manuscript, our narrator-writer confesses having been tempted by the idea of rewriting the "primary material" and publishing the text as his own. Throughout the novel, structurally or reflectively, Khoury keeps coming back to the issue of the "original" manuscript or text, framing its impossibility or showing how,

through multiple narrative routes, the "original" becomes merely a mirage of the work of mediation and transfer. By diving into "the intrigue that ties a writer to what he writes" (16), mirroring cultural and personal uncertainties, Khoury tackles the complex fictionalized 'incorporation' of the Arabic-Islamic sociocultural struggle into the world-system imaginary. Mainly, his focus is on how Jewish and Palestinian victimization mirror each other in an intricate web of narratives about exile and displacement.

The relation between experience and language, truth and metaphor, historical events and storytelling, reference and imagination lies at the core construction of Khoury's text. The writer is concerned with how stories and myths are passed down, becoming part of various constellations of meaning, within distinct scenarios of domestication, transformation, translation or appropriation. The frame-story is about the writer himself receiving a manuscript that complements or substitutes the novel he could not write himself. Adam, the presumed author of the manuscript recounts the story of the Omayyad poet, Waddah al-Yaman, including his reflections about the distinct ways in which the story has been passed down, how we should read it against the temptation of simple allegoric meaning, and how the process of turning this story into a novel becomes an almost impossible task. The other narrative layer comprises Adam's personal story and his unintentional coming across a different version/story of his identity and origins, which is tied to the 1948 Palestinian expulsion form Lydda. Given this multilayered, multifaceted construction of the book, including a chapter, *The Coffer of Silence*, which is itself an essay on the attempt of writing a story from two points of view, I believe reading the text through the lenses of what Linda Hutcheon terms "a poetics of postmodernism" is fully justified. More specifically, I think *Children of the Ghetto* is an insightful example of "historiographic metafiction" in that the text critically reflects on the process of transmission and our relation to a referent that "is a discursive entity" (Hutcheon 145). Despite the fact that historiographic metafiction deems all knowledge about the past provisional and discursive, the importance and grip of this 'vanishing' referent is not simply crossed out. That is why, for Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is not merely a postmodern relativization of historical knowledge, but also the reflection of a self-conscious formalist gaze upon historical events. In other words, this 'poetics of postmodernism' assumes its own "manipulative narrators and narratives" (206), and acknowledges theory and art's "implication in that which they contest" (222).

In his text, Khoury shows how narratives become complicit to the historicized interpretations they generate, having the power to reveal and conceal, at the same time. Khoury is mostly interested in how stories are culturally structured around the silence of the victims, or around death, marking our symbolic relation to the 'buried' perspective which cannot get across (culturally, historically, etc.). For instance, distinct versions of the story of Waddah al-Yaman, a seventeenth-century Arab poet who was ostensibly buried alive in a coffer by the Umayyad Caliph Al-Walid I after discovering his wife's unfaithfulness, are

explored in the novel. The multiple versions of this story are narrated from various angles, juxtaposing erotic desire, and the death of love, with the literary text's wish to supersede the limits of historical knowledge. Moreover, the story of the Omayyd poet who is smuggled into the palace by the caliph's wife includes a commentary related to the (im)possibility of upending dynastic rule, interpreted as an allegory of the 'outsiderness' of history being buried by the caliph, who did not know for sure whether his wife's lover was inside the coffer or not, disposing of his doubts altogether by entombing the coffer previously situated in his wife's room. The silence of the poet in the coffer becomes the recurring metaphor the narrator resorts to, as we (the readers) are warned against the political symbolism of Waddah's story. Instead, we are left with the more religious (or mythological) approach, that of reading Waddah's history as "a human parable relating to Palestinians, Jews, and all men that have been persecuted on earth" (23). There are several instances in the novel, in which the narrator believes that certain metaphors or symbols can become universal, or 'cosmic', but, shortly after, dismisses the option, choosing the eloquence of silence over the power of words. The absence of a "cry of protest", the muteness of the victim, and the "deafness of the world" are the metaphoric pillars on which Khoury builds his demonstration about cultural narrativization, transmission and reception. According to his narrator, Adam, literature should serve no other purpose, or bear no other appropriation than that to "the first signifier that binds man to his death" (24). Again, the readers are paradoxically told that texts can transcend their historical condition when, in fact, throughout the text, narratives become correlates of the gaps and silences of cultural memory. Thus, Khoury's tackling of the topic of the victim's willing or unwilling silence cannot be understood solely in light of "the triumph of the unsaid" (Knight 199) which brings us back to modern apophaticim as the middle ground of Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. Instead, Khoury's treatment of this silence is political (in the broader sense), as he points out the ways in which the lines between memory and imagination become blurred within stories of displacement. *Children of the Ghetto* suggests that bearing witness to the victim's silence through the imagination is more accurate than the discursive or narrative attempt to fill in the gaps of memory. Imagination allows for a prelinguistic relation to the trace of the disruptive historical event, while memory is bound to a linguistic tradition that becomes entangled in a 'core-periphery' dynamics, through the history of the reception of texts:

> "The story of his love and death (Waddah's), which had seemed naive to me thirty years earlier, took on a new meaning, not just as a metaphor evoking the Palestinian Nakba, as that first reading had seemed to indicate, with the lover choosing silence to protect his beloved, but as an expression of what follows the despair that comes when love dies and dissipates. Thus, the poet's silent death becomes the meaning of the meaning, or the moment at which life acquires meaning through death" (32).

Thus, the suggestion is that imagination transcends political reference or is not politically bound, but it is, in itself, political as it compels us to assign meaning to silence and death, dragging the signifying force of imagination beyond the historical moment of disruption. By 'imagination' I understand more than the simple individual exercise of coming to terms with the unrepresentability (or incommunicability) of historical disruption. Imagination is viewed more in connection to Arjun Appadurai's conceptualization of the term, understood as "a property of collectives", meaning as the dynamics of conflicting products of the imagination that sets the ground for envisioning ways of living and possibilities of action within a transnational, global landscape. Thus, I am interested more in how Khoury's novel plays with a notion of imagination that desilences parts of the real within the dynamics of "imagined worlds" (Appadurai 33), subverting the mass-mediated imaginary. Imagination mediates the relation between large-scale realities and local ones, not in the sense that it helps us better understand locality as opposed to a homogenizing globalization, but in the sense that it configures or restructures the realisms through which ordinary lives are reflected. As Appadurai puts it, "the power of the imagination in the fabrication of social lives is inescapably tied up with images, ideas, and opportunities that come from elsewhere, often moved around by the vehicles of mass media" (54). It is through the power of the imagination that individuals draw on the realisms of this "elsewhere" they are exposed to, in order to tackle the large-scale realities they can imaginatively articulate, leaving alongside absences, returns and displacement. Appadurai's social conceptualization of imagination as "a staging ground for action, and not only for escape" (7) echoes Cornelius Castoriadis' *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, where the imaginary dimension of social reality is viewed as an effect of the self-disclosing (generative) dynamics of the instituted universe of significations. Thus, imagination can no longer be reduced to individual creativity after having acknowledged its function in giving shape to forms of collective consciousness that give rise not only to representations and institutions, but to entangled generative effects of meaning and to practices of mediation.

Elias Khoury, through the voice of his narrator Adam, is very much aware of how symbolic mediation works at the level of the world-system imaginary. At the beginning, Adam sets out to write a "cosmic metaphor", one that would render the culturally situated, local experience of disruption emotionally and imaginatively comprehensible through an allegory of totality: "I had failed to write the novel that I wanted to, so I decided to create a great metaphor, a cosmic metaphor, that of an obscure Arab poet who lived in the Omayyad period and died a hero's death" (19). Khoury is not only interested in how the power of the parable works with projections of totality in both Christian and Islamic religious tradition. More particularly, Khoury's novel problematizes the relation between language, silences and the frames of large-scale realities which accommodate individual trauma within the world-system imaginary. At the level of the construction of the novel, the reader witnesses how each story or narrative level is embedded in a meta-narrative which aims to legitimize and contain the other stories,

or even function as a universal, unadorned truth that is, nonetheless, constantly undermined because of the prevalence of silence over language within the narrative construction. These meta-narratives try to legitimize, symbolize or uncover the 'universal' meaning of the stories of loss they contain, showing, through these literary mechanism (such as inter-text or narrative frames), how narratives belong to, and at the same time distance themselves from the grip of global frames.

I argue that, in *Children of the Ghetto*, imagination is not seen as a narrative force that should facilitate the reader's connection to the traumatic past, but rather as a means of conveying the disconnection after traumatic violence. As John E. Drabinski puts it in his book on Édouard Glissant's philosophical thought, "the painful, traumatized, and traumatizing past disconnects us from disconnection, leaving something we might be tempted to call an abyss" (10). By insisting on the leitmotif of silence, Khoury's novel becomes a meditation on that specific type of imagination which should stare into this "abyss", seeking no reflection, but managing to make this absence of the sign legible. As Drabinski suggests, "the ideal of transparent universality imposed by the West" (13) reflects the failure of the imaginary, which needs to be non-barbaric, keeping "the opaqueness of the unknown and chaos in motion alongside the known and the ordered" (16). Tawfiq Saleh's film, *The Dupes* (1973), based on the novella of Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*, is evoked in the novel as part of the construction of this "cosmic metaphor" of silence. The movie tells the story of three Palestinians that fled the region after the Nakba and died of suffocation in the water tanker of the cistern which was supposed to smuggle them from Iraq to the "paradise" of Kuwait. Adam Dannoun comments on the fact that the Egyptian director decided to change the ending, choosing to show the viewer the hands banging on the sides of the tank, whilst in Kanafani's novella the silence of the three Palestinians (together with their decision not to cry for help) is used as a pretext for asking the typical Western question "why". Dannoun, Khoury's narrator, considers that neither focusing on the victim's cries and gestures of resistance, nor instrumentalizing the silence and the narrative gaps in favour of a westernized meta-narrative can accomplish the task of imagination, because both the cinematic and the literary treatment of the victim in this case fall prey to allegorical meaning, framing the message rather that the abyss. Thus, the question of how can imagination account for the abyss of historical disruption arises. By insisting on the metaphor of silence, Khoury does not suggest that narrative or storytelling are ineffective responses to these failings of representing the experience of the victim. I believe Khoury shares Richard Kearney's idea that "narrative imagination may help prevent past traumas from becoming fixated in the pathological forms of melancholy, amnesia or repetition" (182). Thus, trying to imagine the unimaginable, even through storytelling and cinematic treatment, is an ethical attempt that muddles through the perils of (re)appropriation. By indirectly suggesting that imagination should dialectically sit in relation to the abyss of historical disruption, without domesticating it, Khoury does not

simply dismiss the forms of representation that open towards an interpretation that comes from outside the logic of the narrative. I argue that the writer implies that we (the readers) drive our attention to the silences and silencings these readings or forms of reception embed, pushing our imagination to work with the disjointedness of the experiences or events that become part of the narrative's logic.

So far we have sketched two understandings of imagination: one that creates the dynamics of the world-system imaginary through the encounter, collision or hybridization of different levels of the imagination (local, global, diasporic, etc.), and one that mediates our foreshadowed access to the memory of historical disruption. I think it would be relevant to reference another understanding or facet of imagination, one that sets the task of imagination in direct connection to the impasse of the impossibility of transparency. The issue of giving a voice to the subaltern has become a major source of debate within the theoretical framework of postcolonial studies. One of the perils of this approach is to reduce the issue of the voice of the subaltern to the goals of transparency, visibility, representation, etc. Gayatri Spivak provides us with an alternative to this reductionist approach, suggesting that subalternity is not an identity that needs to be brought to light from the waters of under-representability in which it has been sunk. Viewing subalternity as an identity which awaits disclosure misses the fact that giving a voice to the subaltern is a complex problem of translation, rather than recuperation. It is precisely in this process of translation that I believe imagination steps in, making room for a perspective which is not that of what Spivak critically calls the "universal witness" (53). This problem of translation needs to be paired with "the work of the negative" (Spivak 49), which undermines the fetishization of identities, counteracts the interested production of transparency and gives way to "measuring silences into the object of investigation" (Spivak 72). Through the metaphor of the victim buried alive in a coffer which is central to the analyzed novel, Elias Khoury places this "impossibility of transparency" at the core of his fictional construction, wanting his readers to have an insight into how imagination and cultural memory work around this impossibility. Moreover, in this novel, Khoury wants us to imaginatively remain in the very proximity of the unassimilable and non-domesticated disruptive event.

Similarly, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty looks into the idealization of Europe, mostly as the birthplace of capitalist modernity, and reframes the *modern–nonmodern* divide as a problem of translation, rather than transition. Chakrabarty believes that within this problem of translation we should look for "other collocations of memory" that subvert the position of the subject speaking 'in the name of history'. In a more radical vein, Chakrabarty suggests we can attempt the impossible: "tracing that which resists translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous" (46). Thus, the following question needs to be answered: is the task of imagination in a globalized world linked to

a special attention required for envisioning heterogeneity or is this task rather inseparable form the conceptualization and thinking of totality? Robert T. Tally Jr. provides us with a rather different perspective on the function of imagination at the global scale. Instead of suggesting that imagination should strip the world of those domesticated, homogenizing accounts of global history, Tally Jr. reaffirms the political dimension of the utopian impulse he exemplifies through the most important movements of the 21st century (such as the Arab Spring), defining utopia as "an imaginative effort to map the world system". This imaginative effort defines subjectivity within spacial and historical frames and allows us to relate (through imagination) to the totality, as well as to the excess of the world system. So, I think that by insisting on structural forms of silence in his novel, Elias Khoury did not simply envision the task of imagination as being responsible for making us even more aware of the heterogeneity of the world and of incommunicable experiences. Instead, I argue that the writer wanted his readers to focus on how the task of imagining silences and gaps directly reflects the excess of the world system. In other words, in *Children of the Ghetto*, the imagination is not only a response to the failure of mapping totality, but it becomes also a possibility of thinking the imaginary produced excess of the world system, more specifically a representational excess that removes the counter-mirroring function of the abyss.

I believe that the migrant is the political figure that may guide our possibility of further digging into the dynamics of the world system imaginary. It is no coincidence that Adam, the narrator, is a migrant who decided to leave his confusing Israeli-Palestinian identity in Jaffa for New York (Khoury spent part of his life in New York, but he fictionalizes himself in the novel as the man whom Adam despises). Adam's story of displacement does not turn into one of estrangement or nostalgia, reflecting instead the process of self-discovery, and that of gradual identification with his 'buried' Palestinian hybrid identity through storytelling. Adam confesses having "put the past of the past in the place of the past" (83) after emigrating to New York, where his preoccupation with writing the novel of the Arab poet was just a game. The turning point in this process of self-discovery was a movie projection he attended, about Palestine, where the author of *Gate of the Sun* (Elias Khoury himself) stood next to the film director. Adam felt outrage at the inaccuracy of the portrayal of the individual stories of the people who took part in the Second Intifada, a Palestinian uprising. Adam Dannoun suddenly feels overwhelmed by the urge to tell the "truth" of the story as he personally knew the characters in the movie and had a different version of the directly experienced events people told him about, but instead of speaking out he rushed out of the cinema and fell ill. The embeddedness of the stories (told or untold) reveals itself to the narrator who becomes the protagonist of the anonymous story of origin recounted in the novel, a story about an abandoned child that had been born in the ghetto of Lydda: "So here I am, gazing dumbstruck at the words from the past's own past, and finding myself before a story to which I feel myself to be heir simply because I'm its only reader" (109).

Elias Khoury is not solely interested in exposing the processes of narrativization and oblivion, but he is also exploring, in this novel, the intricate ways in which we relate to stories that have been passed down to us, how we turn stories into reality or how we create distance or proximity to events through narrativization and fictionalization. That is because Elias Khoury himself, a Lebanese writer opposed to any form of fundamentalism or extremism, politically and personally engaged with the Palestinian cause, but very sensitive to nuances and double-sidedness at the level of his literary works, is very much familiar with these paradoxes. In *Gate of the Sun* and *Children of the Ghetto*, he tells the story of the victims or survivors of the Palestinian refugee camps, so he tries to give a fictional representation to this multilayered dynamics of stories (testimonies) recounted by direct witnesses, but written down by second witnesses or "neighbors" so as to acquire meaning within the world-system imaginary. In an interview with Sonja Mejcher, Khoury confesses being used to writing "the opposite of what I was living", suggesting that the imaginary confers distance from the political practice (Khoury was also a member of the Fatah, the largest Palestinian resistance organization). Moreover, the other distancing stems out of the need to fictionalize or reinvent the story of the victim in order to fill in the gaps of the orally handed-down testimony. In an interview from Pen Transmissions ("Silence as communication: a conversation with Elias Khoury"), the author mentions the ethically debatable nature of this rewriting process:

> "I collected stories from people who stayed in Lydda. I can't go there of course, so I skyped. And then I met many people who escaped and went to Amman, to Jordan. But the major difficulty was how to recreate the life of the ghetto because very few people can tell you about it and most of them have died. So I had to recreate it myself, which opened a huge debate."

The writer goes on recounting the fact that details about the daily-life experiences of the people whose testimonies he collected have been preserved in his texts (*Gate of the Sun* and *Children of the Ghetto*), but that characters have been invented and all the rest is a result of the work of fictionalization. This process of fictionalization is one that needs to avoid romanticism's trap, as Adam, Khoury's narrator suggests: "Writing the truth requires avoiding the melodramatic elements, which have to be eliminated from our life stories if tragedy is not to turn into farce" (142). It is no coincidence that in the book published as a follow-up to *Gate of the Sun*, Khoury draws on the metaphor of silence, historically and culturally (from the fifty-years silence of the displaced Palestinians after the Nakba to the silence of women in Egyptian movies, etc.). This is also because he is trying to offer an answer to the ethical debate surrounding the fictionalization of historical collective trauma. Khoury's point is that in rewriting the story of the victim (which is a form of counter-history) there is the need of creating "a dialog with silence", which does not necessarily break the well-structured story, but which runs in parallel with it. I believe Khoury achieves this dialogue

through a logic of spectrality, both at the level of language and that of narrative construction. In *Gate of the Sun*, silence was a frame for the entire text, as Khalil, the narrator, weaves stories at the bedside of an unconscious patient in a hospital in a camp on the outskirts of Beirut, after 1948, believing that the leader of the Palestinian resistance will come out of the coma as a reaction to him listening to his story being recounted by another. In *Children of the Ghetto*, silence is not the echo with which storytelling is met, but it becomes a part of how stories reflect each other, and a constant topic of critical reflection and reference.

Khoury is aware of the ways in which the silences and gaps within a tradition may also be used as a source for sacralizing and legitimizing ingrained perspectives on the versions of history. Thus the relation between language, the sacred and silence could be viewed as one of the other important topics of *Children of the Ghetto*. For instance, our narrator mentions having watched Eugène Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano* several times, being fascinated "with the meanings fashioned by the Romanian playwright from the meaningless of words" (77–78). At the same time, the novel develops a reflection on the appropriation of the term "ghetto" by Arab Palestinians after the Nakba. As Khoury recounts in an interview, referring to the barbed-wired refugee camps set up by the Israeli Military, "the Palestinians in the ghetto heard the term for the first time from Israeli soldiers." The question of the world-system dynamics of appropriation, translation and memory comes up refracted when Adam discusses the trans-cultural character of storytelling at the intersection between the East and the West:

> "Scheherazade was the first narrator. She gave birth to children and told a thousand stories, everyone of which became a person who narrates. I wanted to explain to the judicious scholar of history that Cervantes found his novel written in the language of Scheherazade, and the novel was thus born at his hands through a translation from "the language of 'ayn'," a language that a bewitched woman had turned into that of storytelling. [...] indeed, he probably was lying when he claimed to have bought the manuscript of the book from an Arab bookseller in the market at Toledo, but his lie was truer than the truth itself." (143)

For Khoury, the language of storytelling, embedded within the broader conceptualization of imagination, is supposed to unveil or reveal life, not to obscure or conceal a reality. In an interview conducted by Anne-Marie McManus, the author implies that in this particular power of unveiling lies the "wordliness" of *The 1001 Nights* which entered the global circuits of translation and reception. The writer believes that the heritage of the Arab world can be traced back to *The 1001 Nights*, "the book of the ancient world" (McManus 397) which points to the hybrid nature of the classical heritage at the intersection between the Arab world, India, China, and Greece. Thus, Khoury's understanding of world literature is not limited to the already defined regimes of circulation within the global landscape. The "wordly" character

of *The 1001 Nights* resides in its ability to play with different levels of the language (drawing mostly on spoken, colloquial language), and in its recognition of non-sacred language as a source of enchantment, and as a gateway to the sacred. Adam, Khoury's narrator, also remarks in one of the notes of his manuscript that the non-sacred language of storytelling has had precedence over the religious: "The linguists and critics had regarded pre-Islamic poetry as a source for the understanding of the Koran, thus giving language precedence over the sacred" (54). This non-sacralized perspective on language and storytelling in general could be viewed as having paved the way towards Khoury's break with the Lebanese school of literature (more romantic in its orientation), defining the writer's aim at opening written language to "the heritage of the spoken and the lived", which he considers to be "the lost memory" of the Arab culture. From a broader political perspective, Khoury thinks that world literature should break with the logic of neoliberal capitalism and "the postmodern flow of ideas" (McManus 403), which reduces the defining political issues of our world to the "exotic", fragmented, decontextualized representations of people's struggles, which turn them into commodities. Conversely, world literature should be conceived as a tool for liberation from the grip of exoticism, orientalist reduction or unimaginative global indifference. As Anne-Marie McManus eloquently puts it, "Khoury's concept of world literature traces a nuanced and multifaceted account of creativity and commitment: one in which literature remains the necessary haven for articulated individual and collective experiences of freedom" (396). As implied in the interview, it is through the imagination that we can devise the bridges and the pillars of an imaginary that could foster international solidarity, based on an appropriation of people's struggles that does not fall prey to reductionist identification, commodification or instrumentalization. Instead, world literature needs to provide us with the discourses and representations that could helps us tackle the counter-worldiness of these portrayals, not for the sake of embracing heterogeneity, but as an important task of the ethical imagination mediating untranslatability within the world system.

I would like to come back to the notion of spectrality, viewed in relation to the universalizing tendency of late capitalism. In order to do so, I am going to resort to Karim Mattar's conceptualization of world literature and her insights into the place of the Middle Eastern novel within these global networks of circulation. Mattar shows that the peripheries of the world-system (a term employed mostly in Immanuel Wallerstein's sense, as the dynamics of "the worldwide division of labour") have a particular way of exporting and reproducing the cultural models of world literature. As she points out, in the peripheries, world literature encompasses those meanings, forms of expression and models that supersede local forms and the life-worlds mirrored by these portrayals. Thus, the local does not simply get to be represented in world literature, but instead it manifests as a "specter" or a "trace". This means that world literature contains or generates, from within a logic of spectrality, its own forms of resistance to universalizing assimilation drives. The originality of Mattar's

argument stems from the idea that, although it is embedded in it, world literature is not simply complicit to global capitalist modernity. Thus, Mattar does not regard the Middle Eastern novel solely in terms of its unilateral relation to the colonial/imperial dynamic, but rather as reflecting "the wider trajectory of the periphery's incorporation into modernity via literature" (49). In this frame, the Arabic-Islamic life-world manifests itself as a trace or spectre in the Middle Eastern novel, gaining shape and meaning only within the logic of spectrality characterizing literature. In the interview with Sonja Mejcher, Khoury mentions having sought a new kind of narrative through his literary works, one "that was neither a repetition of the glorious Arab past nor an imitation of the modern Western novel." This remark helps us better grasp Mattar's insight into how local literature is being produced as an "other" which does not entirely belong to the local interpretative pattern or experience, nor to the worldliness of world literature. One of the topics in *Children of the Ghetto* that best illustrates this logic of spectrality is the narrator's relation to the homeland which resists symbolization, being perceived both as a "skin" (or a material reality) and a fictional story that disavows the memory of the homeland. Moreover, the stories of the Nakba included in the novel and the attempt to give a representation to the silenced memory of Palestinian survivors is conveyed through the same logic of spectrality. For example, Dannoun suggests that by trying to write the story of the Nakba he is hiding his life "among the corpses of words", showing how the struggle for survival (both biological and cultural) gets to be articulated within the "corpse of a language" (Khoury 194). The spectrality of legend in relation to history, the muted perspective, the uncertainties of stories of origin, all come into play in Elias Khoury's novel, pointing towards how world literature produces the 'local' as a spectre, but, at the same time, acknowledging the fact that imagination is haunted by "the memory and the imagination of others" (Khoury 310) in an imaginative way which gives rise to counter-worldings.

In conclusion, Elias Khoury's works of fiction shed light on the alternative global geographies of heritage that can be traced back to the need of recognizing world literature's logic of spectrality and the imagination's task of tackling the excess of the world system. This idea helps us better grasp the role that imagination (understood in a broader sense, as illustrated in this paper) plays in unveiling the logic of the abyss within the coherent, unechoing narrative landscape of cultural memory. I would rather use Richard Kearney's powerful statements as a conclusion I have also reached, investigating Elias Khoury's imaginative rewriting of narratives of the past:

> "The narrative relation of self to other—which imagination recollects from the historical past and projects into the historical future–is a story which cannot be brought to an end. It is a story irreducible to both the fiats of transcendental subjectivity and the globalizing Logic of the Simulacrum. We must go on telling it if we are to make the postmodern imagination *human* again." (396)

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