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Science Fiction, Rational Enchantment, and Arabic Literature
By Aya Labanieh

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By Wessam Elmeligi, Ph.D

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“Cached memories”: Spatiotemporal (Dis)ruptures and Postmemorial Absence in *Palestine*
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Cover Art



Cover Art: *Belonging* by Liala Amin

Letter from the Editors

The relative ease of publishing in the Internet age is just one of many factors that has enabled SF to take off in the developing world. The comparative democratization of publishing only raises the supply. The Internet has also driven up demand for SF in the developing world, and not only because residents of regions hitherto less than well-known for SF production are able to access literature and film, whether carefully translated, inconsistently dubbed, or somewhere in between. While the original *Star Wars* trilogy is at least partially responsible for the blossoming of SF across the developing world, demand for works of local origin is also driven by political conditions—and with respect to the Arabic-speaking world, this continues to be the case.

A dominant theory of how SF works is Darko Suvin's notion of *cognitive estrangement*, where "cognitive" refers to the scientific plausibility of the outlandish elements of the story: usually, the question is whether those elements are plausible within the world depicted in the text or film, rather than whether they meet rigorous scientific standards in the real world. Faster-than-light travel, for example, is pure fantasy as far as our current understanding of physics is concerned, but in SF, it's generally assumed that the problem has been solved, so we can call it "cognitive." The estrangement originally derives from avant-garde theatre, notably that of Brecht: its effect is to defamiliarize the familiar—to hold up to society a distorting mirror so that we might see how very strange are the beliefs we consider customary. For example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts a planet where people are neuters 27 days per month and then become male or female the other three days, not only because it makes for a smashing story, but also in order to hold up that distorting mirror to the extent that people here on Earth associate gender with biological sex.

Estrangement can be a means of political as well as social critique. This is not unknown in Anglo-American SF: consider the long tradition of alternative political futures, from the militaristic neo-monarchy of David Weber's Honor *Harrington* series to the post-scarcity communo-hedonism of Iain M. Banks *Culture* novels.

These stories and so many others depict societies that pique our interest both because they're well-written and internally consistent, but furthermore, because they reflect on our own political systems. For the most part, however, people in developed nations have strong legal protections for direct reflections upon and critiques of their political systems. People in the developing world often do not have these protections—and in the case of the Arabic-speaking world, not only is their freedom of speech not protected, but there are ruinous, painful, or sometimes even fatal consequences for direct critiques.

SF in the Arabic-speaking world, then, in part grows steadily more popular precisely because estrangement enables critique to have plausible deniability. Write a social-realist novel with an incompetent, violent buffoon as dictatorial president, and the security forces might come to your door; write an SF novel about an alien society run by those same buffoons, and it becomes more difficult for the regime to accuse you of sedition without looking like fools. Modern Arabic literary fiction has a long tradition of this sort of estranged critique, so using the tropes of SF to accomplish their goals was an easy jump for Arabic-speaking writers.

This sort of serious political critique is not the only reason SF has grown in popularity in the Arabic-speaking world. A thousand years ago, scientific and technological development was centered in the Arabic-speaking world, whereas now, new developments are absorbed (or imposed) from without. This produces all manner of complex emotions; SF literature is one way to address these. Still more importantly, genre fiction has grown increasingly respectable in Arabic literature in recent decades: some Arabic SF is just... fun. In this issue of the journal, we present to you a number of different perspectives on SF from the Arabic-speaking and greater Muslim worlds: we hope that these articles provide you information on the genre and inspire you to take advantage of some of the increasingly numerous titles available in translation.

- Ian Campbell & Ibtisam Abujad
Guest Editors, MOSF *Journal of Science Fiction*

Reflections

Science Fiction, Rational Enchantment, and Arabic Literature

Aya Labanieh, Columbia University

The Arab world is known for pioneering a plethora of literary genres and forms: one reflexively imagines the couplets of pining ghazal from the seventh century that rippled across the Asian continent, or the fantastical stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* that mutated through eighteenth-century Orientalism from low-brow and largely oral entertainment to European romanticism and gothica. One could also consider the annual Ramadan soap operas radiating from the film industries of Cairo and Damascus; genres not invented in the region, but indigenized and ritualized across the Middle East, with the inks of many sheikhs spilling to censure the televisual commercialization of the holy month.¹ One generic mode that Arabic literary and popular culture is not well-known for, however, is science fiction—a genre more closely associated with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, in the wake of the scientific revolution.

Debates about the “real” and “first” Arabic origins of and influences on Western science fiction are rife; al-Farabi’s tenth-century *Opinions of the Residents of a Splendid City*, Ibn Tufail’s twelfth-century *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, and Ibn al-Nafis’ thirteenth-century *Theologus Autodidactus* are sometimes described as prototypes of science fiction, due to their emphases on spontaneous generation and utopian futurism. At the same time, Zakariya al-Qazwini’s thirteenth century tale of *Awaj bin Anfaq* and the stories of *Sinbad the Sailor* engage in imaginations of interplanetary travel or alien life. But these retrospective debates over origins, fascinating as they may be, are not my primary interest. Rather, it is the genre’s essentially futuristic questions that prompt me to ask: how does Arabic science fiction deviate from the entrenched themes and tensions of its Western counterpart? What historical relations to science, technology, and dystopia lead modern Middle Eastern writers to diverge from or complicate the generic expectations of traditional science fiction?

While there is no easy or exhaustive answer to these

questions, a wealth of Arabic science fiction texts explicitly or implicitly grapple with the paradoxes of Middle Eastern modernity. Emile Habibi’s 1974 *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Pessoptimist*, suggests that the only solution for the Palestinian caught under Israeli occupation is alien abduction—an escape route that serves as an inspirational precursor for the 2019 futurist anthology, *Palestine +100*, whose twelve authors likewise displace the conflict onto parallel universes, digital uprisings, and VR technology. Meanwhile, Egyptian writer Nihad Sharif uses aliens in “A Woman in a Flying Saucer” (1981) as a way to contend with colonial invasion and extraction, while Sonallah Ibrahim’s *The Committee*, published the same year, transforms multinational corporations into a type of omnipotent, omnipresent, non-human entity that brings about an Egyptian dystopia, a theme also picked up in Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* (2013) and Ahmed Naji’s *Using Life* (2014). In the Gulf, *Iraq+100* (2016) escapes Iraq’s dismal present through time-travel and robots, while Ahmad Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), which I discuss later in this piece, does so through the possibility of becoming undead. What these and other such works have in common is that they deal with the paradoxes foisted upon the modern Arab world and what may be termed as Arab modernity’s ample and ambivalent rational enchantments.

Though modernity was first characterized by Max Weber as a “disenchantment” that goes hand-in-hand with the decline of religious belief and practice and the rise of secular forms of life and management (such as bureaucracy and the state), postcolonial theorists have long contested this thesis, pointing to the increase in religious observance in modernizing states around the world. However, these scholars have adamantly insisted that the type of religious observance in these states is not a “backward” relic of the past, stubbornly lingering in the present,² but something entirely new: a hybridized, modern spirituality, inflected by technological advancements, print capitalism, digital media, postco-

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lonial nation-state ideologies, and capitalist globalization. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1999) describes the voting citizen-peasant in India, the largest democracy known to history, as inhabiting a modern political sphere, but one that does not follow the same “secular-rational calculations inherent to modern conceptions of the political” (p. 11); instead, his political sphere is enchanted, and many of his political actions are motivated by spirits, gods, and local religious traditions. Such an enchanted sphere “pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universalist narratives of capital” or stages of history within which the peasant is “anachronistic” or “premodern.” The same can be said of the Middle East, in which modern religious manifestations are just as rooted in seventh-century Quranic scripture as in viral WhatsApp memes, Western narratives of linear historical progress, petroleum colonization, and Coca Cola.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the literary genre of science fiction has proven to be an apt tool for making sense of lingering, shifting, and increasing enchantments in the modern Middle Eastern world. Even in its Western forms, the genre harnesses utopic or dystopic imagination to follow a rational train of thought to its extremes, engaging with the fascinating or horrifying futuristic consequences of scientific experimentation, technological advancement, or extraterrestrial life. Building on Darko Suvin’s infamous definition of science fiction as principally a dialectic of “estrangement and cognition,” Carl Freedman (2000, p. 17) insists that the genre, as compared to fantasy, must “account rationally for its imagined world and for the connections as well as the disconnections of the latter to our own empirical world.” Insufficient as all generic definitions may be, one can easily see the resonance between Suvin’s “estrangement and cognition” and the aforementioned “rational enchantment.” Arriving at the miraculous through a meticulous scientific method, using step-by-step “research” as a means of uncovering an otherworldly truth—these are the trappings of the genre; ones perfectly suited to postcolonial subjects grappling with a supposedly sterile, secular, and scientific Arab modernity, only to arrive at its absurd limits.

In its Arabic iterations, science fiction rationally accounts for its “estrangements” from empirical reality, but does so in a doubled form: an embodied estrangement from the modern real, and the modern real’s estrangement from “modernity” as an aspirational ideology or developmental project. Arabic science fiction is thus quintessentially postcolonial because of this “double estrangement.”³ Informed by its empirical position in the Global South, it uses the estrangement baked into the genre to interrogate not just the modern, dysfunctional reality, but also the paradoxical “modern” values (linear march of progress, industrialization, economic development, statehood, independence, human rights) through which that dysfunctional reality came to exist. In the words of Talal Asad (2003, p.14), the question one must put to modernity is not why it is a misdescription, but rather why it has become “hegemonic as a political goal.” Modernity as a civilizational goal is a target of critique and satire just as much as the miscarriages of that goal on Arab soil.

A useful example through which to explore this double estrangement is a comparison between Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein*, held by many to be one of the founding texts of science fiction, and Ahmad Saadawi’s 2013 retelling of the story, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. In Shelley’s text, the Blochian novum or “radical novelty” that estranges the reader from her nineteenth-century Europe and inducts her into a new, science-fictional world is the biotechnology of electricity as the source of life (Freedman, 2001, p. 79–88). The young scientist Victor Frankenstein is seized by the diabolical desire to create, and upon stitching body parts from disparate graves together into a ghastly whole and running a current through it, his undead Creature draws breath. The worlds of science, bioethics, theology, and fatherhood are ruptured by this act: what does one owe to the life that emanates from a laboratory? And if science is a form of rational enchantment as opposed to an objective, rational truth, perhaps it, too, should be subject to checks, balances, and taboos?

The stakes of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are equally high, but the new, science-fictional world it creates produces a doubled estrangement from the postco-

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lonial reality of Baghdad after the US's 2003 invasion and subsequent civil war. The counterpart to Victor the scientist is Hadi the junk-dealer—an impoverished social outcast who loses his best friend Nahem to a suicide bombing. When he goes to the morgue to collect his friend's body, he is callously told to pick whatever assortment of fleshy pieces he would like, as the daily volume of suicide victims' fragmented corpses makes it impossible to identify bodies or return them to their families. It is here that Hadi begins collecting exploded limbs and stitching them into a whole. His Creature, or "Whatsitsname," comes to life and embarks on a mission of revenge against the cause of death for the original owner of every dead part constructing its monstrous body. There is no emphasis on electricity as the operating novum here, nor is routine bombing perceived as a shocking advancement in technology—rather, the radical novelty lies in the potential for bombings to create life. Though one is estranged from modern Baghdadi reality when one witnesses the Whatsitsname rise as a whole, drag its stitched, rotting legs off of the bed and ambling through the streets, one is not estranged from its fragments, or from the modern circumstances that rendered it fragmentary in the first place. One's estrangement through some extreme elements of the text is thus meant to shock one as much as one's lack of estrangement by others; in other words, one is estranged from estrangement itself, forced to realize the disastrous conditions one has accepted as normal and familiar for modern Iraq.

Thus, Arabic science fiction is a continuation and, in some ways, an intensification of the Western genre. Its double estrangement from the present questions not just the world at hand, but also the ideal world that is promised through modernity. Often, the dark Middle Eastern present is escaped by seeking refuge in a darker but (at the very least) less predictable future: a future in which laws, governments, and peace talks may not be as intransigent and painfully unchanging. "Hope" in these books is not optimistically figured in utopic transformation, but in difference: a novum by which to raise new questions, imagine new landscapes. But what newly anticipated answers might this genre give us? And how do they overlap with recent surges in

science fiction elsewhere in the Global South and diasporic culture, like Chinese and Indian science fiction, or the generative Afrofuturistic genre? Are these science fictions postcolonial in intersecting ways, or do their relations to modernity diverge? Are they estranged from one another in their dialogue with a historically Western genre, or do their uses of high-tech, galactic travel, and posthuman subjects make space for equally innovative solidarities? These are promising South-South interconnections for future scholarship to explore.

Of course, "gaiety" signifies both joy and queerness, and *Blackfish City* is not only fun but inclusive. *Blackfish City* features a lesbian couple, gay men (more than one of whom has the breaks, a clear analogue to AIDS), and a nonbinary person. Perhaps more importantly, the novel treats them as a regular part of the world, and these characters' identities are normalized without being erased. This is not a story primarily about LGBTQ identity, then, but one featuring people with a variety of identities and desires. *Blackfish City* does not posit queer identities as merely problematic nor does it rely on queer saviors. It's not that only LGBTQ people could change the world, but also that the openness that makes room for them spills over into an openness to alternative ways of being and thinking in other arenas as well—including challenges to capitalism and colonialism.

The queerness embedded in the novel also involves engaging deeply with nonhuman beings. Nanobonding, which irrevocably ties a human to an animal, is central to *Blackfish City*. This process creates deep and meaningful cross-species relationships, but it is also dangerous—especially if the connection is disrupted. For instance, one of the main characters was nanobonded to a polar bear as a child and then separated from his animal, which caused him psychological pain for years. Without knowing of this past, he thinks of himself as an animal: "He was amphibious. He was a polar bear" (Miller, 2018, p. 21). He carries the strength and power of the polar bear in his sense of self, but he is not able to understand this or feel whole. In the end, the bonds between human and nonhuman are crucial to revolution within the city itself and to finding

Rational Enchantment, continued

a way to fix what has been broken in the larger world and environment. The novel tells a story of hope in a damaged world, and this story cannot be told without the embrace of queer relationships, both human and more-than-human, demonstrating that “certain queer affects and sensibilities [...] are not just *compatible* with politics but *inseparable* from them” (Seymour, 2018, p. 123).

Miller’s novel indicates that environmental SF can be more than dystopian but must still acknowledge the dangers we face going forward. Allyse Knox-Russell describes “*a futurity without optimism*—that is, a futurity cleared of fantasies projected from the (patriarchal, anthropocentric) past and thus a futurity radically open to difference and change” (Knox-Russell, 2018, p. 218, italics in original). The hopefulness of *Blackfish City* is located in this kind of futurity, which functions by rejecting heteronormativity and anthropocentrism and creating a space open to both queerness and reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world. This openness also makes room for a more joyful encounter with environmental SF itself. There is a lot to be afraid of, but—as both Miller and queer environmental futures more broadly indicate—there’s also a lot to live for.

Notes

¹ This critique is fairly widespread, as it is thought to distract from religious observance during the month. Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* (2011) discusses the opposition of daiyas, or female religious leaders, in 1980s Cairo to the watching of Ramadan series in favor of pursuing piety. Walter Armbrust (2006) has also written a relevant chapter titled “Synchronising Watches: The State, the Consumer, and Sacred Time in Ramadan Television.”

² Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) strongly repudiates a “subtraction” thesis about religion; Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha, and many others from the Subaltern Studies group insist on forms of religious belief and practice that are quintessentially modern.

³ Ian Campbell, in his book *Arab Science Fiction* (2018), uses the term “double estrangement”—while I borrow it from him, I do not agree with his definition of the two estrangements as (1) estrangement from Western science and technology which is perceived as entering nefariously from without, often in colonial forms and (2) estrangement from one’s own “stagnant” Arab culture and religion from within. While the book has worthwhile insights and rightfully seeks to fill a gap in Arabic science-fiction analysis, it sometimes falls back on stereotypes of Arab societies.

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A Journey of Erasing the Self

Meltem Şafak, University of Georgia

After three years of leaving it aside, I came back to Thomas Disch's "The Asian Shore" as a result of homesickness and nostalgia that accompanied me with the Coronavirus outbreak. Disch wrote this novella after his three-month-long trip to Istanbul in 1967. He depicts some interesting details about this ancient city in a very close proximity to where I was born and have spent several years of my life. My first encounter with Disch's work was in 2017 in New York City. While working on this mysterious story, I developed a weird empathy for the protagonist, John Benedict Harris, who is a New Yorker becoming a Turk in Istanbul. Centering around the theme of identity loss, "The Asian Shore" provides an intriguing discussion around the relevant-to-our-time notions of the self, the other, and the arbitrariness of identity.

The novella shapes around John, an architect who works on a project called Homo Arbitrus. The main thesis of his study considers arbitrariness as the essence of architecture. According to that, the artifacts of a city have been placed arbitrarily. John wants to apply his theory on architecture to human nature; hence, he plans a six month trip to Istanbul to be an alien in an unfamiliar environment. His physical and spiritual journey constructs an attempt at proving his thesis: identity is arbitrarily constructed. Before he "logically" proves or demonstrates his thesis, his loss of identity entails a breakdown in logic itself. John strangely becomes the first and only test subject of his own studies.

Identity has plenty of definitions that agree on one particular phenomenon, in which it is defined as the relationship of the self with the other. According to Francis M. Deng, for example, "[i]dentity is used...to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (Deng, 1995, p. 1) In "The Asian Shore," the dichotomy of the self and the other is established around the binaries of the East and the West. John passes from a Westerner to an Easterner through a chain of physical and men-

tal alterations in his body and mind once he arrives in Istanbul. The different stages that John's identity goes through in the narrative remind me of Samuel Delany's¹ description of building a coherent narrative. According to Delany, in a written text everything starts with a letter. A letter becomes a word. The text is constructed by adding new words to the first one to create a whole and an understandable meaning. (Delany, 2009, 2-5) "The Asian Shore" awakens similar feelings in me, given that John's passing for a new identity requires him to achieve similar milestones.

The first obvious identity shift occurs in the protagonist's name. John's name never comes forward in the first page of the novella, and the narrator refers to him only with the pronoun "he." The reader learns John's full name when he is called "Yavuz"—an ordinary Turkish name—by a mysterious woman who chases John throughout the novella. After this incident, every time the woman calls him "Yavuz," John reminds himself of his full name and his nationality, as he gets suspicious of his true identity: "His name was John. John Benedict Harris. He was an American" (Disch, p. 27) This quote implies that the national identity is strongly attached to someone's proper name, which sets a boundary between the self and the other, the West and the East, and John and Yavuz.

The second sign of the protagonist's transformation is his moustache. One day, John goes to a hamam and realizes he is growing a moustache, particularly the "pala moustache." (Disch, p. 31) John regards this stereotyped moustache as a feature specific to Turkish people. His reflection with the new moustache in the mirror brings out certain ideas and emotions about the artifact of his own face: "It is this, the baroque moustache, not a face, that he sees when he looks in the mirror" (Disch, p. 48) Subsequently, the moustache, which is an arbitrary and transitory facial decoration, alone determines his cultural belonging to Turkishness.

A Journey of Erasing the Self, continued

Clothing occurs as another fundamental component of John's identity shift. He finds a Turkish tailor to have a new suit made. The suit the tailor makes for John fits much better than all his old suits; therefore, the new suit also initiates his distancing from the American identity: "it seems so different from other suits he had worn, so much...smaller. And yet it fitted his figure with the exactness one expects of a tailored suit. (...) When he wore it, he became, to all appearances, a Turk" (Disch, p. 36) This situation also leads the reader to question whether John's body changes, or his memory is false.

John Harris's transformation is completed with a territorial passing. A day before his flight from Istanbul to New York, John decides to visit the islands of Istanbul. His tragedy, or maybe salvation, takes place on the way back to Istanbul when he takes the wrong ferry, which goes to Yalova. Routing to Yalova instead of Istanbul, he physically passes an Asian territory outside Istanbul—a territory that is not in the borders of John's psychological limits of the West. This coincidence or subliminal choice finalizes John's passing for a different identity. Consequently, John loses all his titles and becomes only "a man" out of this chain of incidents. By losing the names both John and Yavuz, or by his realization of the arbitrariness of these names, he becomes someone else; but not someone specific, not someone special—only "a man."

It is not a coincidence that Istanbul is the central location in the novella. John struggles with his hybridizing identity in a hybrid city. As a center, Istanbul has witnessed many encounters and contradictions of the self and the other. Geographically and culturally, the city has been a connection point between the East and the West. Istanbul, once again, emerges as territorial and also psychological border of the West. The emphasis on this border comes forward when John cannot travel to any other city in Turkey further east than Istanbul, even though his initial plan involves moving toward other Asian countries. The in-betweenness of Istanbul is terrifying enough for John, so moving deeper into the East becomes

something to avoid. Technically, when John passes the Bosphorus of Istanbul that divides European and Asian continents to visit Uskudar—a neighborhood in the Asian side of Istanbul—he steps on the Asian continent. However, the cultural identity of the city seems more important than its geographical location, leading John to identify the whole city as more of a Westerner. Eventually, John's fears of assimilation turn into reality, and he gets fully blended into this alien and hybrid entity. John fails to resist embracing the patterns of Turkishness.

One final anecdote that is worth to mention is Thomas Disch's special interest in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk is the founder of the Turkish nation-state as well as the national hero of Turkish people. He is particularly famous for his reforms of language, clothing, and religion for the sake of building Turkish national identity. Disch mentions Atatürk's name three times in "The Asian Shore" (pp. 26, 30, 41) First, John reads Atatürk's biography and describes it as long and dull. After that, some more negatively sided criticism of Atatürk's reforms comes forward. I could not stop myself from speculating about whether Disch was referring to Atatürk to demonstrate an accurate example of the arbitrariness of a (national) identity by focusing on the aspects of being a "real Turk." Turkishness was constructed almost a hundred years ago by the ideas, ideologies, and guidance of a single man. Even though before then this ethnic group existed in the Ottoman Empire, they did not have a nation-state or a national unity. When the Republic of Turkey was established, the main national and ethnic components of Turkishness had been determined and processed. In the sense of creating patterns and turning them into a true identity for a newly invented nation, John's transformation reminds me of Atatürk's reforms—that sometimes led to quite oppressive regulations for many people—to create a national identity in almost perfect uniformity.

All in all, initially it seems easy to identify with this mundane character, John, trying to adjust to a new physical and cultural environment. Further into the

A Journey of Erasing the Self, continued

story, however, the plot takes us to an uncanny climate where the limits of our world are reconstructed, and some occurrences that are impossible in our world become possible. Apart from its genre-bending skills, “The Asian Shore” is a fascinating reading experience for highlighting the representation of Turkey and Turkish identity with all irony from the lens of an American character and with the words of an American writer. More fascinating than that is my very personal experience of writing this paper in New York as someone from Turkey—although, I am not sure if I have integrated into New York as completely as John Benedict Harris blends into Istanbul.

Notes

¹An American author and literary critic. He has a special interest in Thomas Disch’s literature.

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Islands, Rooms, and Queues: Three Tropes in Arabic Science Fiction

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Abstract: This study traces the development of three trajectories in Arabic science fiction illustrated by four narratives. Starting with Ibn Tufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, the article analyzes the scientific focus of this 12th century philosophical narrative, written at the peak of Islamic Andalusian philosophy. The island motif exemplifies the unity of creation in a scientific pursuit of spirituality. Youssef Ezeddin Eassa, a pioneer of 20th century Arabic science fiction, wrote short stories, novels, and radio dramas expounding on the philosophical ideas of earlier Arabic literature. The article studies the Kafkaesque motif in his short story "The Waiting Room," and the grotesque alternative reality in his novel *The Facade*. The last trope is exemplified by Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, a dystopian narrative of endless queues, where life is stifled by surveillance and control. In all the narratives, there is an invisible force watching the characters. The motifs of island, room, and queue represent examples of the attempt in Arabic science fiction to grapple with the crisis of isolation and to understand and interact with higher powers, whether they are benevolent or evil. This article reads all four narratives from a narratological lens, examining how the writers construct their visions.

Keywords: science fiction, Arabic science fiction, narrative, Ibn Tufayl, *The Queue*, Ezzedin Eassa, place, power

This study examines the narrative intersections of power and place in Arabic science fiction literature in four narratives. Starting with Ibn Tufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, the article analyzes the scientific focus of this 12th century philosophical narrative written at the peak of Islamic Andalusian philosophy. The island motif exemplifies the unity of creation and the almost pantheistic existence of humanity within nature, in an amalgam of scientific pursuits and spirituality. The article then moves to Youssef Ezeddin Eassa, one of the pioneers of 20th century Arabic science fiction and radio drama (*ʿAbd el-fatāḥ*, 1988). His Kafkaesque 1974 short story, *Ghurfat al-ʿintizār*, published in English as "The Waiting Room" in 2002, and 1981 dystopian novel, *Al-wājiḥa*, published in English as *The Façade* in 2014, expound on philosophical ideas of creation, life, and death through the space of closed appointment rooms and utopian cities that turn into grotesque nightmarish spaces. The last trope is exemplified by Basma Abdel Aziz's 2013 *Al-ṭābūr*, published in English as *The Queue* in 2016. An Egyptian psychiatrist, novelist, and artist, Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* is an apocalyptic narrative of one endless queue, based on the aftermath of the Arab Spring, where visions of life are stifled by surveillance and control. In all four narratives, there is an invisible force watching as the characters struggle to survive. The motifs of island, room,

city, and queue represent attempts to grapple with the crisis of isolation. They also provide a way to describe an awareness of higher powers, and endeavors by the characters to fathom and even interact with them.

The authors foreground the functionality of place by linking the shape of the main place to the narrative progress, whether circular or linear, as well as by offering alternative dimensions that act as further extensions of the main place, whether as shadows of that place or as mysterious destinations. The significance of place in all the narratives is enhanced by narrative perspectives, which focus either on the individual protagonist, acting as the chosen one who might fail or succeed in his quest, or the community, which behaves collectively. The intersection of the individual and the community creates conflict that remains unresolved until the end of each narrative. The science fiction tropes of place, narrative quest, solitary protagonist, and hostile community are interconnected by their subjugation to some form of higher power, which is spiritual or political, or possibly both. Such power ranges from favorable to despotic but remain, for the most part, controversial. I will highlight the role of two narrative perspectives—that of the individual and the communal—in enhancing the intersection of the manifestations of power and place.

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Manifestations of Power

The dominant powers within each of the stories have specific features that figure prominently in each narrative. All manifestations of such power appear to be omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. The dominant powers willingly distance themselves from other characters and then “inadvertently” interfere in ways that remain enigmatic to the characters, who never see or meet the force that rules over their lives. Details of how the nature of each power is perceived differ from one narrative to another. It is the sole creative force that distinguishes the Abrahamic, monotheistic deity in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the feared and revered City Owner in *The Façade*, the low-profile doctors and nurses in “The Waiting Room,” and the sinister and bureaucratic government in *The Queue*. It ranges from a single invisible figure to a secret board or committee. It is a singular force reflecting the monotheistic doctrine in the spiritualized version of the search, stated as the Islamic creator in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and hinted at in the thinly disguised symbol of the City Owner in *The Façade*. It is a Kafkaesque group reflecting more material versions of power, as the medical team that calls upon the patients waiting in the appointment room in “The Waiting Room,” and as Gate, which replaces political authority in *The Queue*.

The power is depicted in the light of the moral judgment of the protagonist and the rest of the characters that form the community in each narrative. It is a force of good in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the Creator worthy of worship by the intellectual savage Hayy. It is highly controversial in *The Façade*, in which the protagonist, M N, cannot decide whether the City Owner is a force of good or evil, as he hears contradictory views from three men. One of these men, who represents an archangel of sorts, calls the Owner benevolent. The second, who seems to symbolize a fallen Satanic figure, refers to the City Owner as evil. The third one, an intellectual vagabond ignored by everyone, claims that there is no owner.

In “The Waiting Room,” this power is eerily neutral, rarely discussed at all by the patients. They take it

for granted that they need to succumb to a medical team behind the closed door, although none of them has ever seen that team, but only surmise it must be a group of doctors since they are in a clinic. The power is increasingly and aggressively villainized in *The Queue*. It is presented as an Orwellian, organized, and dictatorial governing elite, which has an iron grip over everyday life and controls everything (including food, education, media, and even hospital reports). In all four narratives, it is possible to detect a trait of Arabic science fiction that depicts society as deteriorating, serving as a form of internal critique, as has been described by Ian Campbell (2018). This is evident in Ibn Tufayl’s critique of the Muslim societies of his time, and similar critiques of modern urbanized communities in Eassa’s narratives, and, most recently, Abdel Aziz’s focus on the aftermath of Arab spring and the hegemony of political regimes in the region.

In a study of Islamic ideology as a dominating power, Sabry Hafez compares the long-lasting effect of the Caliphate to Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra. The idea of the simulacra, argues Hafez, focuses on making “the real coincide with its simulation models” (Hafez 2015, p. 32). Similarly, the power of a lost empire still defines its followers and “informs their ideologies and nightmares” (32). The concept of the simulacrum is reflected in the looming presence of power in the four narratives in this article—powers that remain largely unfathomable and unseen, but are capable of manifesting themselves in the dreams of the believers (in the case of benevolent powers) or their nightmares (if they are the victims of maleficent powers).

Individual and Communal Perspectives

Two of the narratives, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, focus on the protagonist, and provide narratorial insight into the consciousness of the lone character as he embarks on a journey of discovery that involves both self-knowledge and an attempt to understand the world around him. This search leads him to an ambitious endeavor to unravel the mystery of the powerful force dominating that world. The sole protagonist is openly on a quest for truth in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The*

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Façade. In Ibn Tufayl's novel, the protagonist's name is a straightforward reference to the author's intent to present the narrative as a philosophical treaty. *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*'s name means "Alive the Son of Awake," denoting a spiritual and intellectual awakening for which Ibn Tufayl is arguing. The narrative engages with the ideas of theological and natural philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Ghazaly, two of the pillars of Islamic philosophy of his age. *Ḥayy* is the epitome of the man-on-island motif. *Ḥayy* can be seen as the European concept of *tabula rasa*, referring to the infant washed ashore and raised on an island. (Campbell, 2018). His birth is an allegory for the scientific theories of existence as compared to Abrahamic creation narratives. Ibn Tufayl attempts to reconcile both by accepting either of them as his protagonist's origin story. He writes that *Ḥayy* could have been generated on the island when natural elements were in harmony:

I bring it to your attention solely by way of corroborating the alleged possibility of a man's being engendered in this place without father or mother, since many insist with assurance and conviction that *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* was one such person who came into being on that island by spontaneous generation. (Ibn Tufayl, p. 105)

He also writes that *Ḥayy* could have been the secret child of the sister of an unfair king of a distant kingdom who opposed her marriage. When she delivered her baby, she put him in a box and set him to sail to his destiny in the sea, a clear reference to the Quranic version of the story of Moses. The box lands on an island, opens up, and *Ḥayy* is raised by a deer. He grows up, and as the result of his mother-deer's death, begins to question the relationship of the soul and the physical body, a thought process that prompts him to explore the island and study the intriguing secrets of life. His scientific observations of plants and animals lead him to the realization that a supreme being must have created all of the world.

The protagonist of Eassa's *The Façade*, Meem Noon, is only given initials of the Arabic alphabet, like all the characters in the novel. Together, the two letters can make the word "man" (which means the interog-

ative "who") or "min" (which means "from") depending on the diacritics used that can change the pronunciation and the meaning of the word. In the published translation of the novel, the name is translated as M N. As this article refers to the translated edition, for purposes of clarity, Meem Noon will be referred to as M N. Indeed, M N arrives at the City as an adult with no memories, background, family, or even his name, for "he does not recall where he came from nor why he came [...] He does not recall what method of transportation has brought him to this city" (Eassa 2014, 1). He finds out that he is a guest at the city for one year. No one is allowed to answer his questions except the Information Office. There, he writes his questions on a piece of paper and submits it to a hole in the wall and waits for a paper slip with answers. He wants to know where he is, who he is, and where he comes from. The answer is that he comes from the unknown and that his name is the initials M N. His quest is stated bluntly on the answer paper slip: to seek truth,

-One: The name of the City means nothing. Call it whatever you like.

-Two: The mission you have come for in this City is: To search for the truth.

-Three: Where have you come from: You have come from an unknown place.

-Four: The grave secret, which everybody is keeping from you, is: All people of this city, with no exceptions at all, are sentenced to execution.

-Five: The time you shall be staying in this city: All your life, until it is time for your execution sentence to be carried out. (Eassa 2014, p. 58)

The first fact that he learns of is the Execution, a terrifying verdict randomly and instantly hurled at anyone in the City with no trial and no crime. Everyone at some point gets a sign that they will be executed and they suddenly die. Men in dark suits show up in dark cars, and carry the body to a pit called the Sewer. The Execution is the City's equivalent to death, a fate that is so unavoidable that people try to adapt to it. The decision to execute anyone is at the discretion of the City

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Owner only. As much as the supreme power in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* is introduced through the death of his mother-deer, so the City Owner in *The Façade* is introduced to M N through the Execution. However, Ḥayy gradually sees the Necessarily Existent Being as a creator, a giver of life, not a being. M N learns that the citizens of the City are all toys made by the City Owner, and sees him more as a puppeteer. The narrative presents M N in a nightmarish setting, invoking the dream-like mood that can be reminiscent of what Sabry Hafez refers to as *al-ru'ya* or “visionary dream” (Hafez 2012, p. 274).

The two other narratives are community-centered in perspective. In Eassa’s short story, “The Waiting Room,” a number of patients are waiting in a clinic. When they start talking to each other, they discover that some of them have no idea they are in a clinic. They walked in randomly when they saw people inside the waiting room. Every now and then, someone opens the only door in the room, which they assume leads to the examination room or the doctor’s office, and calls on one of the patients. Once the patient goes in, they never show up again. No one knows where they go. The patients play cards as they are called in, one after another. They refer to the doctors in plural, thus the novel is populated by groups—the patients and the medical team—without there being a single protagonist. Like *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, their fate is completely in the hands of the medical team. Truth, as is the case in the two novels, is hidden. Yet, the characters in this short story do not try to discover the truth. They are aware of their ignorance of what is happening. But they do not seek to unravel the secret. Instead, they are occupied by their card game, which they play with money until they start quarreling. The communal reaction is distinctly opposite to that of the single protagonists. The community is sheep-like, displaying mob mentality, with vague awareness that they are being led to an unknown, and potentially deadly fate. The individual protagonists are restless, persistently seeking knowledge.

In Abdel Aziz’s novel *The Queue*, a formidable structure referred to as the Gate seems to manifest itself to separate the governing elite from the rest of an un-

identified country teeming with everyday struggles). The government is a bureaucratic, authoritarian regime. Its strong hold on people’s lives is guaranteed by monopolizing all vital activities. No citizen can be hired or receive medical employment or even food without the Certificate of True Citizenship, a document that declares those who earn it are free of any political activism. The need to possess this document ensures total obedience by the people. The Gate stipulates the following,

[Services] shall not be granted, except to those who prove beyond doubt, and with irrefutable evidence, their full commitment to sound morals and comportment, and to those who are issued an official certificate confirming that they are a righteous citizen, or, at least, a true citizen. Certificates of True Citizenship that do not bear a signature from the Booth and the seal of the Gate shall not be recognized under any circumstances. (Abdel Aziz, p. 1308)

As one would expect, the media is state-run, and we gradually discover that the Gate bolstered its control in the aftermath of a failed uprising by some activists who were crushed by the security apparatus. Due to the impossible red tape and bureaucratic centrality of the Gate, an endless queue has formed in front of the foreboding construct, a line of people that stretches across the borders of the city. Shops, religious sermons, reporters, new relationships, and other facets of life (and even death) take place in the queue. While there is no single protagonist for this novel, several characters are highlighted. They stand close to each other in the same section of the queue, and whenever one of them leaves for a necessary errand, she or he makes sure the person before and after them keep their place in line. As we follow their intertwining stories, we unravel the Gate’s invasive surveillance, which is capable of knowing even the color of one citizen’s underwear. Like the patients in “The Waiting Room,” the citizens in the queue are aware of the stifling power of the Gate, and are aware of their ignorance, but they are too distracted by their mundane bureaucratic needs for certificates, reports, financial aid, and other documents to care. Consequently, facing no resistance, the Gate

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strengthens its control over the endless queue and the lives of the people standing in it. People spend significant amounts of time in the queue, waiting for their turn to get some paperwork done that makes their most basic needs possible. Those who need to leave the queue briefly make agreements with the ones before and after them to preserve their position. Shops and other businesses started opening on both sides of the queue. The queue has become so long it stretches outside the city where the Gate is situated. It has become the central figure in many people's daily activities.

Individual Perspective or The Individual as Protagonist

The individual protagonists, Ḥayy and M N, are carefully portrayed with psychological depth that is evident in the changes their personalities undergo because of their interactions with their respective worlds. Neither of them knows their true origins and both learn to grapple with their realities. Ḥayy is a well-developed personality. His growth against the natural backdrop of the island contextualizes his characterization on multiple levels, mainly intellectually and spiritually. He grows into a scientist and believer, and, judging by his initial physical confrontation with Absāl (who is regarded as an intruder by Ḥayy), his physical growth is also impressive. Ḥayy becomes an archetypal model citizen, another trope in science fiction—specifically cyberpunk, where the character is usually introduced as the object of scientific experiments that lead to super soldiers or some superior human or android form. Indeed, while it is possible to compare Ḥayy to the heroes in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (as discussed by Campbell, 2018), and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, it is possible to see early examples of the experiment on the island-lab motifs in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. Ḥayy is not a super soldier nor an android, but he is close to a fully developed human being, fulfilling the full physical, intellectual, and spiritual potential of humanity. He develops to full potential because he grew up free of human influence, not only physically, but, perhaps even more significantly, intellectually and spiritually as well.

M N, on the other hand, sinks as far as possible. The ultimate peace, faith, strength, and sublimation that Ḥayy exemplifies are reversed in M N, who deteriorates into death after losing his two children, his sanity, and his health out of sheer exhaustion. Where Ḥayy achieves peace, faith, and strength, M N's destiny is torment, skepticism, and weakness. Sublimation is ironically represented in the useless tower where M N works. He dies in his office at the top of the tower, where he physically rises to the top but fails to reach the sublime due to his lack of knowledge. Ḥayy is physically much lower, on the ground in the island, but reaches the sublime through his knowledge.

While the development of the protagonist is central to *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *The Façade*, the connection between the protagonist and the community still has a significant function. In both novels, the community is antagonistic. When Ḥayy meets Absāl on the island, he teaches his new friend all he knows about nature and his approach to a life, leading to the supreme being, who Ḥayy refers to as the Necessity Existent Creator (Ibn Tufayl 141). In return, Absāl takes Ḥayy to his country. There, Ḥayy attempts to guide Absāl's people to the path he and Absāl have adhered to during their stay on the island. Nevertheless, Ḥayy is ignored by the community and returns with Absāl to the island. Ḥayy remains unfazed by the community. In a sense, the loss is theirs, not his. His isolation this time, however, becomes more of a willing self-exile. He retreats to the center of his existence.

Similarly, in *The Façade*, M N's search is consistently impeded by the community. Throughout the narrative, he raises serious questions, a practice discouraged by the terrified residents of the City. His questions were shunned angrily by D, a man who generously invited M N over for dinner at his house and introduced him to his sisters. The sisters try to tell M N the truth and urged their brother to reveal the nature of the Executions to M N, and D angrily tells them to keep quiet (Eassa 2014, 34). Soon after, one of the sisters dies suddenly, providing the first example of an execution that M N witnesses. When M N goes to the Information Office seeking answers to his existential questions

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and receives unsatisfactory information, he voices his exasperation to the clerk. Immediately, people started dying in the street and a natural disaster shakes the City briefly, “at that moment bells echoed everywhere in the city sounding like thunder roars” (Eassa 2014, p. 62). The clerk yells at M N, blaming him for angering the City Owner with his forbidden opinions,

“Look what you’ve done!” she said to M, shaking.

“I’ve done nothing!” cried out M.

“You have made the owner of the city angry.” (Eassa, 2014, p.62)

This incident begins the downward spiral for M N. There is no turning back from that realization.

The community in *The Façade* offers layers of consciousness through its interaction with M N. In the beginning, members of the community are welcoming towards M N as the new guest, offering to give him lifts or invite over for a dinner. Once he falls from grace, people in the streets immediately treat him with hostility, frowning when they see him, avoiding him or even running away. Forced to work at the grindstone to earn a living, M N notices a laughing audience forming outside the window watching his hard labor and the whippings he received (Eassa 2014, p. 97). The cruelty of the public when he becomes a laborer stands in sharp contrast to their generosity when he was a briefly a guest. Later, it changes yet again to something unexpected as it is revealed that the City Owner wants him to search for the truth. When M N reaches the stage where he is recognized by all residents as a truth seeker, he suddenly achieves a messianic status. People revere him and build a tower for him, with dozens of people working for him in the tower, facilitating his message as a truth seeker. Ironically, however, since he is not an employee in the tower dedicated to him, he is not allowed to use the elevator (Eassa 2014, p. 361), he has the smallest office (Eassa 2014, p. 371), and a small bookcase (Eassa 2014, p. 376). His employees burn the books of dead authors and reduce the number of books in his office (Eassa 2014, p. 409). The community’s shifting attitude towards M N mirrors social hypocrisies, especially antagonism towards the

working class, represented by M N’s labor. It can also be seen in their shallow support for intellect and religion, as evidenced by the unnecessarily gigantic tower they build for M N, which in fact makes his job more difficult, for he wastes his entire working hours climbing forty flights until he is exhausted.

The resistance that H̄ayy and M N face from their communities is a mythological and religious trope that found its way to some apocalyptic science fiction narratives. Ranging from Superman’s father, Jor El, to Paul Atreides in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, the protagonist gives prophecies to his people. In some cases, such as Jor-El’s planet, the people respond cynically at their own peril, mirroring an Abrahamic tradition of ignored prophets followed by destructive cosmic punishment that falls upon the cursed cities. In others, the messenger protagonist takes matters into his own hands, acting as the chosen one, such as Paul Atreides. There are also other morbid scenarios in which the communal mob mentality prevails, crushing the prophetic anti-hero’s voice, as seen with John the Savage in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

Another type of protagonist faces off with the community mainly to survive rather than for the good of the people, a plot line more inclined to invasion science fiction novels, such as H. G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*. An interesting take on the lone protagonist character and the island motif is expounded in Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. In *The Façade*, M N is partly reminiscent of Edward Pendrick, the shipwrecked protagonist who finds himself on an island that gradually turns into hell as he discovers Dr. Moreau’s experiments on the inhabitants of the islands. This is quite analogous to M N finding himself in the city at the mercy of its owner and misunderstood by its people, who fail to understand him. H̄ayy demonstrates elements of the noble savage we see in *Brave New World*’s John the Savage, also ridiculed by the community. However, H̄ayy is distinguished by a more solid personality built out of years of solitude and self-learning, leading to the gratification of knowledge as opposed to M N’s tortured soul, lost in the frustrating journey of unreachable truth.

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In that sense, The City Owner, who makes dolls for his own reasons, only to execute them at will is a Moreau-figure and the Necessarily Existent Creator he seeks through both science and spirituality is indeed a creator, but a good one, worthy of Ḥayy and Absāl's faith. It is worth noting that in both novels, communal rejection impacts the final fate of the individual protagonist unexpectedly. Ḥayy achieves his personal goals after he is shunned by the community. Their rejection seems to lead to his personal accomplishment. M N, who suffers rejection throughout the novel, is destroyed only when he is finally accepted and revered by his community. Their approval brings about his downfall.

Communal Perspective or the Community as Protagonist

The two narratives that focus on the communal perspective underline the impact of total lack of freedom on the collective mind of the group. In both narratives, the community is immersed in the rules of the game, as with the patients in "The Waiting Room," literally playing a card game that echoes the random turns of those called by the nurse. Alternatively, the community is coerced into obedience to such an extent that some are eventually brainwashed into acquiescence and even appreciation for the authoritarian rule of the Gate in *The Queue*.

In "The Waiting Room," five patients are described physically, focusing on their age, facial features, and skin color; for instance, we have a man with a long nose, a dark-skinned man, and a stout man. Later, only one young woman joins the patients. When they express their joy that she is keeping them company, she cries and says she is the one who is lonely (Eassa 2002, 133). She then does something that startles everyone:

She started fiddling with her fingers then suddenly burst out into tears, weeping bitterly. She then stood up and started banging at the other room door. The door opened and the face of a smiling man looked out. He motioned to her to enter, so she went in and then the door was shut. (Eassa 2002, p. 134)

Her actions indicate that the examination room can be a metaphor for death, and her going in before her turn is, therefore, a metaphor for an untimely death, possibly suicide. Moreover, her presence accentuates the gender bias in the group as she is outnumbered by the men in the room. What starts as an idle conversation becomes rather aggressive as tensions rise. It is revealed that at least two of the characters have no idea that they are in a clinic (135). One of them states he entered the room when he found people there. They start playing cards, quarrel over bets, and stop playing with money. Then a child enters, claiming he is the grandchild of one of the men who went in the examination room, and the group of patients allows him to join them at the table, occupying his grandfather's seat, thus symbolizing that the clinic has been there for a long time. This is also suggested by the clock on the wall, which does not move.

The nurse, representing the medical team, completely controls communication between the examination room and the waiting room, which is one-sided in the first place since no one reaches anyone in the examination room. The patients wait passively for each patient's turn, and only complain that their turn is not respected, and patients are called in randomly. They seem to take their frustrations out on each other. It is possible to see a political and existential undertone in the structure of the short story. The passivity of the group, the silence of the doctors, the terse instructions delivered through the nurse—are all indicative not only of the total hegemony of the doctors, but also of the community's inability to grasp any purpose of existence. The *Waiting for Godot* type of futile waiting and lack of knowledge portrays an absurdist void, with the medical touch adding a foreboding notion of a sinister finality behind the closed doors of the waiting rooms. The child entering might reflect the mercilessness of the selection to enter the examination room, which can signify anything from death to any other form of loss into an unknown realm. The story ends with one man left, who decides to play by himself, remarking that he has no one to defeat now, while waiting for his turn to enter the examination room:

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The thick moustached man sat by himself, lonely. He started arranging the cards to while the time away. He kept fiddling with the cards. He then re-arranged them again so as to foretell his future. The smiling man looked out of the other room and pointed at him, so he hurried towards the room. (Eassa 2002, p. 140)

It is possible to see a political undertone here as well—specifically post-colonial, with the patients representing colonized, maybe specifically Arab, countries that are selected for occupation one by one, while they waste their time competing with one another.

The second of the two narratives that focus on the communal perspective, *The Queue*, shares elements of the endless wait and the medical horror that encompass “The Waiting Room” as well as what one critic referred to as “totalitarian absurdity” (Machado, 2016). The people in the long queue in front of the Gate managed to form a community, complete with diversity of socio-economic classes as well as religious and political ideologies. In addition, the queue stretches for so long and is considerably slow to the extent that shops and cafes open on both sides of the queue. An event that happened before the story begins still impacts the community at the present time of the novel. A failed uprising, led mainly by young activists, shook the state and apparently led to the erection of the Gate and the stifling bureaucracy that ensued. In the narrative present, most people have been successfully brainwashed enough to turn against the activists, branding them as traitors. Indeed, the protests are referred to in the media as The Disgraceful Events (Abdel Aziz 2016). What is more, it seems the campaign villainizing the rebels is only one stage of a larger scheme. Towards the middle of the narrative, a new media campaign gradually denies the events altogether. This is self-contradictory, as the same Gate-run media used to blame fictitious foreign agents for killing protesters, which in essence admits that there were protests.

The communal rejection of protest is in line with the Gate guidelines, and individual attempts to question loyalty to the Gate are quelled by the community

as much as by the Gate. The few who dare object to the Gate are systematically hunted down. One stark example is Yehya, whose name means “he lives.” A depoliticized figure, Yehya accidentally walked into a protest and was shot by riot police, called the Quell Force, during the earlier short-lived uprising. The Gate denies he was shot, and bureaucracy is used against him to delay his surgery, clearly in the hope that he will die while waiting for permission to have surgery. Other characters include Amal, who tries to help Yehya obtain the necessary paperwork from the Gate to authorize his surgery. When she pushes too close to the forbidden mechanisms of the Gate and their brainwashing tactics, she disappears for a few days. We do not know the details of what happens to her, but it is hinted that she is tortured, possibly psychologically. She emerges disoriented and hallucinating, and eventually dies, if not physically, then mentally. Tarek, the doctor who handles Yehya’s case, suffers from guilt when he has to choose between his conscience (operating on Yehya who is deteriorating and needs the surgery), and his self-interest (by ignoring Yehya, who is designated an enemy of the state). The queue and its citizens constitute an ensemble of societal elements united by hypocrisy. There are those who know what they need to do, but do not act, such as Tarek, the physician who stalled Yehya’s surgery until it was too late. There are those who unscrupulously capitalize on the situation. For example, the High Sheikh, the highest religious authority, in a bitterly satirical incident, preaches to the people and links his sermons to the state-run Violet Telecom company, by decreeing that the religious principle of loving one’s neighbor can only be fulfilled by making seven consecutive phone calls, thus garnering profit for the phone company. The High Sheikh preaches,

A believer who is weak of faith, and does not join his brothers, is guilty of a sin, which shall be weighed on Judgment Day. This sin can be absolved by fasting, or by making seven consecutive phone calls, each one not separated by more than a month. (Abdel Aziz, p. 1600)

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The one-month period is a satirical reference to Egyptian telephone companies that require users to make at least one phone call every month to maintain services. The relationship between the High Sheikh, the Telecom business, and the government reflects how the governmental, religious, and economic institutions in much of the Middle East work hand in hand to control the people.

Manifestations of Place

The spaces for the narratives discussed in this article are designed to enhance isolation for the individual protagonists and conformity for community characterization. In *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, the island provides an incubation period that nurtures Ḥayy's growth. While the island is ultimately a positive place for Ḥayy, it is not utopian. Ḥayy experiences a life-defining tragedy when his mother-deer dies. As he grows up, the island plays the role of a scientific laboratory where Ḥayy experiments with his theories about nature. When Absāl arrives at the island, he is attacked by Ḥayy, making the island a space of contention and conflict. This does not last long, as Absāl and Ḥayy soon become allies and friends. They teach each other the knowledge they have acquired over the years—mainly Absāl's language skills, which Ḥayy never had, and Ḥayy's experimental scientific findings and natural philosophical wisdom. During this stage of the narrative, the island becomes a school, a learning space. When Ḥayy leaves the island to visit Absāl's country and is shunned by Absāl's people, they both return to the island and resolve to devote themselves to sublime knowledge of the Necessarily Existent Creator. The island's role changes to a spiritual haven for meditation. The island, therefore, is a multifaceted symbol that acquires its significance based on its intersection with the changes in the protagonist's development.

The City in *The Façade* is also a fluid symbol. It mainly oscillates between a utopian and dystopian existence, based on the protagonist's experiences. Initially, M N thinks the City is utopian, with free meals and free residence offered for a year to guests, and with a priest of an unknown religion who announces that

he is no longer required to preach since there is no wrongdoing in the City anymore. Yet, the utopia rapidly turns into a dystopia. M N offends a restaurant server unintentionally when he asks her to talk to him after her working hours. As a result, he suddenly loses his guest privileges and his life rapidly deteriorates into endless suffering. He is required to work for a living. The only job available for him is to turn a wheel that grinds nothing. He is whipped by a wheel keeper, who is a stereotypically grotesque, demonic figure, thus reinforcing the hellish transformation of the City. The money M N earns is hardly ever enough for meals and basic needs as prices always go up, sometimes almost instantly. M N gets married without being given much of a choice and his responsibilities rise considerably. The single mistake he makes when he talks to the restaurant server, followed by the brutal punishment of toil and pain, can be a reference to humanity's Abrahamic fall from grace when Adam eats the forbidden fruit and the entire human race has to work for the duration of its existence. This makes the City more of an allegory for life on earth than a futuristic fantasy or an afterlife representation, thus portraying everyday life as dystopian.

A twist in the presentation of the island and the City is the existence of another place in each story that acts as a foil, a distorted copy, or a reverse reflection. In *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, this alternate place is Absāl's country. It is the antithesis of Ḥayy's island. The island is devoid of humans and rich in natural and wildlife. Absāl's country is a regular human society, and there is no mention of wildlife there, only human gatherings. The island is a place of solitude. The other country is a place of communion. The island is a space for experimentation and discovery. The other place is one of certainties and old institutions. The island is a place of growth. The other place is a place of stagnation.

In *The Façade*, an entire city lurks behind the main city. It is a darker space that M N notices by accident. He hears about its existence but does not know what it is until one night he watches his wife, whom he suspects is having an affair, and sees a door suddenly materialize in the back of his house. His wife silently walks

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through it and he follows her to find the reverse of everything he had observed in the superficial utopia of the City. The clean streets and beautiful well-kept landscapes and houses are replaced by old, neglected streets and houses. The conservative people are brazen hedonists. Even the restaurant server who had filed a complaint against him for asking to meet her after work is the exact opposite in this other city: sexually uninhibited, behaving lewdly, and seducing men openly. At some point, M N is even put on trial for refusing to have sex with a woman other than his wife, which stands in sharp contrast to the conservative façade of the main city, where he was punished for nothing more than asking a woman to talk to him. Unleashed sexual desires are not the only vice in this other city. While M N's wife has her sexual escapades with other men, their children accompany her and turn into shoplifters. The distorted city represents a stereotypical notion of the Freudian unconscious mind, harboring all the desires and fantasies negated by the orderly conscious mind, and, thus, functioning as a dungeon for all of the baser human instincts. It also enhances the theme of social hypocrisy that underlies the depiction of the community in *The Façade*.

In "The Waiting Room," the place has few details. Like all waiting rooms, it is well organized and open. The minimalism of setting, events, and characters, as well as the reliance on dialogue are as appropriate to a short, one-act play as they are to a short story. The objects that stand out in the room are like stage props: a round table where the patients sit, a few chairs for late comers, a skeleton, and a calendar marking December 31st with the year crossed out:

It is a spacious room with walls, which need painting. On one of its walls is a picture of a human skeleton of actual size. On another wall hangs a calendar, dated the thirty-first of December. It seems that nobody had bothered to change that calendar a few days earlier, perhaps a few months or maybe years ago, for the part stating the year, had been totally scratched. On the same wall is a clock, its hands have stopped at nine minutes past three.

(Eassa 2002, p. 131)

The round table is surrounded by men, each distinctly different in appearance, who are equally subjected to the same dubious fate in the examination room. The woman and then the young child who arrive later sit on separate chairs. By not joining the men at the round table, the male-centeredness of the community is asserted, with the female and the young child physically and symbolically on the margin of the central sphere of action. The waiting room is accessible from the street. This is evident as three of the characters enter the room after the narrative starts (one man, the woman, and the child) while everyone else was already there when the story begins. This connectivity between the waiting room and the larger community solidifies the function of the waiting room as a microcosm of society, with members trickling in gradually.

In *The Queue*, the main space is the endless line of people waiting in futility in front of the impenetrable Gate for bureaucratic paperwork that controls the most basic actions of their daily lives. A huge screen is at the far end of the queue, by the Gate, where the government broadcasts instructions and fabricated media items that habitually reshape truth to serve the Gate (p. 1301). This space, like the waiting room in the clinic, is a microcosm of society, a blend of all classes and lineages. People in the queue leave their spots when they need to go to work or run important errands, but only to come back as soon as they are done. When they have to leave temporarily, they confirm their positions in the queue with those in front and behind them to reserve their spot until they come back (Abdel Aziz, p. 358). Marking one's spot in the queue is an ultimate sign of communal interconnectivity and the link to the outside world—the source of more people who join the queue—just as the clinic's outside door brings in more patients.

The waiting room and the queue have other places linked to them as well. However, unlike Absāl's island or the back City in *The Façade*, the waiting room and queue are more like extensions of the original places and have the same foreboding natures. They are

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more like new dimensions—new mysterious abodes where “the power” resides. Their interiors remain unknown to the readers and characters during the time frame of the narratives, yet everyone ultimately has to deal with them. In “The Waiting Room,” this space is the examination room, where a medical team presumably sits, decides turns, and receives patients. No one ever comes out of that room. The patients in the waiting room notice that and rationalize this by reassuring themselves that there must be a backdoor in the examination room that leads straight to the outside. This acts as a metaphor for the afterlife as a fatalist justification of death. This sinister space in *The Queue* is the Gate itself. Like the examination room, the Gate is the ultimate destination of the queue. Everyone has to interact with a representative from the Gate, even if they never enter. A clerk needs to receive their petitions and sign their paperwork. This becomes compulsory when the Gate issues a new, mandatory Certificate of True Citizenship that every citizen must obtain before they proceed with paperwork for any other facet of their lives. The Gate and the examination room, therefore, are the destinations that end the period of waiting in the waiting room and the queue. It is not necessarily the place where the power that nobody understands resides, but it is certainly the place where the decisions made by the power take place.

A study about the relationship between urban and rural settings in Arabic novels showed that Egyptian novels are positioned as forerunners in formulating the pattern of a vicious circle (Ostle, 1986). Rural values and urban promise were described as remaining in futile tension as early as Heikal’s *Zaynab*. Even in Mahfouz’s *Cairene* novels, the individual “man of destiny” character ends up forcing Mahfouz to adapt his narrative form to present a “world of helpless individuals in the grip of malevolent social and political forces” (Ostle, 2016, p.200). These forms are mainly allegorical, such as in Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley* and *The Thief and the Dogs*, and have affinities with the dystopian forms of narratives in this article, mainly *The Façade* and “The Waiting Room.” Philosophi-

cally and socially, place represents the struggles of destiny reflected by the urban landscape. Politically, Ostle described the tension of place as exacerbated by the looming and stifling powers of the palace and the British. Place, therefore, and its association with power, seems ingrained in the Arabic novel.

A more elaborate use of spatial patterns than vicious circles directly connects metaphorical geometric structures to narrative forms. In Egyptian author Gamal Al-Ghitani’s novel, *Pyramid Texts*, for instance, the pyramid shape reflects ontological factors “pertaining to an artist’s outlook on time, individuality, the nature of the universe and the human condition” (Azouqa, 2011, p. 7). The pervasive use of patterns asserts that the “The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exist” (Waugh 47, as qtd. in Azouqa, 2011, p. 8). The four narratives I have focused on here use geometric patterns to reflect the interactions between the individuals and their communities in response to higher, unseen powers that at once monopolize, demand, and obscure truth. Those patterns correspond to the narratorial trajectory that each narrative adopts. The island is circular, as it is surrounded by water from all directions. This echoes the cyclical nature of the narrative. Hayy’s consciousness and growth are initiated on the island, and after his friction with the outside world represented by Absāl’s country, he returns to the island. “The Waiting Room” also has a circular center presented by the round table, but the room itself is not circular. Assuming it is an ordinary room, it will have some kind of angular structure like most rooms, and would therefore reflect the narrative depiction of the patients as captives in a cage, where entrance is willful but leaving is controlled and guided. The city in *The Façade*, has the most interesting structure. It is designed entirely around one long street, more like an avenue, that runs through the city and leads to the City Owner’s mansion. When M N unknowingly enters this mansion, he learns from a butler that no one can see the City Owner. Anyone can come to the mansion, but only if they want to submit a written complaint (Eassa 2014, p. 83). The mansion can be

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a metaphor for houses of worship, where worshipers spill their innermost fears and anguish, but never see the power they are hoping will answer their prayers. Alternatively, in a political sense, it can be the authoritarian power that receives people's grievances, but never meets them. Behind the houses on both sides lies the other version of the city. The main place, therefore, runs along one single line with potential brief digressions left and right into houses, restaurants, and shops, brilliantly reflecting the linearity of the narrative, and the short-lived intervals when M N attempts to rebel or question the course of his life. Retreat is possible, just like going back and forth on a street is possible. M N does remember earlier events and characters he has met previously in the narrative, thus moving briefly sideways, with questioning and musings, as well as forward and backward, but always within the general linearity of the narrative avenue. Linearity is also crucial to *The Queue*. However, in *The Queue*, the possibility of leaving to a wider space is possible, but the return is also inevitable. The queue itself is even more stifling, reflecting the narrow confinement of the narrative structure, as the novel is divided according to documents from Yehya's hospital files and the narration progresses mercilessly until Amal's and Yehya's monumental demise and Tarek's dehumanization, just like the queue progresses towards its destination at the gigantic Gate.

Manifestations of place can be viewed through the concept of homeland. In a study of watan, or homeland, Samar Attar (2016) refers to the homeland's duality, as a nurturing mother or an oppressive tyrant. This is evident in the nurturing mother motif of Hayy's adoptive mother deer and the tyrannical Gate, for instance. Leslie Tramontini (2016) discusses the interconnection of memory and space, with place as a site for memory, constructing an ideal lost paradise or a personal refuge. In *The Façade*, M N's absence of memory dissociates him from any connectivity to a personal place or a homeland. The patients in the "Waiting Room" willingly leave their place to move into the unknown, mimicking the migration from the homeland to the diaspora.

Conclusion

Whether spiritual, philosophical, metaphysical, or political, the four narratives discussed in this article all share interesting tropes and narrative strategies that I have argued can be employed in readings of Arabic science fiction narratives. The role of place, specifically as it manifests itself in spaces that navigate trajectories of individual and communal intersectionality with power, is an underlying motif in Arabic science fiction. What is more, the geometric shape of space as a reflection of the narrative process—whether circular or linear, for instance—is another feature of the use of space in Arabic science fiction that is worth analyzing. Writers' ability to use the allegorical and the symbolic while implying references to local issues is an underlying feature of modern Arabic novels, seen most evidently in the works of Naguib Mahfouz who "combined universal relevance with local appeal" (Starkey, 2006, p. 124). In Arabic science fiction, the connection between the universal and the local seems to have been achieved by narrative use of place.

For further research, this article suggests that readings of Arabic science fiction can benefit from considerations of the interconnectivity of spatial motifs and what might be termed shape or geometric narratives, where the shape of place reflects the development of the narrative. A significant underlying element of Arabic science fiction is the interplay between the individual and the communal, with individual protagonists or the community itself presented collectively as a protagonist. Whether as an individual or a community, Arabic science fiction protagonists are often pitted against a higher power. Characterized by its omnipresence and omniscience, regardless of its benevolent or evil nature, this superior force is crucial in unpacking the complexities of Arabic science fiction. Within these complexities are individuals and communities sharing spaces that lead them to that formidable and unfathomable power, be it spiritual or political. Arabic science fiction had its roots in spiritual philosophical narratives. The increasing role of religious and political discourse in Arabic intellectual life now impacts science fiction as



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a literary genre of alternate realities. The narrative intersectionality of place and power can offer a deeper understanding of Arabic science fiction.

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Arab SF Film and TV in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This article defines the most prominent features and conventions of Arab SF film and television in the twentieth century by examining its narrative, structural, cultural, and production-related conventions. This includes the usage of folk literature and local mythology and certain SF devices, such as advanced medicine. In addition to breaking down the genre's plot devices, the paper looks at its history, its transitions from comedic to serious modes of narrative, and its evolution over the course of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Arab Science Fiction, film, television, plot devices, 20th century

Despite the fact that relatively few Arab entries in the science fiction (SF) genre exist, they have not received much study. Most critics claim that from the 1930s to 2000s, no more than fifteen Arab SF films have been produced (Louis, 2020). But they do not extensively analyze these works or outline their narrative and formal conventions, nor do they discuss them in relation to other genres. Similarly, deep discussion of SF television programming is relatively rare. Responding to this, my paper surveys twenty-three films adhering to the SF genre and two TV series with SF elements released from 1934 to 1998. Critically examining them will reveal a close relationship between SF and fantasym as well as point to how approaches to genre and filmmaking styles have changed. I focus on 20th-century works as they demonstrate a consistency of characteristic elements, and Arab SF in the twenty first century undergoes a considerable shift, which my concluding statement will touch upon. As Table 1 shows, most of these titles are Egyptian, though there are some Syrian and Lebanese examples. It is important to note that there is no consensus regarding what represents the earliest Arab SF. For example, some critics identify the thriller *Time Conqueror/Qaher Alzaman* (Al-Sheikh, 1987) as the first Arab SF film (Basmaji, 2019). However, this work takes up the position of Jan Aliksan (1982), Mahmoud Kassem (2018), and others that find *Mysterious eyes/ Eyoon Sahera* (Galal, 1934) to be the first Arab SF chronologically.

The definition of SF varies according to its temporal and cultural contexts, often depending on whether or not one discusses it in relation to the genre of fantasy. Scholars such as J. P. Telotte and Christine Cornea recognize that the boundaries between SF and fantasy

are difficult to distinguish. For them, SF occupies the middle ground between fantasy and reality (Cornea, 2007, p. 4-5). M. Keith Booker agrees on the difficulty of distinguishing these genres, but refers to some standards of processing physical laws, science, and magic. Booker explains that SF's physical principles differ only slightly from those operating in our world as the result of the SF creators' elaboration of scientific principles or technologies unknown in our world. Arthur C Clarke says, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke, 1977, p. 38). On the other hand, fantasy fiction typically takes place in worlds that operate according to a logic of their own; fantasy worlds thus need not obey our physical laws (Booker, 2010, p. 2). For Muhammad Azam, SF has two primary functions: to deploy thought in the service of humankind and to solve problems and predict human developments by extrapolating from current technology (Campbell, 2018, p. 97). The relationship between SF and our world/reality is closer than its fantasy counterpart. As such, the distinction between science and magic sets a clear boundary between SF and fantasy. However, the author admits that the boundary itself can sometimes be permeable, and it is undoubtedly the case that images and motifs typically associated with fantasy can sometimes be found within works belonging to SF, and vice versa (Booker, 2010, p. 2). These definitions suggest that one can approach SF as a rational variation of fantasy.

Ada Barbaro's work supports the idea of a close relationship between SF and fantasy. In *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba* (2013), Barbaro refers to early

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Film	Director	Genre Within SF	Country of Production	Date of Release
<i>Mysterious Eyes/ Eyoon Sahera</i>	Ahmad Galal	Romance, drama	Egypt	1934
<i>Felfel</i>	Seif El Din Shawkat and Mustafa Al-Attar	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1950
<i>Virtue for Sale/ Akhlaq lel-Bai</i>	Mahmood Dhulfeghar	Drama, comedy	Egypt	1950
<i>El Sab'a Afandi/ Mr. Lion</i>	Ahmad Khurshid	Comedy	Egypt	1951
<i>Where Did You Get This?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha</i>	Niazi Mostafa	Romantic comedy	Egypt	1952
<i>Have Mercy/ Haram Alek</i>	Isa Karamah	Comedy, horror	Egypt	1953
<i>The One who has Dazzling Eyes/</i>	Hassan El-Seifi	Comedy	Egypt	1958
<i>Journey to the Moon</i>	Hamada Abdelwahab	Comedy, thriller	Egypt	1959
<i>Haa 3</i>	Abbas Kamel	Comedy, crime	Egypt	1961
<i>Ashour, the Lion's Heart/ Ashour kalb El-assad</i>	Hussein Fawzy	Adventure, comedy, romance	Egypt	1961
<i>Please Kill Me/ Ektellni Men Fadlek</i>	Hassan Al Seifi and Nader Galal	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1965
<i>The Fake Millionaire/ Al-millionaire Al-mouzayyaf</i>	Hassan El-Seifi	Comedy	Egypt	1968
<i>The Land of Hypocrisy</i>	Fatin Abdel Wahab	Comedy, drama	Egypt	1968
<i>El-Maganin El-Talata/ Three Madmen</i>	Hassan El-Seifi, Mahmoud Elseify, and Atef El-Sisi		Egypt	1970
<i>Adam and Women</i>	El-Sayed Bedeir	Comedy, post-apocalyptic, action, thriller	Egypt	1971
<i>The World in 2000/ Al-Alam Sanat 2000</i>	Ahmad Fuad	Comedy	Egypt	1972
<i>The Queen of Love/ Malikat al Hobb</i>	Romeo Lahoud	Romance, comedy	Egypt & Lebanon	1973
<i>Uncle Zizuo Habibi</i>	Niazi Mostafa	Family, comedy	Egypt	1977
<i>Time Conqueror/ Qaher Al-zaman</i>	Kamal Al-Sheikh	Horror, thriller	Egypt	1987
<i>Monsters Run/ Gary Elwohosh</i>	Mohamed Nabih	Drama, thriller	Egypt	1987
<i>Adam Without A Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa'</i>	Mohamed Nabih	Comedy-post-apocalyptic, romance, thriller	Egypt	1990
<i>The Dance with the Devil/Al Raqss Ma El Shaitan</i>	Alaa Mahgoub	Thriller, horror, drama	Egypt	1993

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

Film	Director	Genre Within SF	Country of Production	Date of Release
<i>Risala 'iilaa Alwali/ A Message to the Elderman</i>	Nader Galal	Comedy, drama, fantasy, history	Egypt	1998
A TV Series of 4 Seasons: <i>Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan</i>	Ayman Sheikhan and Bassam al-Mulla	Family, fantasy, drama	Syria	1990-2000
A TV series: <i>The Robot/ Alrajul Al-aliu</i>	Mohammad El-Sheikh Najib	Family, drama, educational	Syria	1998

Table 1. Twentieth-century SF films and some TV series discussed in this paper

SF in several Arabic literary works. Barbaro states that Arab SF is rooted in classical traditions. For example, *The Epistle of Forgiveness/ Resalat Al-Ghufran* by the Syrian poet Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri (around 1033 CE), describes a voyage to paradise and interactions with spirits of various figures from the past. *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* depicts the human transformation from primitive conditions to a philosophical utopia through science, experience, meditation, and knowledge (Ibn Tufail, early 12th C). In the thirteenth century, Ibn al-Nafis wrote *Theologus Autodidactus* (1968), a philosophical novel that ends with an apocalypse (Campbell, 2018). *One Thousand and One Nights/ Alf Layla Wa-Layla* might date back to the middle ages, and has been cited by Arabic bibliographers in the fourth century, such as Ibn al-Nadim, who summarized the Arabic published stories in his book *Al-Fihrist*. A story in *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The City of Brass*, and many other folk tales contain early elements of SF, including controlling nature, future technology, and proto-cyborgs (Campbell, 2018, p. 61- 63). Barbaro's theory of the classical influences of Arab SF literature can also be applied to the twentieth century Arab SF films, which have maintained the conventions of fantasy in SF and SF in fantasy. Many Arab SF films intertwine supernatural and rational causes for impossible events. For this reason, numerous SF films double as fantasy films, meaning that Arab cinema emphasizes and foregrounds genre hybridity with pictures that one could describe as "science-fantasy."

ments within fantasy is *Risala 'iilaa Alwali/ A Message to the Elderman* (Galal, 1998). In 1807, Harfoush, a strong knight, tries to deliver a message to Egypt's ruler, Muhammad Ali, to help the city of Rasheed, which is besieged by the British. While running away from some hired enemies in a cave, Harfoush meets a wise man who transfers him to the twentieth century. He recognizes modern Cairo, where he gets accused of being crazy. Inas, a social worker, sympathizes with him after learning his story and confirming his identity. After a lot of trouble and heroism, Harfoush sees the house and fortune that he will make in the future, a touristic archaeological site in modern Cairo. Holding on to a photo of his beloved Inas, he finally comes back to the cave and his time, knowing that he will succeed in his mission and that Egypt will free itself from Ottoman and British colonialism. In the historical house of the knight, Harfoush, Inas sees a big, partially wiped painting that looks like her and meets a person who is a great-grandchild of Harfoush. The uniqueness of this film's narrative and mise-en-scene techniques lie in its utilization of Egyptian history and how it sets a past time narrative to make the current Cairo a future city for Harfoush. The wise man smoothly transfers Harfoush into modern Cairo through strong lights and magic. To give an impression of a future time, the film depends on real footage from Cairo's streets, historical spaces, and the performance of an astonished character by Adel Imam.

An Egyptian film that incorporates powerful SF ele-

Syrian TV series exemplifies this duality between sci-

Arab SF Film and TV, continued

ence fiction and fantasy. *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan* (Sheikhani and al-Mulla, 1990-1999), which most Arab youth of the author's generation grew up watching, was written and produced by a private-sector producer, Daoud Sheikhani, and directed by Ayman Sheilhani, his son. The show contains elements of family drama, and its narrative depends on global, Arab, and Middle Eastern mythologies, especially *One Thousand and One Nights* (Fig. 1). Each episode presents a problem in the contemporary daily life of a Syrian family. We learn a lesson through the wisdom of the folktales and each of the grandparents who narrates the story. The series deploys simple cinematic effects to create illusion and fantasy elements such as giants, magic, flying carpets, etc. It was the first Arab TV series that used computer animation to create audio-visual illusions. It was also the first Arab live-action production globally marketed after winning at the Festival Prix Jeunesse (Marefa, 2020). The series contains many vital SF elements and sources that fundamentally accomplish the same purposes as modern technology. For example, the idea of individuals communicating and crossing all borders freely, with no cost, is not a reality yet, but it can be conveyed equally well via a magic carpet, which is derived from folk tales, or a transporter, as seen in Western SF. As another example, characters in *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan* may return to life or to be healed from fatal disease by drinking magical herbs. Analogously, Western SF portrays the desire for immortality through the creation of cybermen or androids or mind transfers and memory technologically.

The Egyptian film *Haa 3* (Kamel, 1961) uses a similar approach. The main character, Abbas, an elderly factory owner, undergoes an experimental medical procedure that entails entering a machine that physically de-ages him into a young man. However, the de-aging results in catastrophic changes for Abbas and his family, landing him in prison awaiting execution. At this point, the film uses a radial visual transition to return audiences to the point before Abbas entered the machine, revealing that regaining his youth had been a dream. Now awake, Abbas refuses to finish

the procedure and returns to his family to fix their unresolved problems. These films allow us to enjoy the SF unreality, but both suggest that fantastic elements are ultimately escapist illusions that cannot truly exist within the narrative diegesis. This type of dream narrative framing is a recurring convention. One encounters it in *Adam Without a Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa* (Nabih, 1990), where in the end, things fall apart in Adam's apocalyptic world and it turns out to only have been a dream. The dream convention also appears in *Mysterious Eyes* (Galal, 1934) as well in *Please Kill Me/ Ektellni Men Fadlek* (Al Seifi and Galal, 1965). The attempt to regain youth is encountered again in *Three Madmen/ El-Maganin El-Talata* (Elseify, Elseify, and El-Sisi). A veterinarian (Tawfiq) experiments on his friend, and instead of making him younger, mistakenly makes him one hundred and eighty-six years old.

Devices

Other films rely on diegetic plot devices to explain impossible events, and in the process explore social issues of the time in which they are made. Advanced medicines, including pills, herbs, drugs, elixirs, etc., are some of the most popular devices. For instance, in *Mr. Lion/ El Saba' Afandi* (Khurshid, 1951) SF elements manifest in the plot. The main character randomly buys magical pills and takes them excessively to later discover a secret magical ability of breaching walls. He becomes a popular hero because of his good deeds that he was able to accomplish through his superpower. Although walking through walls is an old magical idea, it is placed in a modern context such as the pill container and the office issues and the relationship between the main character and his boss.

In *The Land of Hypocrisy* (Abdel Wahab, 1968), the story of which is reminiscent of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), they serve as a means for the main characters to change personalities. Masoud, a kind person who suffers from the oppressive actions of people around him, discovers a mysterious scientific laboratory and a doctor that sells seemingly magic drugs that can positively and

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negatively affect a user's morality. Masoud begins taking these medicines and acquires various (virtues and vices), such as "hypocrisy," significantly transforms his character and negatively affects his family and job. In the end, he tries to transform the corrupted society around him by throwing the "honesty" drug into the river that serves as the source of drinking water, but the effects do not last. Masoud goes back to his old life, sad about not being able to change his society. The shop itself also closes as it runs out of "moralities" and so the world ultimately reverts to normal, playing into the idea that a moral society is itself a fantastic concept. This film's story is adapted from Yosef Asebaei's novel, *The Land of Hypocrisy* (Al-Sebai, 1949). *Virtue for Sale* (Dhulfeqar, 1950), which is a lesser-known earlier film, surprisingly uses the same story, but in a more fantastic style. An old sheikh-like figure sells virtue powders that also transform personalities. However, he has run out of vices, and so can only provide positive characteristics such as courage and chivalry.

In *Uncle Zizuo Habibi* (Mostafa, 1977), the protagonist takes dangerous "satanic herbs" that endow him with supernatural powers and make him a star footballer. His powers, however, eventually expire and Zizuo comes to understand that his real strength lies in his will to succeed without any injections or magical herbs. His story shares a number of elements with that of *Ashour, the Lion's Heart/ Ashour Kalb el-assad* (Fawzy, 1961), in which a scientist injects the weak and poor Ashour with a serum that grants him superpowers. This allows Ashour to defeat all his colleagues in sports competitions and gain the attention of the girl whom he has always loved. In the end, when the drug's effect wears off, she abandons him, and only his true friend and a poor girl who loved his personality take care of him. Then, he realizes that his love should be given to people who like him, not his muscles.

The medicines that appear in these films, and other movies such as *Where did You Get this?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha* (Mostafa, 1952) and *The World in 2000/*

Al-Alam Sanat 2000 (Fuad, 1972) are inspired by traditional Arab medicine and are similar to the magical herbs that appear in folk tales and works of fantasy literature, which themselves draw on global, Arab, and middle Eastern mythologies. Although sometimes, the elixirs that give superpower are stopped or do not work at the end, they help in resolving romantic storylines. Even when characters refuse to depend on the elixir at the end, it actually works to an extent as the experience always raises the characters' social status, transforms their awareness, and ultimately solves their problems. At the same time, the plots of these films often end up encouraging the characters to realize their true potential rather than depending on the abilities granted by the elixirs. Such a depiction of "medicines," especially in *Uncle Zizuo Habibi*, parallels drama films that highlight the negative effects of drug abuse in society. The subject of drug abuse was especially prominent in Egyptian films of the 1980s (Kassem, 2018), such as *Shame/ El Ar* (1982) and *The Addict/ al-Modmen* (Francis, 1983). In this context, the advanced medicine serves as a fantastic stand-in for performance-enhancing drugs like anabolic steroids. Its effects, however, are impermanent, discouraging viewers from using real-life analogues.

Another common device is the use of advanced brain operations by what often is an evil or mad scientist. In *Have Mercy/ Haram Alek* (Karamah, 1953), an evil scientist plots to awaken a mummy and so learn the secrets of an ancient mummification technique by transferring a living human brain into its head. The same pattern is established in *The One who has Dazzling Eyes/ Abo Oyouun Gareaa* (El-Seifi, 1958), in which a corrupt German doctor and his accomplices buy and transfer brains, changing people's personalities through a series of funny and disastrous situations until they get caught. In *Felfel* (Shawkat and Al-Attar, 1950), after research and experiments on animals, a doctor makes a medical procedure in which he takes the vocal cords of a famous singer and gives them to the market boy and poor Felfel as a way of taking revenge on his enemy. This changes the equation of the stories of all characters; Felfel becomes strong

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and rich. However, they all, including the doctor, realize their mistakes. So, the doctor returns everything to its original situation. Such pictures typically examine the ethics and moral effects of science, calling to mind works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This is especially central to the Arab SF films of the 1980s, to which I will return later. Now that some of the genre's common narrative devices have been outlined, it is time to discuss its cultural and historical dimensions, as well as its influence by SF literature.

Robots are recurring characters throughout the genre, often created with cheap special effects costumes usually made of cardboard box, such as Auto in *Journey to the Moon* (Abdelwahab, 1959), one of the oldest cardboard box robots in Arab SF cinema. In *The Fake Millionaire/ Al-millionaire Al-mouzayyaf* (El-Seifi, 1968) Mak Mak is a sophisticated robot who can love, regenerate with other machines, and who understands human ethics. It is made by the struggling inventor Mr. Hamdi and an actual actor wears the costume. Some of this inventor's other inventions are artificial rain, a super jet car, electronic doors, and a magnetic cupboard that helps in automatically changing clothes. *The Robot/ Alrajul Al-aliu* (El-Sheikh Najib, 1998) includes Arfan the robot who knows everything. This prop was designed by Anwar Zarkali. It has orange flashing lights, can move, and becomes like a friendly teacher to Ammar.

Culture

Barbaro recommends viewing modern SF literature from a post-colonial perspective (2013). It is common to present SF elements within a local and traditional cultural environment distinct from Westernized technological environments. The many technologies found in Arab films are considered to have Eastern inspiration and origins in the past, such as fantasy folk tales. A goal of Arab filmmakers has been to resist cultural homogenization and produce a local, non-Western film commodity.

Marwan Kraidy discusses the question, "Do Arab media reflect Arab reality or do they represent foreign

attempts to define a new reality?" (2010, p.4). Generally, Arab media attempt both, and I think that the dialogue between global and regional media should always be an active component of the theory and practice. However, television shows that copy Western programs, such as *Star Academy* (Adma, Lebanon, 2001—) and *Arab Idol* (Future TV and MBC 1, 2011), are frequently criticized as furthering globalization, though this does not impact their popularity. Rasha Bkhyt asks, do these shows represent Arab youth in a global form? Or do their styles eliminate Arab specificity? Or are they a form of successful cultural exchange and Arab union in media? (Bkhyt, 2016) One critique, which comes from a religious perspective, refers to the disadvantage of Arab satellite broadcasting, which copies foreign programs, such as reality shows and video clips, without considering Arab traditions. This problem affects Arab youth and weakens their sense of belonging to Arab-Islamic culture. Others see that such popular foreign programs frustrate local attempts to produce competitive Arab shows. A compelling point, which comes from an artistic and cultural view, is that local production in Arab broadcasting satellite is an advantage that avoids some of the disadvantages of globalism and Western domination (Ibrahim, 2017, pp. 7-159). Furthermore, Kraidy has described the situation as being a balanced relationship that embodies equal, creative powers of Arab media and Western culture. So, the SF media's tailoring of Western elements and techniques to a local and traditional frame is emblematic of how "media usage helped Arab and Muslim communities to accommodate modernity without forsaking their heritage" (Kraidy, 2010, p. 5).

Once upon a Time/Kan Yama Kan highlights the Arabic language as an essential element of Arab identity and postcolonial theories as an orientation in public education and media. Arjun Appadurai describes how "the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization... There is always a fear of cultural absorption by politics of larger scale" (Appadurai, 2003, p. 40). This show reacts to these fears and suggests creative ways of reconciling global and

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local culture by emphasizing local folk tales, and Arabic language and culture. Western-style special visual effects and filmmaking techniques appear within the narrative frame of Arab folklore, modern culture, local issues, and morals.

SF devices often allow films to delve into history and mythology. *The Queen of Love/ Malikat al Hobb* (Lahoud, 1973) uses a time machine to offer an Egyptian and Lebanese take on mythological Atlantis's rich fiction. A timeship, which is supposed to transmit three scientists to the future, travels by mistake to early Atlantis. The general theme was inspired by American SF films (Louis, 2020) such as *Atlantis, the Lost Continent* (Pal, 1961). However, its plot reclaims the myth of Atlantis through placing the events in modern Egypt and on the South of Libya, where the film situates Atlantis. In this way, the film draws on real historical findings of the geography of Atlantis, offering a counter-narrative to Western mythology.

Journey to the Moon (Abdelwahab, 1959), meanwhile, uses the spaceship to explore the context of the space race in the 1950s. The film also demonstrates the heavy influence of Western films including *Destination Moon* (Pichel, 1950), *Cat-Women of the Moon* (Hilton, 1953), and especially George Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (Melies, 1902), in which a driver, hoping to become a chief newspaper editor, tries to take unauthorized photos of a spaceship and accidentally launches it. The ship brings him to the moon with Dr. Sharvin, its German inventor, and Mr. Rushdie, an Egyptian meteorologist. They meet the moon inhabitants, including Dr. Cosmo, his daughters, and the robot Auto. The film is worth discussing in more depth as it contains both specific references to local Arab culture and Western Pop-culture.

In the film's plot, the news about the moon's trip is published in the Egyptian *El-Akhbar Elyoum/Today's NEWS*, an actual newspaper. Mass media plays a vital role in the plot. The driver's motivation is directly tied to the popularity of journalism, which in 1959 played a significant role not only by providing news, but also in constructing the national identity. Paralleling this, the narrative also constructs a kind of nation-

al myth by letting the driver, inspired by his desire to work in mass media, launch the spaceship and so further Egypt's status as a competitor in the space race. These elements help to convince the Arab audience that a space trip setting off from Egypt is possible. The SF narrative reflects the political context of the 1950s and a cultural desire to compete with dominant world powers.

At the same time, the film clearly draws on and reworks Melies' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Both films share the premise of two groups travelling to the moon. Both contain many errors reflecting the lack of understanding of the nature of space, such as the characters' abilities to live and breathe on the moon. Today, these inaccuracies play into their comedic styles, helping elicit audience laughter.

Journey also makes an explicit reference to Melies' film by including a ballet scene on the moon but the meanings of both scenes differ. Within an Arab and Egyptian cinema context, ballet dancing seems alien and foreign, so it defamiliarizes the moon dancers. The return of the spaceship ends up with a celebration similar to the ceremony in Melies' movie. But where Melies' film arguably promotes a pro-colonialist narrative, Abdelwahab's film offers some critique. Melies' *Trip to the Moon* can be read as a metaphor for Western's colonization of new territories. It depicts the lunar inhabitants as savage and fighting aliens that can be a kind of threatening foreign other. By contrast, Abdelwahab depicts the lunar inhabitants as friendly, hospitable, technologically advanced, and humanized beings similar to the Earthlings. The astronaut who lives on the moon with his daughters is a refugee from a war that is not specified. Melies' film inherits the theme of superiority over the others while Abdelwahab suggests equality with other people. So, this film is a good example of how Arab SF can promote certain cultural narratives and global dialogues.

Comedy and its techniques

It is important to note that in addition to being classifiable as fantasy picture, the majority of Arab SF films also qualify as comedies and so often make their SF

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elements funny and comedic. This reflects their generally ironic attitude towards their subject matter. The fact that most Arab SF are comedies speaks to the popularity and dominance of comedy in commercial Arab cinema. Including comedic elements and characters would help sell a SF film to mainstream audiences.

Both Ashour, from *Ashour, the Lion's Heart* (Fawzy, 1961), and Zizuo, from *Uncle Zizuo Habibi* (Mostafa, 1977), are a type of comedic hero that one repeatedly encounters in Egyptian cinema from the 1970s until the 1990s. The characters' hopes are a reflection of the rosy dreams of the 1970s. The hero is usually an honest, unlucky citizen who lives through some difficult situations but who, at the end, is able to change his social and financial situation for the better (Al-Sa'ehi, 2020).

This approach had also been applied in *The World in 2000* (Fuad, 1972). A scientist predicts that worldwide famine will result from overpopulation. Therefore, he tries to create an elixir to diminish the size of human beings. However, when his brother Shawky takes the potion, he becomes so small that he disappears from view, except for his voice. Because of Shawky's terrible financial situation, his girlfriend's father has refused to let them marry. Shawky uses the experiment to regain his girlfriend, which creates funny situations. Shawky's invisibility is performed through the rest of the characters' mime and reactions, a style inspired by American comedies, especially Charlie Chaplin cinema. Shawky's invisibility allows for comic gags. Another film that uses mime techniques is *Where Did You Get This?/ Min Ayn Lak Hatha* (Mostafa, 1952). Wahid, a medical student, uses a medicine invented by his professor to become invisible and destroy the marriage party of his beloved Salwa, whose father was forcing her to marry the hypocritical, drug dealer, Taher. To implement Wahid's disappearance, Salwa dances as if her hidden beloved is dancing with her. This way, her father thinks she is mentally affected. However, after a lot of trouble, action, and the appearance of Taher's real colors, the lovers succeed in getting married. So, both films demonstrate how an SF

element can be subordinate to comedic effects.

The use of comedy played well into the low budgets and lack of resources. The history of the SF genre up until the end of the 1960s reflects the producers' hesitation to invest in extensive scenery and staging. The 1970s subsequently sees the emergence of more serious films that tackle post-apocalyptic themes. With that, the genre sees higher production values and less reliance on comedy. That is not to say that post-apocalyptic plots lack comedic elements.

Turning away from Comedy

Adam and Women (Bedeir, 1971) is an Egyptian film with satirical elements that indirectly reflects some global political tensions. The plot is set in a world where atomic weapons have led to mass male infertility, leading countries to compete over the ownership of the last fertile man on Earth. The film also contains interesting views about racial discrimination. Despite the setting, the film is quite light-hearted and silly, with lots of jokes taking place alongside more serious ideas such as criticism of the nuclear industry. The pursuit of the main character stands for global conflicts over control of resources.

Adam and Women can be compared with *Adam Without a Cover/ Adam Bedoun Ghetaa* (Nabih, 1990) in terms of the changes in their apocalyptic plots and comedic styles. Only two people remain alive on Earth following an undefined event. The film is darker and more serious in tone than the similarly titled *Adam and Women*; it focuses on the loneliness of living in a largely barren world. The apocalyptic scenario is treated with appropriate gravity. But the film also attempts to elicit laughter by following the main characters as they go on various escapades and adventures, such as visiting an ancient museum and broadcasting on TV. They philosophically question the essence of their relationship, life, and loneliness. The differences between the two titles evince how much the SF genre will have changed in two decades.

New filmmakers of the 1980s challenged the traditions of production and started to make more serious

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films (Alashri, 2006, Pp. 13- 142). SF movies of the 1980s demonstrate the era's debates about science and religion, as well as the pros and cons of future technology. *Time Conqueror* (Al-Sheikh, 1987) stands out from its predecessors in terms of mise-en-scene, costumes, and prop design. It is based on the milestone Arab SF novel, *The Lord of Time*, written in 1966 by Nihad Sharif, who is considered, according to Barbara and others, the father of Arabic SF (2013). The filmmaker, Al-Sheikh, nicknamed "Egypt's Hitchcock," uses many techniques to generate suspense in telling the story of a historian searching for his journalist cousin who had vanished investigating the mysterious disappearances of patients from a hospital. The historian discovers that a doctor is working on a scientific experiment to freeze sick people's bodies for years to allow their survival until suitable medicine is invented to heal them.

The film is more convincing in its depiction of the future and futuristic technology, which suggests that it has a relatively bigger budget than previous titles in the genre. Transparent freezers or capsules for preserving bodies take on the appearance of mummy coffins, taking inspiration from the Pharaonic culture. Through graphic elements of painting and photography, we see believable future images of the elegant Cairo of 2110. The unity of the narrative with these elements allows the film to successfully tackle complicated questions, in this case, the ethics of scientific experiments on human bodies. In line with this, *Time Conqueror* is one of the first Arab SF movies completely devoid of comedy. This film also projects the popular currents in Arab cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the spread of TV (Alashri, 2006, Pp. 13- 142), which appears in the actors' performance.

Another serious SF film that tackles the questions of science and ethics is *Monsters Run/ Gary Elwohosh* (Abdel-Khalek, 1987). It tells the story of three friends. A doctor finds a way to cure infertility via brain surgery. He operates on his wealthy friend so he can have a child. His friend pays a poor man to donate the part. The operation succeeds, but ironically the lives of both the rich and the poor are ruined on all levels. In the end, neither achieves the happiness they were seek-

ing through the child or the money. Despite its outlandish premise of brain surgery, the film tries to maintain as plausible a plot as possible. Through this SF element, it addresses class relations. The trend towards seriously tackling social issues in Arab SF continues into the 1990s.

The success of films such as *Time Conqueror* and *Monsters Run* led to *The Dance with the Devil/ Al Raqss Ma El Shaitan* (Mahgoub, 1993), which tells the story of a chemist who formulates a floral medicine that gives him the ability to travel through time. However, the drug causes hallucinations that almost result in the chemist killing his unborn child. The film deals with the question of whether or not it is ethical to alter the flow of history for personal benefit and includes multiple philosophical discussions about science and morality. It is reflective of an overall less ironic attitude towards SF in the 1990s. Similar approaches to storytelling are also visible in *Adam Without a Cover* (1990) and *The Message to the Elderman* (1998), in which the main character travels to the future. Finally, the unironic attitude is apparent in Syrian children's educational TV programs, such as *The Robot/ Alrajul Al-Aliu* (El-Sheikh Najib, 1998). The show has a funny premise, wherein a child finds a highly intelligent robot named Arfan and gets him to do his schoolwork. The series uses the robot to seriously promote children's education, inspiring young viewers to learn through honest hard work. As a whole, then, between the 1930s and the 1990s, Arab Cinema had largely transitioned from a generally ironic to serious stance on SF. In part, these changes are attributable to the general transformations in Arab SF film production.

Production

Compared to other genres, Arab SF has not been very popular in Arab cinema, in the sense that relatively few titles in this genre have been produced in comparison to the total number of Arab films made in the twentieth century. Egyptian productions alone number at least four thousand titles (Arab Thought Foundation, 2008). This is curious, given that most of the SF films have been commercially successful. For instance, *Mysteri-*

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ous Eyes reportedly had significant box office/ticket sales, and its marketing tended to emphasize its identity as a SF picture. In the story, a woman named Delilah tries to bring her beloved Sami back to life through a combination of witchcraft and chemistry, after he dies in an accident. In the press, the filmmakers disavowed the role of witchcraft in the picture, after being forbidden from screening the film, by positioning it as a mix of chemistry and magic. Because of this, the film's plot becomes difficult to classify as explicitly supernatural or rational. Furthermore, the end of the picture reveals that everything that the audience had seen was part of Delilah's elaborate dream (Kassem, 2018). So, the film attempts to further rationalize all the impossible narrative events as the products of the main character's imagination. In this sense, positioning the film as SF, where impossible events can be explained via non-supernatural means, allowed the picture to circumvent censorship. This illustrates how SF helped prohibited subject matter make it to the screen. That more filmmakers had not taken advantage of this capability suggests some resistance to the SF genre within the Arab film industry.

Comments by pioneer Syrian producer Nazih Shahbander in the documentary *Light and Shadows/ Noor wa Zilal* (Malas, Amiralay, and Mohammed, 1994) support this idea. Discussing an unrealized project, he states that the first Syrian picture he had aimed to make would have been a SF film about an alien that arrives on Earth in an oval-shaped, spiral-winged spaceship to learn from people and their morals. But soon, the alien becomes disenchanted with humans and discovers that the bad aspects of life on Earth outweigh the good. However, the investor pushed Shahbander to make a more conventional dramatic film devoid of SF elements, which became *Light and Darkness* (Shahbander, 1948). From this, one can infer that even when producers were interested in SF pictures in the 40s, they were beholden to the conservative interests of investors.

It seems evident that budget was a notable issue. SF can require a high level of production value to convincingly realize their worlds and scenarios. Some film

industries simply do not allow such budgets. For example, in Syria, the National Organization of Cinema, a state-run institution, controls most of the cinematic production. Due to its strict standards, it does not produce commercial entertainment, focusing instead on and arthouse and educational films. There are also political events and factors that can negatively influence film production as a whole. Because of this, there is little to no financing for SF pictures. At the same time, private-sector cinema is not able to generate enough money independently to execute a quality SF production.

Even Syrian TV, which has a successful private sector, is still constrained by low budgets. An example is *Al-Obur/ The Crossing* (Isber, 2014). In a TV interview, its director, Abeer Isber, says that her production company became interested in making a SF series, but the low production values considerably impacted the visual execution. The show could not make extensive use of mise-en-scene or computer technology and so had to represent SF elements in terms of verbal exposition and costume design (ElaphVideo, 2013). One can infer from the Egyptian films discussed here that budget was also an issue in commercial Egyptian production. A lot of the SF films are playing around the limitation of the budgets. They tend not to depict certain effects directly on the screen, hence, there is a tendency to tell, not show.

For Arab producers, it is not a genre that has ties to local history and, hence, appeal to a local audience. The Syrian producer, Mustafa Al-Barkawi (Lighthouse VFX), believes that the production of the SF genre has been considered a risk up until the twenty-first century because of low budgets and the domination of TV channels, which follow the policies of advertisers that consider this genre to be unprofitable. Moreover, many producers still see it as a foreign product (Al-Barkawi, personal communication, 2020). For them, SF is a predominantly American genre and so is rooted in Western cultural traditions. Perhaps, that is why Arab SF films have a tendency to over-rationalize and over-explain implausible aspects suggesting that maybe the audience would not accept them otherwise.

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Another interpretation by Nesrine Malik links the lack of SF production to the cultural tendency to glorify the past and to the absence of an Arab equivalent to Neil Armstrong or Yuri Gagarin, a contemporary iconic figure that inspires public interest in the present and future (Malik, 2009). While I agree with the author about the Arabic fixation on the past, I would not attribute it to the prevalence of religious thinking and the suspicion of science. I would argue that it is related to a combination of economical, historical, political, artistic, and other factors.

Ideologically, Arab culture has romantic bonds with the glories of the past, perhaps because the Arab community is not associated with current technological marvels. A lot of the SF films carry themes of nostalgia, which is proven through their extensive use of plot devices typically associated with ancient Arab culture and mythology. Many ideas in Arab SF, such as phasing through solid matter, levitation, invisibility, miniaturization, and herbal magical medicines, are drawn from folk literature. For example, in *Once Upon a Time/ Kan Yama Kan*, even if the characters are using future technology such as light to move through spaces in seconds, the time frame is set in the past. Past problems teach lessons about the present and the future. It frees the plot from the limits of logic. The past is used as a metaphor of wisdom and neutrality. In the ancient past anything is possible.

Conclusion

Having looked at its general conventions, narrative devices, and evolution, one can recognize that Arab SF is an actual genre that has unique features, a history, and a place in Arab cinema. It did not have a lot of cultural recognition, especially as many titles have not been recognized as SF. Arab SF films in the twentieth century demonstrated valued global, local, and cultural dialogues. Over the course of six and a half decades, the genre had undergone some interesting transitions, and it continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. There are currently signs that the genre is going to become more widely visible due to developments in marketing. For example, *Maskoon* fantastic Film Festival “ushered in the region’s first

festival for horror, action, fantasy, and science fiction films” (Dabbagh, 2019). This can potentially help in producing and exhibiting new SF films.

Twenty-first century Egyptian SF shows a greater degree of inspiration from foreign film and TV. For example, *Super Miro* (El Halfawy, 2019) is a TV series about an Egyptian superheroine that uses a technologically advanced costume. Other examples reflect new cyber and alien elements, such as *Cima Ali Baba* (El Gendy, 2011), which is a parody of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977- 2019) and the drama/ thriller TV series, *The End/ El Nehaya* (Samy, 2020). As we notice at the end of the twentieth century, the genre frees itself from comedy and fantasy, opening up new creative directions for SF storytelling. The twenty-first century witnesses a more significant increase in production of Arab SF. Egyptian cinema is not the only center anymore. New, emerging competitors appear such as UAE. New standards and conventions define the genre in the twenty-first century. There is more overlap between art-house and mainstream films (Fahim, 2019).

With that, the new titles tackle the twenty-first century’s social and political issues. New SF cinema and TV from Palestine, Arab Maghreb, and Syria, as well as diasporic filmmakers, reflect Arab futuristic perspectives exploring climate change, diaspora, collective traumas, exile in space, etc. The Emirati, post-apocalyptic film, *The Worthy* (Mostafa, 2017), tackles the subjects of war, water pollution, fear, destruction, and hunger, anticipating what happens when political conflicts escalate. *Aerials* (Zaidi, 2016) is an entertaining, horror SF that imagines an alien spaceship invasion of the earth and presents issues of communication, fear, alien abduction, and lockdown. There emerge low budget short films such as *The Way of Hope* (Nasser, 2015) and *The Capital of Destruction* (Nasser, 2016). The former responds to the Syrian crisis, while the latter posits that a global disaster forces people to immigrate to space. New generation filmmakers take advantage of the advancement of technology to overcome the limitations of low budgets. So, low production value is not a constraint for SF anymore.

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There are some advancements in TV programs which present different systems of production. For example, *Spacetoon*, a pan-Arab and Indonesian children's channel, uses animated SF themes to present its programs promoting Arab futuristic visions. Some of its ideas aim to prepare Arab children for the age of globalization (Hijazi, 2012) and others are to educate them about science, music, arts and crafts, the environment, and other cultural topics.

A significance of studying Arab SF film and TV is how much it tells us about Arab culture, media, its history, and future. Yasser Bahjatt demonstrated examples from movies that envisioned future technology that we are using now and said that the advancement in SF leads to advancement in science (Bahjatt, 2012). There is a belief that if there is no advanced technology, you cannot produce SF. But for me, SF is a form of art that inspires cultural and technological advancement.

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“Cached memories”: Spatiotemporal (Dis)ruptures and Postmemorial Absence in *Palestine +100*

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Abstract: Each story in the collection *Palestine +100* (Basma Ghalayini, Ed, 2019) takes place in 2048, or 100 years following the collective trauma of the Nakba (when Palestinians were forced to flee their land upon creation of the State of Israel). However, analysis reveals that this event has not been relegated to the past but continues to reverberate through successive generations, resulting in a uniquely Palestinian postmemory. Science fiction, with its future orientation, has not been popular with Palestinian authors whose literature is largely characterized by allegiance to the past. *Palestine +100* is unique in that the intentional framing compels writers to contend with a future imaginary. This results in stories dominated by spatiotemporal (dis)ruptures: characters inhabit parallel spaces and simulations; time moves backwards or stands still; and the notion of “return,” which looms large in the Palestinian psyche, is digitized in innovative and unique ways. The article argues that these stories illuminate a narrative present (which, for the reader and writer, is the near future) characterized by profound absence and the alienated suspension of identity. This is a time that lacks meaningful existence in light of a past that has not passed. In such a void, memory and, by extension, history, become the enemy. Consequently, characters are trapped between a duty to remember and a desire to forget. This tension illustrates an attempt to sever the inter- and transgenerational link of trauma that is produced by the structure of postmemory.

Keywords: Palestinian postmemory, collective trauma, memory, transgenerational trauma

In his self-elegy, *In the Presence of Absence*, celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish posits that “he who was born in a country that does not exist...does not exist either” (Darwish, 2011, p. 49). This statement encapsulates the degree to which a spatiotemporal anchor is pivotal for identity; that is to say, how the twinned notions of time and space provide ontological axes around which a sense of self may cohere.¹ It follows that dislocations and disrupted temporalities have profound implications for identity, and this is the problematic when considering Palestinian cultural expressions. In the case of Arab literature, there has been a recent turn towards speculative fiction, which moves away from a realist aesthetic and provides a new framework in which to explore identities shaped by the legacies of collective trauma, both past and present. This move suggests the need for a novel vocabulary with which to interrogate identity construction, the role of memory in sustaining communal identity, and its impact by collective trauma. Recent examples of such speculative fiction include Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* (2013), Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), Ibtisam Azem’s *The Book of Disappearance* (2014), and Mohammad Rabie’s *Otared* (2016). In this article, I ar-

gue that by disrupting spatio-temporalities, the stories in *Palestine +100* are able to dismantle existing power structures and combat concomitant erasure in order to claim an identity space.

The collection follows *Iraq +100*, which asked authors to imagine their country in 2103, a century after the US/British-led invasion. The future imaginary of both collections compels writers to depart from dissection of the past/present in order to project their fears and hopes onto a coming horizon. Meanwhile, the science fiction framing of *Palestine +100* throws into stark relief how modern-day Palestinian identity is constructed over a void, constituted by the spatiotemporal absence left in the wake of the Nakba. Speaking to the use of science fiction in her films, artist-filmmaker Larissa Sansour (in a conversation with Lindsey Moore), references both dimensions, noting how the genre “works formally for the Palestinian predicament because our identity is suspended between the past and the future. The Palestinian present is an odd space, a limbo” (Moore, 2020, p. 111).

Each story in *Palestine +100* takes place in 2048—a century after the Nakba (or ‘catastrophe’). This event

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was one where over 700,000 Palestinians, or half of the pre-war population, were forced to flee their land and homes when the State of Israel was created (Morris, 2001). These people (and their descendants) have since resided in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, and neighbouring Arab countries; were displaced within the land that became Israel; or have settled in exile. As Basma Ghalayini notes in her introduction to the collection, Palestinians are “like nomads travelling across a landscape of memories” (Ghalayini, 2019, p. viii). Remembrance becomes a duty in service of the dream of “return” in addition to fortifying an ethos of resistance. Consequently, memories of the Nakba and life in pre-1948 Palestine are passed down from generation to generation. Indeed, for many families, memories are the only things from home to which they can claim ownership. Saleem Haddad (2020), whose story “Song of the Birds” opens the collection, told me:

For Palestinians and other people subjected to settler colonialism and erasure, the question of the value of collective memories is an important one—they are important, both as a testament to a history that is trying to be taken from us and a way to assert that we did exist.²

Collective memory is not only intergenerational, transmitting itself—as per Jan Assman (2011)—in a communicative, familial sense, but it also extends transgenerationally, beyond the scope of those who directly experienced an historic event. In other words, collective memory is forged and refined through cultural artefacts of expression, including art and literature, to form a cultural memory. This type of memory has an undeniable role in identity formation, both individual and social: Jan Assman notes that “groups ‘inhabit’ their past just as individuals do, and from it they fashion their self-image” (Assman, 2011, p. 33). Furthermore, Aleida Assman notes that “groups define themselves by agreeing upon what they hold to be important, to which story they accord eminence, which anxieties and values they share” (Assman, 2010, p. 38). Marianne Hirsch, in *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), extends this work to incorporate

the impact of collective historic trauma in shaping cultural expressions of successive generations. My reading of *Palestine +100* shows that these stories illustrate spatiotemporal (dis)ruptures which expand and problematize Hirsch’s concept to produce what I call a “postmemorial absence.” When articulated through a critical framework of Dominick LaCapra’s *Absence and Loss* (1999), the stories attest to an historic trauma that has not been relegated to the past but continues to echo through successive generations, with haunting effects.

In many ways, Palestinian identity has become constituted by what Ghalayini refers to as an “ongoing Nakba” (Ghalayini, 2019, p. ix). In her article, “Who will we be when we are free? On Palestine and futurity,” Sophia Azeb calls it a “forever-catastrophe” and asks: “What if [...] we have been formed and effaced in catastrophe? What if [...] our Palestinianness continuously manifests itself in our suspended state of catastrophe?” (Azeb, 2019, p. 22). More relevant still when considering the forward-looking concept of this collection, Rosemary Sayigh (2013) notes that “the Nakba is not merely a traumatic memory, but continually generates new disasters, voiding the present of any sense of security, and blacking out the future altogether” (p. 56). This is what, I believe, distinguishes Palestinian postmemory from Hirsch’s theory. Her work centers on writing and visual cultural artefacts after the Holocaust and, consequently, there is a temporal demarcation between the artefact and the historic trauma it seeks to represent. There is no such demarcation for Palestinian writers, who are driven by a cultural duty to remember the Nakba (from which they derive their sense of identity), in light of present-day continuing injustices. Consequently, this literature has been refined by consistent appeals to the past, which demonstrate, in the words of Edward Said (1994), “not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms” (p. 1).

This allegiance to the past helps explain why science fiction, with its focus on future imaginaries, has

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not been popular with Palestinian authors. For them (and Arab writers more broadly), realism has been the preferred literary aesthetic. Indeed, in *The Palestinian Novel*, Bashir Abu-Manneh (2016) concludes that realism is the dominant form in this literature up to the end of the twentieth century as it allows for the embodiment of historical and societal struggles within the lives of individual characters as they negotiate contradictions in objective reality. Drawing on Lukács' notion of realism as a revolutionary product, Abu-Manneh (2016) shows how, in the Palestinian context, realism "is strongly connected with emancipatory desires" (p. 11) while a shift to an Adornian modernism in the 1980s points to a defeated despair that acknowledges and combats a breakdown in praxis. Perhaps the closest this literature has come to science fiction is Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974), which, according to Abu-Manneh, "pierces to the heart of 1948 Palestinian reality by using elements of other-worldly fantasy and invention: figures from outer space rupture the burden of the real and convey the main protagonist's wish for redemptive messianic intervention" (p. 23). This lone exemption proves the rule that "the cruel present (and the traumatic past) have too firm a grip on Palestinian writers' imaginations for fanciful ventures into possible futures" (Ghailayini, 2019, p. x).

The intentional framing of *Palestine +100* produces an uncomfortable tension, then, as it compels writers to confront a future imaginary by interrogating notions of reified space and linear temporality. Thus, chronotopic considerations are paramount within these narratives: Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) thesis of "time-space" as a "formally constitutive category of literature" (p. 84) is stretched to new dimensions when applied to Palestinian science fiction.³ Though he draws attention to the ways in which space responds to historical events, Bakhtin fails to address the ways in which both time and space manifest and operate as modalities of power; and therefore, how such modalities can be subverted within literature. I argue that science fiction allows the writers in this collection to disrupt the daily realities of chronotopic power structures as an act of

resistance and reclamation. The experimental nature of the genre provides a new framework for writers to highlight the anxiety of perpetual spatiotemporal insecurity and imagine pathways out of it. In an interview, Haddad asserts that:

Palestine is a rich canvas for science fiction: it is the frontier where tools of subjugation, occupation and resistance are experimented and used. There are powerful themes of past and present, memories and alternative realities, questions of homeland and belonging, of resistance and the limits of solidarity. (Mende, 2019)

This results in stories dominated by jarring chronotopic configurations: characters inhabit parallel spaces and simulations, such as in Haddad's "Song of the Birds" and Majd Kayyal's "N."; time moves backwards as in Abdalmuti Maqboul's "Personal Hero" or stands still as in Talal Abu Shawish's "Final Warning." Furthermore, the notion of "return," which looms large in the Palestinian psyche, is digitized across the collection in innovative ways. As a whole, the stories highlight how, as Lindsey Moore (2017) states, "time/space is constituted through epistemic and other forms of violence. Home space is historically dislocated, uncanny, haunting and, to the extent that it still exists, systematically fractured so as to produce disjointed lives" (p. 166). This article argues that by illuminating a narrative present (which, for the reader and writer, is the near future) characterized by profound postmemorial absence, the stories interrogate (and, simultaneously, dismantle) the chronotopic power structures that define realities of collective trauma.

"Poisonous memories": The Burden of Collective Remembrance

Cultural memory, through ritualistic use of symbols, can transform historic trauma into foundational myths, which in turn solidify collective identity. In *Dark Continuities*, Ranjana Khanna (2003) elaborates Volkan and Kakar's notion of "chosen trauma," describing it as:

an event that the group experienced together with particular group affective responses, often em-

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ployed by groups to consolidate a sense of collective identity. [...] The event qua event, takes on a particular resonance for the history of the people, their most deeply felt cultural affiliations and anxieties, and collective symbols of a community. (p. 14)

Palestinian literature abounds with signifiers of collective identity, such as oranges, keys, or deeds to houses. In terms of the Nakba, Carol Bardenstein (2007) notes that the orange serves as a “metonymic fragment” of the homeland that has acquired “emblematic status in the process of [...] being repeatedly mobilized and circulated” (p. 24). Likewise, she notes that the key and deed to the house in Palestine can serve as “anachronistic objects” which provide “tangible links to a version of house, village, and homeland frozen in time before dispersion” (p. 26). The repeated activation of these symbols reinforces a collective identity and connection to home. Interestingly, such iconography is absent from *Palestine +100*, which may suggest that these signifiers no longer function as useful coherents of identity. The only exception is Anwar Hamed’s “The Key,” in which an Israeli family is terrorized by the sound of a key turning in the lock of their front door. When investigations reveal no one lurking on the property or attempting to enter the home, the husband seeks the help of a psychiatrist who then becomes haunted in the same way. That night, the sound of keys in the door keeps the doctor awake; eventually he retrieves his service rifle and shoots out the lock. The story ends with the doctor triumphantly exclaiming, “There is no lock left, where will the intruder put his key?” Thus, the symbolic function of the key has been deployed in a subversive gesture of resistance and restitution by ghosts of Palestinians seeking to reclaim space which was taken from them.

In thinking of collective memories as formative of identity, it is important to take stock of how these are impacted by large-scale trauma. Hirsch (2012) finds that collective trauma can dominate the transmission of memories, both through and across generations, asserting that “both embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural memory would be

severely impaired by traumatic experience” (p. 33). This impairment results in postmemory, which she defines as an “inter- and transgenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but [...] at a generational remove” (p. 6, emphasis in the original). Collective trauma, in the form of the Nakba, constitutes, implicitly or explicitly, the core of most (if not, all) Palestinian literature; however, the historicity of the event, the extent to which it is bracketed in time, has been repeatedly challenged. There is a pervasive sense that with this event, Palestinians were ejected from “time” itself; in the novel *Mornings in Jenin*, Susan Abulhawa writes: “In the sorrow of a history buried alive, the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon the marching count of days, months, and years, instead becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history” (p. 35). In other words, the Nakba has taken on the transhistorical and—most importantly—atemporal aspects of what LaCapra (1999) would call “Absence.” He defines this as a structural state of grief, unlinked to direct experience of a specific event, which he contrasts with “Loss” as representative of an historic trauma or event to which not everyone is subject. LaCapra warns that conflating Absence and Loss can obfuscate historic losses and “etherialize them in a generalized discourse of absence” (p. 700). In the Palestinian context, I argue that the specific Loss of the Nakba, through the structure of postmemory, has been transformed into a subtending state of Absence, or what I call a “postmemorial absence.” In such cases, according to LaCapra, when “absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy” (p. 715).⁴ Thus, the sense of an existence that is spatially suspended, isolated, and unresolved in an atemporal sphere is reiterated across Palestinian artefacts of cultural expression.

Palestine +100 highlights a tension between the duty to remember and the desire to forget, with many characters attempting to sever the inter- and transgenerational transmission of trauma that keeps them

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in a state of postmemorial absence. In Majd Kayyal's "N.," the father shields his son from what he calls "predatory memories that spew poison into our children" (p. 62). He has resisted sharing recollections of a war he spent "a lifetime trying to bury," but which he fears may have traveled to his son's subconscious like "dust transmitted from the throat of one generation to the next" (p. 44). In Haddad's "Song of the Birds," Ziad is resentful of the postmemory with which his generation has been saddled, saying, "these cached memories wrap themselves around us like a second skin" (p. 11). "Cached" is a provocative term: the gesture to technology fits the collection's science fiction framing, but it also carries negative connotations that conflict with the notion of rose-tinted, nostalgic memories with which the reader might be more familiar. The term "cache memory" is used for junk files or files which assist in the running of software, and users are often encouraged to clear cache data to increase the efficiency of their devices. Consequently, the story suggests that collective traumatic memories not only imprison successive generations, but that they weigh them down and prevent individuals from functioning as well as they could. This further suggests that severing the link to those memories might be necessary before the future can have any meaningful viability. And indeed, later in the narrative, Ziad's father wonders, "Would our personalities have been different without this weight inside our souls?" (p. 17)

In some stories—and in a move reminiscent of *The Pact of Forgetting after the Spanish Civil War*—severing the link with the past is institutionalized as a core component of the "peace" that has been achieved.⁵ In "N.," the agreement between Israelis and Palestinians contains Article 7, stating that, "Both parties shall refrain from commemorating the hostilities that occurred between them, or any part thereof. This shall include commemorations of a direct and/or symbolic nature, as well as commemorations of celebration and/or mourning" (p. 54). Consequently, interest in the past is limited to scholarly endeavours whereby it is agreed that "the parties shall limit activities related to the history of the hostilities between them to the field of research, under the stipulation that any such research

activities must be authorised jointly by both parties" (p. 54). However, Samir El-Youssef's "The Association" goes further in that history itself has become the enemy and the study of the past is outlawed. In this story, the 2028 Peace Agreement between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish parties includes a law which "ban[s] anyone going back over the past by writing, speculating or in any way publishing about it" (p. 144). Though the law was initially "well-received by an exhausted, war-weary people" (p. 144), extremist organizations subsequently spring up whose aim is to resurrect and preserve history. These groups, some of which are labeled as terrorist, include "the Jidar who harboured evidence of the effects of the near 20-year blockade of Gaza" and "the Mathaf who secretly preserved evidence of the atrocities of Occupation" (p. 145). The association to which the story's title refers is one such organization; believing that "war is better than the lies that they call peace" (p. 146), it facilitates a political assassination in order to alert people that forgetting "is a sign of deep-rooted corruption" and that "no one has the right to forget the past" (p. 150). Consequently, laws enacted in a spirit of reconciliation, and which presuppose the suppression of painful memories for all parties involved, prove futile and inadequate to the goal of lasting peace given that they necessitate a denial of justice and withholding of restitution.

This desire to forget, whether at an intergenerational or institutional level, contributes to postmemorial absence, which in turn produces a profound sense of isolation and detachment. As a result, the sense of present existence as a limbo is rendered digitally (through the use of parallel spaces and simulations) across the collection. In "N.," the solution to the conflict is presented as two parallel worlds occupying the same geographical space. In other words, there is a Palestinian Haifa and an Israeli Haifa, a Palestinian Hebron and an Israeli Hebron, and so on. Furthermore, only Palestinians born after the establishment of these spaces can move freely between them, which opens up a fissure between the eponymous N. and his father when he decides to go to the Israeli side to study. The father is left feeling suspended in the Palestinian world, watching his son disappear through the depar-

Cached memories, continued

ture tunnel, which he says, “swallows our children to over there, to the other over there” (p. 45). Thus, the solution presented is no solution at all really; in fact, N.’s father recalls how a friend likened it to “a hi-tech, scientific apartheid” (p. 58). Likewise, in “The Key,” the Israeli solution is another kind of wall, one which “would not be a solid, concrete edifice, like those of the past—that would have the wrong psychological effect” (p. 69). This wall would be digitized such that only persons implanted with the correct chip could pass through it. However, the persistent haunting by Palestinian ghosts attempting to infiltrate the characters’ homes suggests that such a measure would ultimately fail. It becomes clear then, that these stories illustrate how “even the most extraordinary future technology can do little more than mirror or reframe the current, real-world impasse” (Ghalayini, 2019, p. xii).

In fact, future technology only enhances and deepens separation. In “N.,” citizens escape the present via virtual realities (VRs) which depict everything from war to pornography to “historical-cultural” realities, such as one of early-20th-century Egypt that N.’s father returns to over and over. He notes how some of these realities attempt to alter history by, for example, removing “a young Gamal Abdel Nasser from its database, so that you can’t detect his presence” (p. 48). Tying these forms of entertainment to Article 7 of the Agreement, N.’s father concludes that the VRs’ success depends on the users’ willingness to forsake the past, the “complete abandonment of their memory” (p. 49). Furthermore, it relies on the isolation that characterizes their circumstances: “Isolation from the other, isolation from the self, isolation from existence” (p. 49). In other words, the VRs are a method to escape the separation imposed by the establishment of the parallel worlds, and yet they also reinforce that isolation by allowing “everyone—Arabs and Israelis—[to bury] themselves in the warmth of their sofas, in their different realities” (p. 49). A similar form of VR appears in Emad El-Din Aysha’s “Digital Nation,” in which the protagonist laments that this technology allows “kids everywhere to spend all their free time in parallel worlds, on far away planets... anywhere but here” (p.

77).

“N.” amplifies the theme of isolation and detachment in form as well as content. The polyphonic story is divided into three parts: The Departure is narrated by N.’s father; The Encounter contains contributions by Ibn al-Qalaq (the fishmonger), N., and N.’s father; and the final section, The Return, is again narrated by N.’s father. While there is a temporal circularity here—where the closing section is labeled with the emotionally-charged word “Return” (or ‘awdah)—the story stylistically highlights the alienation expressed by the characters in that the individual narrative threads are depicted as one-sided conversations that only cohere for the reader as they move through the story. In other words, N., in his section in The Encounter, responds to topics raised by his father in other sections as though they were in the midst of a conversation: N.’s section opens with “It smells good. Bull’s tail? Wow. Eight hours? It smells amazing” (p. 52) while his father’s second narration ends with “Another piece? Bull’s tail is good, eh?” (p. 59). Thus, the different contributions are not standalone narrations but can be threaded together as coherent conversations. However, in keeping characters isolated in their sections, Kayyal spotlights how alienation and absence take hold within a displaced existence while transferring that jarring sense of discontinuity to the reader.

“Digital Return”: Chronographies of Power and Spatiotemporal Reclamation

Thus far, I have argued that *Palestine +100* extends Hirsch’s notion of postmemory which, when articulated through LaCapra’s theory of Absence and Loss, produces a postmemorial absence. This is a state defined by isolation, suspension, and an inability to cohere a sense of self as an individual grows up burdened by weighty inter- and transgenerational memories of collective trauma that are compounded by present-day collective injustices and a lack of closure. Now I will turn to the ways in which the writers in this collection employ science fiction in a subversive gesture, whereby chronotopic power structures are dismantled in an act of resistance that allows them to claim an identity space amid historical (and current)

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erasure and silencing.

Science fiction offers the temptation of utopia, of future technological advancements ameliorating or even eradicating present-day concerns. However, often this vision proves to be dystopian, or even, as Fredric Jameson (2005) states, anti-Utopian, in that such fiction is “informed by a central passion to denounce and to warn against Utopian programs in the political realm” (p. 199). Such is the case in Haddad’s “Song of the Birds,” which takes place in a Gaza City filled with sunbathers on the beach, the smell of freshly grilled meat, and “cheesy music blasting from the drone speakers in the sky” (p. 1). It is a city of beachfront hotels, “quaint cafés and vintage furniture shops” (p. 14). In short, it is not a Gaza anyone in the present-day would recognize. Often described as an ‘open-air prison’ Gaza is a place of fences and walls, ringed by Israeli snipers. According to a *Guardian* article by Sarah Helm, “A Suicide in Gaza” (2018), which Haddad cites as an influence, after more than a decade under siege, the two million strong population “find themselves without work, their economy killed off, without the bare essentials for decent life—electricity or running water—and without any hope of freedom, or any sign that their situation will change.”

And yet “Song of the Birds” takes place in a world of bio-therapeutic bandages that disintegrate as they heal, robo-cleaners, and teaching holograms, leading the reader to believe that a long-desired liberation has resulted in prosperity. However, what appears to be an idyllic existence quickly begins to unravel. Teen suicides have been increasing rapidly across the city, one of whom is eighteen-year-old Ziad, the brother of the story’s protagonist, fourteen-year-old Aya. Ziad hanged himself the year before and begins to appear in her dreams to convince her that they live in a simulation concealing the actual, ravaged city. This simulacrum of Gaza is what Foucault (1984) might call a “heterotopia of compensation,” or “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled” (p. 8). The siblings were born in the simulation, and the only escape is to commit suicide.

Moreover, Ziad tells Aya that in order to construct this world, the Israeli authorities “harnessed our collective memories, creating a digital image of Palestine” (p. 14) with which to placate the population. In other words, memory, that perennial link to subjectivity and communal identity, has been weaponized against a people for whom acts of remembrance have always constituted a duty.

During their dream conversations, Aya experiences what Bardenstein (2007) might term a diasporic anachronism, albeit one occurring in a digital realm, which does not represent “being ‘out of time’ or ‘in time’ or history, but the perception and sensibility of living in and being shaped by multiple time frames simultaneously” (p. 26). In a sense, Haddad’s Gaza is not so much dystopic as it is dys-chronotopic, revealed to be a literal and metaphorical “fake place” whose inhabitants are suspended in a sphere where both time and space no longer carry any ontological meaning. Furthermore, this “right to digital return” (Haddad, 2019, p. 15) not only makes a mockery of the “right of return” enshrined in UN General Assembly Resolution 194,⁶ but, in fact, constitutes a new and experimental colonisation which requires new tools of resistance. In discovering this deceit, the siblings take on the attributes of the exile, whose “actual condition,” according to Said (1994), “makes it impossible to recapture [the sweetness of the homeland], and even less possible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma, whether deriving from pride in one’s heritage or from certainty about who ‘we’ are” (p. 407). The sense of simultaneous (em)placement destabilizes Aya and leaves her despondent, caught between accepting the mirage of liberation and escaping the simulation: “The two worlds were merging, and what emerged wasn’t one or another but a third dimension, a nightmarish new conglomeration” (pp. 18-19). She eventually chooses to join her brother, walking into the sea with a backpack full of stones.

In Aysha’s “Digital Nation,” utopia is “a dangerous thing. It had to be stamped out. Hope was ‘calculating’ and calculatable” (p. 81, emphasis in the orig-

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inal). In this story, Palestinians launch a digital war against the Israelis, infiltrating their systems by way of a programme/hacker that comes to be known as Hannibal. The stock market and social media are initial targets followed by a virus that “convert[s] all on-line use of Hebrew into Arabic” (p. 82). Eventually, the programme succeeds in creating “the world’s first virtual government” (p. 88). Going beyond infecting just computers in Israel, it tracks “its way to every player whose medical records showed Levantine blood (dated to 1948, including Jewish and Christian players, of course). The slogan that appeared on their screens as it downloaded read, ‘It’s time to come home’” (p. 89). It would be a mistake, however, to view this “digital return”—where Palestine becomes a “single government, free floating in a digital sea” (p. 89)—as a *de facto* surrendering of the land so long fought over. On the contrary, the third stage of the offensive involves a reversal of the renaming of streets and areas in Palestine, which is an exercise of power by the Israeli state and constitutes yet another trauma lingering in the Palestinian psyche.⁷ In “N.,” the father strolls through a neighbourhood he used to frequent, saying, “We always used to dream about bringing back the real names of the streets, the names the Zionists changed for those 76 years” (p. 57). These spaces are reclaimed in “Digital Nation” where, over the course of a single day, “virtual tour guides, eBooks and online atlases all began rewriting themselves, telling tourists they were, in fact, in Palestine, and replacing all Hebrew names with their pre-1948 Arabic ones” (p. 86). Without a sense of irony, the Israeli protagonist, Asa Shomer, asks: “Who needed to ‘liberate’ Palestine if you could convert Israel into Palestine? You wouldn’t even need to build a new world, just repaint the existing one” (p. 84, emphasis in the original). Though this would seem to be the only story in the collection with a wholly victorious narrative resolution—with “the Palestinian flag [...] fluttering—the right way up this time—over the Dome of the Rock” (p. 92)—it is revealed that an Israeli psychiatrist was the prime facilitator of the hacking programme. It is a problematic end as it gestures to the need for an Israeli “saviour” before Palestinian liberatory desires can be realized while also

suggesting that escape from the existing framework of total dominance is futile.

Space is not the only plane on which power struggles occur. Time—its control, organization, and disruption—also constitutes a site of conflict. In his article on Middle Eastern futurisms, Jussi Parikka (2018) notes how “time is a central part of struggles across a horizon of [...] politics of ethnicities, race, and neo-liberalism as formative of everyday habits and practices” (p. 43). This is certainly the case in Palestine/Israel where authorities exert enormous power by manipulating and controlling Palestinian temporal modalities. Movement restrictions in the territories are well-documented, with various obstacles—from checkpoints to curfews to the Separation Wall—severely disrupting daily economic and social life. According to the United Nations (2020), there are 593 fixed obstacles to movement in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, up from 542 in 2013. Additionally, the United Nations noted that permanent obstacles, such as roadblocks, are being replaced with flexible ones such as partial checkpoints. There is a temporal aspect to restricted movement that is often overlooked: checkpoints translate to long delays while roads classified as for-Israeli-use necessitate detours that can be considerably longer than direct routes. This is in addition to burdensome bureaucratic and administrative processes to secure permits and licenses, which also hamper social life and undermine livelihoods. Such policies serve as examples of how, as Parikka (2018) notes, “reality creation (or what some would just call ideology) is fundamentally related to modalities of time” (p. 44, emphasis in the original).

This “reality creation” is taken to extremes in Tasnim Abutabikh’s “Vengeance,” wherein high levels of pollution require the population to wear lifemasks in order to breathe. Citizens receive a mask at birth, “which adapted, expanded and even changed colour as they got older” (p. 108). And though the masks occasionally require repair, they are never replaced. Essentially, they serve as a tool to monitor and control the population. This is elevated to an appalling degree as Israeli authorities issue “deactivation” dates to citizens. One

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character, Yousef, becomes involved in a black market smuggling unassigned lifemasks because his daughter had been “sentenced to deactivation at the age of two due to a congenital heart disease, putting her on a ‘high cost’ list” (p. 115). The protagonist, Ahmed, betrays Yousef to the authorities in exchange for an extension on his sick mother’s deactivation date. When the soldiers arrive, a deputy steps forward and “after first swiping an identity card past the side of Yousef’s head, [flips] a switch just behind his left ear” (p. 114). Onlookers watch as Yousef falls to the ground, clutching his neck and choking, until “his face turned purple and by the third minute, he stopped thrashing” (p. 114). Thus, the story chillingly illustrates a chronography of power that specifies “whose future was cancelled and when it was (already) cancelled” (Parikka, 2018, p. 43)—a dynamic which has particular resonance in the case of the contemporary coloniality of the Occupied Territories.

According to Parikka (2018), futurism, as an aesthetic expression, confronts these chronographies as such works aim to “unhinge existing temporal schemes and complexify already existing regimes of time as forms of power” (p. 44).⁸ Two stories in *Palestine +100* serve this aim. Talal Abu Shawish’s “Final Warning” takes place in Ramallah where the Imam, Sheikh Hassaan, sits in a mosque after leading the dawn prayer and awaits sunrise. When the sky remains dark longer than it should, the Imam grows anxious. Another character, Rahel, panics when she looks at her great-great-grandfather’s clock and notices that its pendulum “wasn’t moving; it hadn’t moved, apparently, since 5 o’clock that morning” (p. 162). As the characters register that the sun is not rising, they also notice that all electrical equipment is out: smartphone screens remain black; the air-conditioning will not turn on; and telephones have no dial tones. The sheikh moves towards Al-Manara Square, “shaking and frothing as he cited verses from the Quran” (p. 162). This reaction not only stems from the shock one would feel upon waking to discover that the sun is not rising but is also due to the fact that this phenomenon is considered, in Islam, as one of the End Signs. These are signs which are understood to appear to mankind

in anticipation of Judgment Day, one of which is the sun rising in the West. The sheikh affirms this when he tells a panicked citizen, “It’s all over. Allah’s wrath is upon us, this is the end. It is Al-Qiyaamah, Judgment Day” (p. 164). Soon the crowd is joined by the Christian and Jewish inhabitants, along with the local rabbi and priest, who stand and watch as “the colossal white limbs of [a] creature” (p. 165) rise up over the horizon. At the fearful sight—which they understand to mean that the world has come to an end—“Sheikh Hassaan and Father Yohanna approached Rabbi Weiss [...]. As if following some script, the three figureheads solemnly joined hands and began chanting in a single tongue” (p. 166). However, it transpires that the creature is in fact a spaceship as a “long haunted wail seemed to come from all of [its] orifices at once, [...] followed by a shrill, robotic voice that translated [the sound] into Hebrew and Arabic” (p. 167). Alien beings tell the assembled crowd that they are intervening because the Palestinian-Israeli conflict “acts as a symbol, a case study, a metaphor, a lightning rod, a red rag for conflicts across the entire planet’s surface” (p. 168) and that the conflict further risks the wider galaxy’s stability. In order to capture humanity’s attention and deliver their warning, they have “deactivated all [...] electron-based technologies, as well as paused [the] planet’s rotation” (p. 168). Promising not to interfere again in the future, the alien beings declare that they will “redraw the borders correctly” and “monitor [the] world from afar” (p. 168). As the spacecraft departs, the crowd watches “the edge of the sun appear in the distance, to the east” (p. 169). In other words, the alien intervention serves as a kind of messianic redemption in which this conflict requires an external agent to intercede in the situation. Thus, the story suggests that peace necessitates overthrowing existing power structures, in both their spatial and temporal dimensions. Resolution is not so simple though and, indeed, like in the majority of the stories, it proves futile. As the crowd disperses, Isaam (an atheist who did not believe that Judgement Day was upon them) watches a group of settlers make their way back to the Jewish sector and laughs when he sees their “way blocked by a colossal new wall that hadn’t been there before”

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(p. 170). The “redrawing of borders” has resulted in new obstacles and restrictions of movement, suggesting that additional conflicts are inevitable.

Rather than bringing time to a halt, Abdalmuti Maqboul’s “Personal Hero” completely unhinges temporal mechanisms from accepted norms. The two narrative strands—one depicting the life and death of Palestinian nationalist resistance fighter Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni (1907-1948) and the other depicting the night of a scientific breakthrough by his granddaughter, Laila—run concurrently. However, while Laila’s narrative adheres to a temporal linearity, Abd al-Qadir’s story unfolds in reverse. Laila is a scientist who has invented a technology called “Turing’s 10D” which “converts all data into virtual reality. [...] The device works by running a fully-intelligent simulation of world history in reverse” (p. 102). Conducting the first test, Laila brings her grandfather back to life in a haunting unpacking of time, in which the reader learns that “Today is the ninth of April [1948], and tomorrow the eighth, a hero will be returned to life” (pp. 96-97). Abd al-Qadir’s narrative, which is the primary one in the story, is characterized by a “queer direction of time, its gears in reverse. [...] Returning home at the end of a new day, people are caught in morning traffic, but arrive in time for the rooster’s first call” (p. 96). Brought back to life, Abd al-Qadir leads a charge to reverse Operation Nachshon⁹ and crashes a meeting where he berates Arab leaders for betraying the Palestinian cause. He then returns home and greets his daughter (Laila’s mother), Haifa. If we were to follow the logic of his timeline, she should be ten years old (as she was when he died), but the Haifa who greets him is an adult: “I waited so long for you. I waited until I was old, then until I was young again. [...] I am not sure how it is the days are returning. Only that they have brought us together” (p. 100). Haifa sought stories of her father, which she then passed down to Laila who (presumably) used them to populate the Turing’s 10D device. With this technology, not only is Laila able to turn back time, but she has entirely dismantled its mechanisms, so that her mother is able to converse with Abd al-Qadir as an adult while retaining memories of his death and the years that followed. It is a bitter-

sweet achievement, however; as Abd al-Qadir’s narrative continues “the old grow spryer and the young slip back to first beginnings. Difficult days for all the parents who have to watch their children fade before their eyes (p. 101).” Abd al-Qadir and Laila watch as Haifa gradually “becomes a wailing, screaming lump of flesh between his hands,” until her birthday, 2 April 1937, when she is returned to her mother’s body. Nevertheless, Laila has conquered the vagaries of history in a way. By allowing Haifa to converse with the father she had previously only known by his “absence,” Laila negates his death at the hands of the Zionist military and counteracts a wider policy of suppressing and erasing Palestinian voices and experiences.

“Personal Hero” has sharp resonances with the “synchronize[d] diachrony” Bakhtin (1981) saw in the *Inferno*, where the vertical logic of Dante’s world allows for events to coalesce “into pure simultaneous coexistence” (p. 157). It is only when time, Bakhtin says, “is deprived of its authentic reality and its power to shape thinking,” that we can begin to understand “the true meaning of ‘that which was, and which is and which shall be’” (p. 157). While Bakhtin does not address the chronotope as a modality of power, that is to say, an ideological tool that shapes reality, he notes how Dante’s world (like that of “Personal Hero”) is populated with historical figures who have been affected by time. Thus, political and reactionary forces thrust themselves forward and resist the extratemporal form in which they have been placed; in other words, Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni’s historical reality strains toward “participation in a temporal-historical chronotope” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 157) that the world of Maqboul’s story (and the world Laila creates) denies him.

Conclusion

Science fiction, particularly in (post)colonial inflections, is a fertile and as-yet-unexplored ground for reading under the paradigm of literary trauma theory. In foregrounding spatial and temporal modalities, the genre offers a new framework with which to interrogate genealogies of traumatic dispossession and displacement. In *Palestine +100*, a near-future imaginary is presented which focalizes a postmemorial

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absence through spatiotemporal (dis)ruptures. The stories highlight Palestinian identities constituted by the “forever catastrophe” of the Nakba. This collective traumatic postmemory burdens the characters, and the tension between a duty to remember and a desire to forget results in varied attempts to sever the inter- and transgenerational traumatic link, on both a personal and institutionalized level.

Given the current state of Palestinian-Israeli relations and the fact that the future envisioned in *Palestine +100* is not even thirty years away from the time of writing, it comes as no surprise that most of the stories sound a bleak and fatalistic note. Indeed, the collection, as a whole, appears to confirm the conviction of Jameson (2005) that escaping “today” in order to devise a “tomorrow” of true alterity is impossible, and that, in fact, science fiction serves to “demonstrate and [...] dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future,” by revealing itself to be “mired in the all-too-familiar” and becoming instead “a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (pp. 288-289). No less so, then, when the present is conceived of as a long, trauma-filled pause. The collection affirms that future imaginaries are not necessarily “about hope. Their visions are not wishful thinking or dreamy fables about the possibility of ‘better’ futures. They are instead a manifestation of tactical optimism; a constructivist envisioning that gives itself the means to exist through its very own formulation” (Lambert, 2019, p. 15). Resolution in these stories is not an act of settlement between conflicting parties; instead, it refers to a firmness of purpose, tenacity, and a persevering spirit. It is a new mode for expressing *sumud*, that indefatigable steadfastness which has long characterized Palestinian identity. By dismantling a present that harbours the spectre of the past, these stories unhinge fixed ideas of space and time, simultaneously asserting Palestinian existence and claiming a future horizon.

Notes

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy sees a vital dimension of subjectivity as “the presence of the existent. [...] Present is that which occupies a place. The place is place–site, situation, disposition—in the coming into space of a time”

(J. L. Nancy, 1991, p. 7). See Nancy, J. L. (1991). Introduction. In Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, & Jean-Luc Nancy (Eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject* (pp. 1-8). One might also consider Kant’s concept of space and time as “necessary representation[s], lying at the foundation of all our intuitions.” See Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), p. 88.

² Personal communication with author, July 6, 2020.

³ Bakhtin’s influential 1937 essay canvasses canonical “Western” literature, ranging from Ancient Greece through medieval European texts and up to 19th and early-20th century classics. He locates different time-space configurations which give distinct narrative character to different genres, such as the adventure novel or the chivalric romance novel.

⁴ In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud conceives of the latter as a static, unproductive pathological condition in which the subject grieves over an unnamed or unidentified loss. See S. Freud & J. Strachey. (1957). The Standard Edition of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14 (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-analytic Movement; Papers on Metapsychology; Mourning and Melancholia and Other Works.

⁵ Institutionalized in the 1977 Amnesty Law, the Pact of Forgetting (or *Pacto del olvido*) was an agreement between leftist and rightist parties after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Made in an effort to smooth the transition to democracy in the wake of Franco’s death in 1975, the pact ensured that no particular party would be held responsible for mass suffering during the war or the repression that followed. The law has been widely criticized for equating victims and victimizers, with the UN calling for its repeal in 2012. See *Legacies of Violence in Contemporary Spain: Exhuming the Past, Understanding the Present*. (2016). Ofelia Ferrán & Lisa Hilbink (Eds.)

⁶ Article 11 (adopted December 1948): “Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the

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earliest practicable date, and compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.” See *UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East*, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>.

⁷ Nur Masalha argues that such toponymic projects were integral to ethno-nationalist aspirations and intensified following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. For more, see Masalha, N. 2015. Settler-Colonialism, Memoricide and Indigenous Toponymic Memory: the appropriation of Palestinian place names by the Israeli State. *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 14(1), 3-57.

⁸ Parikka (2018) builds on Sara Sharma’s use of the term “chronography of power” in referring to “temporality as an invisible and unremarked relation of power” (p. 42).

⁹ A Zionist military operation during the 1948 war to open the road between Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, blockaded by Palestinians in the Siege of Jerusalem. See Note 2 in Maqboul, A. (2019). *Personal Hero*. (Y. Seale, Trans.). In Basma Ghalayini (Ed.), *Palestine +100* (pp. 95-102).

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War of the Worlds: Geologic Consciousness in Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*

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Abstract: Iranian philosopher and writer Reza Negarestani crosses horror, science fiction, theology, and speculative realism in his complex 2008 work *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Investigating supposedly ancient technologies rooted in oil and oil extraction through a series of increasingly arcane essays, Negarestani locates in the Middle East a geologic consciousness ingrained into human and natural histories that is manipulated and consequently also manipulates human and non-human actors through processes of extraction and consumption. Negarestani's geologic consciousness is a thinking Earth whose oil explicitly guides and "lubricates" events that lead to power and dominance for the surface-level humans and non-humans, while a subterranean-rooted large-scale war between the planet and the sun continues into perpetuity. Foucauldian biopolitics are visible here as life itself is used in gestures of sovereignty, making relevant recent revisions of biopolitics in the work of Achille Mbembe, Dominic Boyer, and Jeffrey Nealon. Negarestani reverses typical assumptions of terraforming—the idea of a human-led restructuring of the planet is instead inverted to reveal a planetary-led manipulation of the human and nonhuman actors staking claim to its surface. This reframing rescales relations and allows for a reorientation of the way that processes of oil extraction are understood. It suggests a terracentric model of reality as opposed to an anthropocentric one. Negarestani's geologic consciousness restructures Middle Eastern philosophical, environmental, and economic relations and puts pressure on assumptions about human-dominated control of the planet, pushing for a broader, less privileged understanding of human and nonhuman relations on a range of distinct scales.

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Talk Among the Stars

As a human-developed¹ medium of imaginative production, science fiction often incorporates anthropo-centered wells of scientific and cultural understandings, allowing for speculations that (re)imagine the sets of prior, existing, and future relations among humans, materials, and nonhuman forms of organic life (as well as imaginings of certain forms of inorganic life). The outcomes of these speculations are far from uniform, but often beg us to question naturalized assumptions popularized within Westernized thinking and practices. One such assumed notion is that of planet Earth's anthropocentricity—a perspective that centers around the effect of the world's processes on dominant human groups, as well as the manner in which these human groups have likewise affected those processes. One need only look at how the Anthropocene as a term has been argued as a descriptor for the current age—a time in which, according to paleontologist Kenneth Lacovara, "[humans are] changing things, in many cases in irreparable ways, and that will certainly be recorded in the geological rec-

ord. [...] There's no doubt if you could go 5, 10, 15 million years into the future and dig down to 2016, you would be able to find the geological evidence that humans occupied the planet" (Raz, 2016). The term itself does have benefits, insofar as it enables humanity to reorganize its understanding of its influence over the world. Evans (2018) suggests that "nomenclature such as 'Anthropocene' can be science fictional. Such names do not simply prompt critical thinking; they call up novel narratives predicated specifically on the embedding of an estranging novum into a storyworld that diverges significantly from the known world" (p. 485). What she terms a "science fictional" manner of (re)thinking pinpoints science fiction's efficacy as a mode of reframing human perspectives. She suggests that "[t]o identify the science fictionality of the Anthropocene is to recognize that the term introduces a novum that differentiates it from our prior sense of the world, integrates that novum into a future-oriented but historically grounded narrative, and uses that narrative to direct a reexamination

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of modernity" (p. 485). While such an analysis of the Anthropocene's wider effects is helpful, it does not change the fact that—as evidenced by the centrality of "anthropo" in the term—humans remain dominantly self-absorbed in their thinking about the world and the sets of relations layered within lived reality. While it is true that humans are heavily entangled within the geological and ecological aspects of the Earth, it does not follow that predominantly human-centric models of reality must take supremacy. Any type of distance from such a model of thinking contributes to a wider understanding of those relations and more sustainability in existing with them. Some extant modes of thinking, like that of the indigenous groups described by Cruikshank (2005) already imagine such models. Nonetheless, dominant human groups and settler cultures have historically dismissed and mythologized these forms of knowledge during past cross-cultural encounters and have instead continued to rely on European notions of science as the primary mode of sense-making when it comes to the environment.

The difficulty of even attempting to view the world's processes as separate from humanity's within the domain of the scientific lies in the difficulty—perhaps impossibility—of separating knowledge and understanding from the subjectivity of human perspective. Ian Bogost pinpoints this as he describes Thomas Nagel's attempt to answer the question, "what is it like to be a bat?"² The "alien phenomenology" that Bogost (2012) identifies is that, no matter the level to which we reduce an experience to physical components and "even if evidence from outside a thing (be it bat, hookah, or cantaloupe) offers clues to how it perceives, the experience of that perception remains withdrawn" (p. 63). As Bogost points out, even the best analysis cannot offer a complete understanding. The barriers that exist are too great. However, while the idea that other intelligences are withdrawn from human understanding is a core component in much of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)³ and remains an important source of insight into the available and unavailable avenues of breaking from human thinking, what I want to draw attention to is the way that this scenario exposes the particularly

anthropocentric allowances that human thinking necessitates. I further suggest that one function of science fiction's reorienting sets of relations is to deform assumptions of human-centered models of reality and draw attention to the inherently biased characteristics in such models. This deformation produces platforms from which a more planetary democracy can be imagined, or at least vantages where the assumption of a human-dominated planetary hierarchy is problematized, even as they are routed through stubborn anthropocentric human thinking. This involves a reprogramming of the reader or viewer.

Iranian philosopher and writer Reza Negarestani's 2008 work, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, uniquely deforms popular Western assumptions about hierarchies of animacy through his science fictional cross-stitching of Iranian culture, Islamic traditions, speculative realism, and continental philosophy. The novel builds its storyworld through a combination of pseudo-academic analysis and summary essays written by or about the fictional Hamid Parsani, a radical archaeologist whose investigations into arcane histories and the occult are hinted to have led to his recent disappearance under suspicious circumstances. The increasingly arcane essays continue to investigate antediluvian mysticisms and technologies rooted in oil and oil extraction as well as revealing a stellar conflict going back to before the evolution of human life. Negarestani locates his novel in the Middle East and consequently puts into conversation Iranian and Western views of the natural world. With its agriculturally rich history and unique ecosystems, Iran has a tradition of cultivating nature that is commonly seen through the integration of indoor and outdoor spaces, a persistent motif found in Iranian architecture. Fondness for nature and respect for the open air and spaces have grown from the pastoral roots of Iranian culture. However, nature is often curated for use by human intervention. Natural spaces in Iran have frequently been utilized as locations for farming or as preserves for game hunting. In the 1960s, environmental conservatism was linked to a push by elites to create sites for big game hunting. Iran established

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one of the largest national park and conservation programs in the Middle East at that time, though this has since eroded as a push for development and expansion have taken a prime role in the country's plans for progress (Schwartzstein, 2020). The field work conducted by Abe (2012) regarding Iranian relationships to planetary ecology finds that Iranian knowledge of nature has been influenced and modeled on Western understandings of science and nature greatly over the last hundred years. Abe describes that "[i]n Western history, nature gradually became an object of scientific inquiries, being increasingly viewed as 'objectifiable' and 'knowable'" (p. 262). This means that Western modes of perceiving nature rely on breaking nature into component parts and objectifying them for physical investigation. It is a technical and sometimes narrow way of seeing nature, and even within Western modes of thinking, that sterility in analysis has been challenged by some individuals. In 1916, for example, Scottish born American naturalist John Muir asked, "why may not even a mineral arrangement of matter be endowed with sensation of a kind that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with?"⁴ Traditional Iranian views on nature often appear as a mixture of mysticism and utility, but not of taxonomic investigation. While Abe delineates ways that the Iranian views on nature coexist with and have developed alongside Western traditions of knowing nature through technical investigation, his analysis of Iranian knowledge about nature points out that, as a whole, Iranians are unlikely to simply transpose their views of nature atop Western ones. Iranian nationalism and identity do not completely match up with these Western notions of the environment, which is perhaps what makes Negarestani's particular geological and ecological model so simultaneously familiar and alien to many of his readers. There is an almost utilitarian focus on nature's materiality and also an elevation of that material consciousness steeped in mysticism.

In *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani puts tension on concepts of anthropo-superiority and governance, and not just by replacing the book's nonhuman entities with anthropomorphized entities of godlike propor-

tion. The subtitle, "complicity with anonymous materials," establishes Negarestani's goal before the text begins: to imagine a way of thinking about the planet itself and the materials that constitute its being. Channeled through a conscious flow of oil, issues of control and power on and in the planet are central to the text as platforms for renegotiating the understanding of human and nonhuman relations. Through inverting anthropocentric models of social production and placing materials at the center of his framework of relations, Negarestani (re)imagines understandings of the processes cycling through local, national, planetary, and interplanetary systems.

In an interview with Fabio Gironi, Negarestani describes how he "wrote *Cyclonopedia* with only one priority, constructing a sense of syncretism and paranoia: both characteristics of the contemporary Middle East" (Gironi, 2018). He attributes this to his own background: growing up as an Iranian Muslim during the Iran-Iraq war and then getting his degree in systems engineering while fostering a private fascination with continental philosophy. This background has contributed to the stacking of numerology, demonology, cosmology, materialism, and geopolitics in the novel, and gives way to both the technical approach of his writing and the grounding of his text in Islamic occultism. His ability to blend genres like horror and science fiction as well as modes of thinking like Islamic mysticism and poststructuralism, make the novel stand out. The novel is often associated with the subgenre of science fiction described as "weird fiction," and *Cyclonopedia* has been called "an incestuous amalgam of Lovecraftian chthonic horrors, Islamic theology, Deleuzian hallucinations, numerology, and not-so-fictional middle-eastern geopolitics" (Gironi, 2018). This description of his work—a mixture composed of what are often seen as incongruent pieces—is helpful, as I argue that it is productive to envision Negarestani's planetary ecologies and systems not as differentiated wholes, but as a sort of concentration of assemblages in which the various agents consciously or unconsciously form and function as a larger unit (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Delanda, 2016; Hayles 2017). Still, despite the knowing and un-

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knowing “complicity” of the “anonymous materials,” in creating these assemblages, it is Negarestani’s notion of the planetary consciousness at work (and guiding the machinations of the human and nonhuman world in asymmetrical proportions) that guides this article. The worlds in Negarestani’s novel are cognizant and the Earth is literally at war with the Sun, and all of the organic and inorganic objects at work on these planets are being played as part of an interplanetary chess match—whether they realize it or not. The anthropocentric model of reality is rendered obsolete or foolhardy and, instead, the reader must perform a terra-centric mapping of relations to process the entirety of *Cyclonopedia*.

Foucault in the Cracks

Foucault’s concept of biopolitics and biopower offers a helpful perspective in the reading of Negarestani’s geologic consciousness. Describing a “biopolitics of the human race,” Foucault (1997/2003) suggested that biopolitics seeks to control “set[s] of processes such as the ratio of births to death, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population [...] together with a whole series of related economic and political problems” (p. 243). Negarestani’s notion of the planet controlling the life and death of all organic life on and within itself as a means of gathering power against the Sun can be productively read using Mbembe’s discussions of biopolitics. His questions—for example, “under what practical conditions is the power to kill, to let live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right?” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66)—underscore the correlation between biopolitics and sovereignty—the power over life and death. He terms this biopolitical focus on and management of death “necropolitics,” and he explains that “sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 80). To wield necropower, then, is to have the power to decide who can and will die, often simply by de-individualizing persons or taking these people as a form of power to be used, reused, and eventually disposed of as one would toss away an old tool that has served its purpose and outlived its utility. The geologic con-

sciousness of *Cyclonopedia*, in fact, at the center of all the continually circular patterns within the novel, is found in this materiality’s sovereignty over matters of death. In his book, *Plant Theory*, Nealon (2016) reads Foucault’s biopolitics in conversation with, first, the inclusion of nonhuman animal life and, second, the addition of vegetal life. He states that “animality is fully incorporated into biopower as the template for life itself” (p.7). Nealon goes on to make a case for how, just as animal life can be applied to Foucault’s notions of biopower, so too can vegetal life.⁵ These considerations further complicate the concept of biopower as they bring, not just human life, but also animal and vegetable life under its purview. If, as is suggested in *Cyclonopedia*, the planet draws organic life toward death in order to convert the living material into literal energy in the form of fossil fuels, then Negarestani’s novel literalizes and extends notions of biopower.

Boyer (2019) has conducted a recent anthropological study in which he coins another idea based on biopolitics—one that he calls energopolitics. His study of wind energy production on Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec specifically notes the relationship between energy production and political institutions. Boyer describes “a more basic but also invisible codependence between our contemporary infrastructures of political power and our infrastructures of energy” (Boyer, 2019, p. 16). Derived from biopolitical methods of power tracing, Boyer complicates the notion of power production by showing that “the material and infrastructural dimensions of energy both enable and disable certain configurations of political power. The line of analysis questions whether political power in the conventional (human-centered) sense can really be taken to be an autonomous and efficacious domain” (Boyer, 2019, p. 1). Boyer’s study—much like the fertile ground excavated by Mbembe and Nealon within their studies of biopolitics—productively configures the means by which Negarestani’s geologic consciousness manages sovereignty for humans and nonhumans, whether it is unaware of the existence of such networks or cognizant of them. By granting energy itself status as a material object, the material consciousness that

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frames *Cyclonopedia* can be understood as wielding and embodying notions of biopolitics, or finding entanglements between politics and energy production that cannot be clearly articulated as granted from one source or the other. In the end, the “oily entity” controls or at least manipulates human and nonhuman life, as well as organic and inorganic nonliving material, through internal programming, from the surface to the substratum where the material flows maintain dominance. The dispute between the Earth and its solar adversary intertwines these notions of energy and politics in such a way that the power dynamics of the terracentric model are rescaled spatially and temporally.

Knowing Nature

The remapping of relations from anthropocentricity to terracentricity directly correlates to ecological readings of the planet and underlines the processes that different groups of humans use to “know” nature. In his introduction to *Green Planets*, Canavan (2014) suggests that “ecological critique [...] can productively be thought of as a kind of science fiction, as it uses the same tools of cognition and extrapolation to project the conditions of a possible future— whether good or bad, ecotopian or apocalyptic—in hopes of transforming politics in the present” (p. 17). Through investigating the science fiction concepts at work alongside the ecological in *Cyclonopedia*, a relevant model of interpreting reality influenced by human and geologic histories pushes beyond those anthropocentered boundaries of understanding in order to provide portals for making sense of planetary processes.

Negarestani, begins relating to nature through materiality. Materials are the result of so-called natural processes and are often extracted or converted by human interventions and invasions into ongoing cycles that are part of the physical world. In his book, *How Forests Think*, Kohn (2013) describes life “beyond the human,” and argues that there is a “hopeful politics we seek to cultivate, we privilege heterarchy over hierarchy, the rhizomatic over the arborescent, and we celebrate the fact that such horizontal processes—lateral gene

transfer, symbiosis, commensalism, and the like—can be found in the nonhuman living world” (p. 19). Kohn’s work is directed at what he calls the nonhuman living world, meaning bio-matter, but we can take this a step farther and include those mineral and geological materials as well, particularly if we read them, as Negarestani does, as having a consciousness. Kohn believes that there is “a relational landscape composed in part of nested and unidirectional associations of a logical and ontological, but not a moral, nature [that] is a form of anthropocentric narcissism that renders us blind to some of the properties of that world beyond the human” (p. 19). It is his conclusion that the human relationship to the nonhuman world is one which, despite a growing awareness of the nonhuman world, still features an anthropocentered reading of reality. He argues that this “anthropocentric narcissism” limits the human understanding of the planetary processes always in motion. Kohn’s observations are rooted in fieldwork that he conducted with indigenous peoples in Ecuador, but his understanding of these ecological assemblages reveals the same stubbornness and inescapably anthropocentric thinking that Negarestani’s nonhuman material consciousness inverts and reappropriates in *Cyclonopedia*. In the book, it is the thinking and yet “nonanthropocentric imagining of oil, the extractive landscapes of the Middle East, and the oil wars pursued by the United States” (Doherty, 2014, p. 367) that shape the so-called natural landscape and relay the ways in which Negarestani wants the reader to experience this ecology. The desert and the oil welled up beneath it are the natural geologies found in *Cyclonopedia*. Nature and the environment are understood through the physical relations, entanglements, and knowability of materials. As Abe (2012) illustrates, “objects play a critical role in how Iranian environmentalists conjure up and develop a conception of Iranian nature” (p. 260). The application of Abe’s research on Iranian environmentalism is easy to see in practice within *Cyclonopedia*. The materiality makes up a crucial part of Negarestani’s novel, and object awareness and analysis are intrinsic qualities of the ecologies that he builds in the text. What Negarestani calls petropolitics originates in the ancient bio-matter

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that physically make up this fossil fuel, meaning that the energy and power entanglements are directly related to the ecological entanglements found throughout the novel. The move to a terracentric model here suggests that the planet itself, through its layering of ecological entanglements, is engaging in biopolitical, necropolitical, and energopolitical manipulation of all organic and inorganic biomatter. The ancient geological consciousness has a deified element to it that comes out through the text, but one that is littered with technical, natural processes.

Negarestani's view of nature contains a duality that bridges between the scientific and the occult. Alternatively, perhaps it is better to see his view of nature as simply a larger net that is cast out, nested around, and living in the flow of oil within the desert that is central to the book. "Or, once again, take Oil as a lubricant, something that eases narration and the whole dynamism toward the desert. The cartography of oil as an omnipresent entity narrates the dynamics of planetary events. Oil is the undercurrent of all narrations, not only the political but also that of the ethics of life on earth. Oil lubes the whole desert expedition toward Tellurian Omega" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 19). The narrative voices understand this unique ecological landscape on one level through metaphysical relations and, on a second level, through the object relationality that comes from scientific scrutiny. It is this foray into the scientific that establishes this work as significant to Arab science fiction.

In a discussion with two contributors to an Arabic science fiction anthology called *Iraq +100*, author Anoud (2017) states that "The debate in Arab media about the lack of Sci-Fi in Arab literature attributes it to the Arab world hitting a slump when it comes to scientific advances and inventions in the 20th century, in comparison to other parts of the world." Even though mainstream science fiction writers like Frank Herbert and Kim Stanley Robinson⁶ plug echoes of Middle Eastern culture into their science fictional world building—with Herbert's fictional world, Arrakis, being a thinly veiled analog to Iraq (Senior, 2007), and Robinson presenting a group of Arabic settlers as one of the earliest sets

of colonizers to inhabit Mars in his *Mars* trilogy—the idea that the rather gradual progress of Westernized science in the Middle East has slowed the genre's development is echoed in Hassan Blasim's (2017) introduction to *Iraq +100*. This is doubly important when put into context with Abe's illustration of science as one of the key venues for actively engaging with and adequately reading the environment. Negarestani reveals the early influence of Western science on his writing, as well as his fascination with genre-splicing and the occult, when he explains that in his youth, "[d]uring the frequent air raids and blackouts, my sister used to read me French fairy tales like the Countess of Segur, Persian folklore, Russian science-fiction, or cloak and dagger stories by the likes of Zevaco and Dumas" (Gironi, 2018). While the Russian science-fiction most likely had the greatest degree of influence in constructing a Western scientifically based understanding of the environment for Negarestani, it is the international web of influence as well as the variety of genres from these early forays into storytelling and world building that makes segregating these influences from one another in his own writing so nonexistent. Negarestani, whose novel can lapse into jargon-filled technical descriptions of real and imagined science at a whim—while concurrently engaging with a numerological deciphering of ancient artifacts—dually builds a world that has a "uniquely Iranian concept of nature" and one that engages both directly with "the growing environmental discourses and practices [...] deliberately modeled and organized based on scientific notions of nature, indicating that this scientific notion of nature is becoming the mainstream discourse" (Abe, 2013, p. 202). Evans (2018) highlights the importance of the ecological in the study of science fiction as she explains how the "tendency toward sf is embedded in the fabric of environmental discourse, shaping environmental narratives as well as technological ones" (p. 487). Meanwhile, Canavan suggests the same sentiment in his introduction to the collection *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, when he argues "that two hundred years of SF can help us collectively 'think' this leap into futurity in the context of the epochal mass-extinction event called the Anthropocene" (Canavan and Robinson 2014, p.

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16). Negarestani's novel contains a particular presentation of and focus on existing mainstream readings of ecologies that are largely anthropocentered. His novel systematically deconstructs these mainstream readings and rebuilds a dissimilar approach as there are important "relationships between conceptions of the environment and Islam" incorporated into his text where "nature signifies the totality of the universe of which humans are a part (Nasr 1996). Humans and nature are inseparable" (Abe, 2013, p. 202). This relationship between the environment and Islam is perhaps what Herbert tried to capture in the environmentally focused mysticism in his Arrakis-born human group of Fremen, or what Robinson's character, Frank Chalmers, begins to embrace as he spends time with the Arabic Zeyk's caravan traveling across the deserts of Mars during *Red Mars*.

In *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani's cultural understanding and background enhance such imaginings of the Middle Eastern relationship between geology and religion through the application and excavation of his lived experience. Negarestani's constructions of the ecological—an ecology cradled in the deserts of the Middle East, highlighted by the geological formation and internal materials being formed beneath the planet's surface—rely on the entanglement of humans and nature that Abe addresses, but Negarestani puts pressure on the direction of the engagement. This heeds back to Kohn's fear of a unidirectional reading of relations, one in which all lines lead back to the human, and Negarestani is able to rotate such roads of engagement in his text. The geological and ecological material entities that become emblematic of nature in Negarestani's novel act as "hyperobjects," to borrow the phrase from Morton (2013), "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (p. 1). In order to know these things, to know and read nature in a meaningful way that can instruct and reframe a model of ethical relations among the planet and its inhabitants other than those understood through globalism in what has been called by Spivak (2015) "planetary," Negarestani's novel builds a knowable, or at least investigable, consciousness in

the planet itself and the materials that course or nest inside of it.

Planets at Play

Negarestani locates, a geologic consciousness in the Middle Eastern and, in particular, the Iranian materialism that is engrained into human and natural histories. The consciousness is manipulated and consequently also manipulates human and non-human actors through processes of extraction and consumption. Negarestani's portrayal of the planet in his novel underscores a kind of, as Moraru (2015) describes it, systematic "geomethodology," a way of understanding and reading planetarity. *Cyclonopedia*'s structure attempts to access and organize the human, organic, material, and geologic relationships as they intersect and knowingly or unknowingly form assemblages. The novel finds ways to merge ostensibly divergent pieces into holistic unities while concomitantly showing the separate components of this planetarity. One can trace unanticipated correlations among the entanglements revealed in the text that coincide with the manner in which the novel reframes the reader's actual thinking. In one example from *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani first engages with geopolitical human conflicts through a Capitalism/Islam binary, describing how "for Capitalism, the other side is Islam, for Islam Capitalism constitutes the other side" (p. 23), but he then describes the planet's infiltration of this conflict, saying that "earth is the other side for both Islam and Capitalism—not in the sense of exteriority, but an outsider which has crept in, an Insider" (p. 23). Here the planet's sublevel of influence is revealed as a key component in shaping human geopolitical relations, both against and integrated in as part of the binary, which Negarestani describes in total as "a decimal disease system knitted on occult tellurian and social dynamics" (p. 23). These enmeshed layers of engagement reveal a large assemblage of which humans and other organic life are part, but unknowingly so. This allows the reader to reorganize a model of understanding so-called global processes and tensions in ways that unveil outside (or inside, as Negarestani playfully puts it) influences in the workings of global human interactions. Part of

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the purpose of this text is to deform anthropocentric thought processes, requiring the reader to utilize a different codex, or more alien process, in decoding the book to align with the jolt that comes from the shift in thinking planetarily. This de- and recoding means a continual removal from the kinds of comfortable and expected modes of relating to and understanding of the world typically found in storyworlds, including the expectations the reader has of narrative voices and of traditional story arcs. Temporally, this deformation is situated throughout the novel as part of past, present, and future arcs of time and narration.

Negarestani not only produces this deformation in the text with the kinds of jolts out of naturalized understandings of human relations found in such examples as the Capitalism/Islam binary dynamic, but he draws the reader's attention to the distorting and readjusting effect that the text produces on and in the reader through the narratology. For example, he embeds this reprogramming into the text when he writes, "[i]t is no accident that hidden writings are associated with collective authors, as in the case of *apocrypha scripta*. One of the initial symptoms of inauthenticity that Hidden Writing produces is positive disintegration, or more accurately, collectivization of one author (voice) or an authorial elite, and its transformation to an untraceable shady collective of writers, a crowd" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 62). The text not only puts pressure on itself and its own reliability as a representative voice that ought to be considered authentic, but also brings into question notions of collectivity and the impossibility of separating certain types of narrative voice into demarcated perspectives. While this distorting, alienating, and disjoining writing seems to lead away from narratological clarity, Negarestani (or the narrator he is using at this particular instant) seems to have that be his purpose as he states, "Inauthenticity operates as complicity with anonymous materials" (p. 62). Citing the deterioration of authenticity, these anonymous materials, or objects, or literal matter become more entangled with the reader as what is hailed as voice becomes disembodied even more. In other words, the voices of the text are no longer understood distinctly as human

voices. The agential component of the text itself solidifies more firmly as the narrator explains how "archaeologists as fanatic readers of Hidden Writing who concretely contribute to the text" eventually "dominate the politics of future and will be the military science of the twenty-first century" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 63). The narrative of the text, by not strictly being derived from a human narrator as would be expected in typical storytelling, materializes in a relationship in which humans are being informed and guided by conscious objects, most directly the planet Earth itself. This kind of re-evaluation of planetary relations aligns with what Szerszynski (2017) suggested triggers a move into "a 'Second Axial Age,' a radical shift in thinking and praxis involving a deeper awareness of being as conditioned by the dynamic material becoming of the universe on multiple spatial and temporal scales" (p. 36). The new model of understanding being formed through the text rescales the typical way humans relate to and understand the greater relations of which all living and nonliving things are part. While Szerszynski's examination of what he calls "theory-fictions" in the process of constructing geo-spiritualism futures does not exactly follow the same kind of endgame that Negarestani seeks, in worlding a horror-science fiction text, *Cyclo-nopedia* does develop and encourage a "radical shift in thinking and praxis" for the reader. By reframing sets of relations and renegotiating assumed hierarchies, material and consequently spiritual understandings are redefined within the text and the reader takes a step closer to a terracentric model of reality in which a material consciousness directs the myriad activities of humans and nonhumans on local and planetary scales.

Although the narrative experimentation in the text is full of paranoid conspiracies and cultish hints within the mock analysis of texts and pseudo-historical documentation, keeping the reader at least an arm's length from witnessing an actual dialogue between celestial spheres, Negarestani (2008) clearly draws the geologic—and material—consciousness as an active "figure" through the musings and translations reported from the fictional sources, like "former professor of Tehran University, the archaeologist and researcher of Mes-

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opotamian occultural meltdowns, Middle East and ancient mathematics, Dr. Hamid Parsani” (p. 9) and “former infantry Colonel Jackson West” who “had unexpectedly deserted Delta Force” (p. 79). The attention to ethos-building for these characters, from the pseudo-authoritative blogger Z to the primary narration of “Sorceress,” runs counter to the infrequent reminders of the novel’s overall narrative unreliability. Despite the fact that the text is governed by rumors and unverified summaries or remnants of notes, the technicality and depth of the reports allow for some growing trust as the text develops. This is why the writings of Parsani, often given academic titles such as “The Rise and Fall of the Solar Empire”—which, we are told, offers a “rigorous investigation of the anomalous pact between the Earth and the Sun” (Negarestani, 2008, p. 145)—invite a reframing of these sets of relations and reorient a human-centered model of lived reality. It is through Parsani’s notes, articles, entries, and then the peripheral notes, articles, and entries written on those primary sources that the reader comes to see the material consciousness that provides the literal subtext of the novel. McLean (2017) describes the material sentience found in *Cyclonopedia* as something horrific: the Middle East is portrayed not only as a material entity (the region from which the mythological story of Tiamat and Marduk originates, and one theater of contemporary global conflict) but as an animate, sentient one. Such life and sentience, however, are far from being anthropomorphic projections or metaphorical displacements from human society to physical geography. This is a vitality and intelligence of an inhuman, alien kind, that Negarestani likens to H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu and the Great Old Ones, i.e. “monstrous, gelid, tentacted, bloblike beings of extra-terrestrial origin” (McLean, 2017, pp. 218-219).

The material entity is animate and motivated as it directs human and other surface life toward its own ends. However, even in McLean’s description, anthropocentric biases are clear as the entity’s “vitality and intelligence” are described negatively as “inhuman and alien.” While reading Negarestani’s text surely does invoke a sense of horror at times, it is perhaps more productive to simply conceive of the entity be-

ing “withdrawn,” unable to be understood completely through a human-centered reading of reality, and therefore simply unlike that of human conception. By avoiding the comparative trap, the geologic consciousness appears less malicious in regard to humankind. Just what this consciousness is concretely comprised of—beyond mention of oil, dust, the desert, the molten core of the planet, and the planet as a whole—lacks clear definition and eludes the reader throughout the text in ways that undermine the impulse to anthropomorphize the material and planetary consciousness. It remains nebulous and variegated because of its scale, while peripheral glimpses can be seen as specific and clearly outlined. This step is essential to the book’s purpose of disorienting the reader in coding the text in a typical anthropocentric model of understanding. Negarestani’s world building alludes to a geologic consciousness excavated from the details of the book that underscores the Earth itself as it “actualizes the planet by looking at it, more exactly, by gazing into the planet’s face and treating it as a legible object—one that lends itself to reading” (Moraru, 2015, p. 20). This is what cognitive materiality does in the book, becoming a legible object although the “face” remains hidden in the “high dimensional phase space that results in [hyperobjects] being invisible to humans for stretches of time” (Morton, 2013, p.1). The book then mirrors the planet materially and translates it into textual and narrative constructions. The functions and processes of, on, and within the sphere reveal motive and plot, but this motive is working in what appears to be a counter-intuitive direction to the anthropos while moving in a direction that can be imagined to be intuitive for a geologic consciousness. It provides, perhaps, “a geophilosophy that doesn’t think simply in terms of human events and human significance” (Morton, 2013, p. 7). The motivation for Morton, though, is to urge human action that can act immediately in affecting change by becoming aware of such massive objects in motion and play across all geologic and temporal scales. Negarestani’s geologic consciousness does not necessitate such a sudden physical reaction, but rather a growing awareness of potential material motivation behind natural process-

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es in order to reorient models of understanding reality.

Negarestani creates a cloud of details to define the wide range of entanglements that go into planetary construction and, consequently, delineates multiple scales to be used for reading the planet. As it unfolds, the text follows what Moraru (2015) has called “an ethoscopia, a contemplation of the planet as planet, a multiple, creative-interpretive consideration of the planet’s planetary ‘aspect’ or *adspectum*,” and it reveals “a material and cultural configuration at once planetarily pertinent” (p. 20). Following the narratological arc and overall reframing of readerly processes, one need only look at some of the scattered environmental descriptions in *Cyclonopedia* to see an example of the level of detail that is used to bridge between human and geologic thinking. The narrator in this section of the text is in the midst of what is described as a “preoccupation of dust as the collective element of the Middle East” and he explains how “middle-eastern bedtime stories are built upon meteorological taxonomies; for meteorology suggests the weather-harnessing power of these alien building processes. Weather, the set of atmospheric states in a given time and space such as temperature, rain, wind, et cetera, represents the building processes of elements in the form of differential compositions between their properties” (Negarestani, 2008, p. 98). From this more technical and concrete musing, the narrator moves on to describe how “[m]onsters and fiends are categorized by weather and meteorological phenomena—for every weather or atmospheric phenomenon, there is a ghoul and a deav (demon)” (p. 99-100). The meteorology and mysticism that underscore the subterranean structures are enmeshed in the novel. The attention to detail and intentional shift in perceived field here reveal the circles of entanglements within a planetarity and go into the reframing of readerly processes forced through the style and genre amalgamation.

It is the geologic consciousness that manipulates the “petropolitics” of the novel, a capitalistic drive that is at the heart of what Negarestani (2011) calls an “organic necrocracy” (a biological drive of all living things and humans in particular toward death) likening it to

Sigmund Freud’s “thanatropic regression” (a *desire* to return to death) (p 192). In other words, according to Negarestani (2008), capitalism at large is symptomatic of a gradual, but widespread death drive preset into humanity and all carbon-based life on the planet, beginning with what his characters describe as a “Socio-political programming of planetary systems based on the depletion of petroleum. Everything oily has been manufactured with and to-ward death” (p. 27). In this planetary plot line then, humans act as agents for advancing the proliferation of fossil fuels as these sources of energy “feed” directly from the death of organic lifeforms. Petropolitics is the the only way for the planet to combat the overpowering monopoly of power that the sun holds over the rest of the solar system. The planetary consciousness programs a death urge into the organic lifeforms that works to create power reserves on subterranean levels. The “war machine” fueled by the “oily lubricant” of capitalism is evidence of a hidden drive of human entanglements with the geologic and ecologic spaces of the Middle East (Negarestani 2008, p. 27).

Bould (2012) draws attention to the colonial mindset found in much of science fiction and discusses more recent turns toward a post-colonial reading of recent writing. He shows the way in which more contemporary science fiction often incorporates world building that is counter to such notions of space as *terra nullius* (i.e., “nobody’s land”). The incorporation of colonial themes is something that D Kilgore (2003) also draws attention to in what he calls “astrofuturism.” For Kilgore, astrofuturism is a subset of science fiction that targets space exploration and that often ends in interstellar conquest or the terraforming of planets. However, he does not extend his reading beyond a human or human-like species being central to the fictional worlds being created or to the process of world building. Negarestani inverts the process, suggesting that the seemingly human-driven urge towards colonization is being directed by the nonhuman geologic consciousness of the planet itself. The function of such world-building and (re)modeling of thinking is to deform common assumptions of global processes and

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raise potential vantages that disorient the reader's presumed understandings. The U.S. War on Terror, then, becomes a very different affair—one that is no longer rooted in the predominant media reports and is instead rooted in a much more ancient drive—as evidenced by Colonel Jackson West's narration in *Cyclonopedia* in which he says that the "War on Terror is riddled with dusty ancient crypts saturated with occult geometries [...] Their war machines do not belong to the time we know, the time in which our civilizations were built. We find ourselves constrained to fight in their time according to geometries which are utterly alien to us" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 81). The question becomes one of power and control, and whether the planet controls the life and death of all carbon-based life on the planet—including manipulating the human population—in order to achieve its own ends. Its goals are what Negarestani's narrators describe as a "Tellurian Insurgency" against the sun, in which "the strategy of stratification is to engineer a perverse immanence with the sun" (p.147). The petropolitical obsession with oil and fossil fuels, as well as the deathly wars that have long surrounded them, are all part of the planet's long attempt to create its own power to rival the sun. In its attempt to under-mine the solar monopoly and create a means of defiance, the Earth manipulates organic life to create its own energy in the form of fossil fuels.

The Inversion of Anthrocontrol and Reverse Terraforming: a Matter of Scale

A major component of (re)forming human imaginations in a way that deforms the anthropocentered model of relations into a terracentric one is to conceive of sets of relations along a more fluid scale. This rotating balance of scale works much like Morton's hyperobjects: they function productively as tools for perception when scales of space and time are adjusted, providing meaningful understandings of those things that would otherwise remain invisible. Scale is at the core of Negarestani's reorientations. In his essay, "Islamic Exotercism," which preceded the publication of *Cyclonopedia* by a year, he writes about the War on Terror and says that "[i]t is a desert lurking in the disruption

of chronologics, the corrosion of history and the collapse of the spatio-temporal continuity to the outside, because it is effectuated by refractory impossibility, not the other way around". (It) "is not a question of a clash between civilizations but a radical Time-war, between chronologics and chronopolitics" (Negarestani, 2007, p. 311). Similar to a thinking model in geologic time, temporality when outside of the common day-to-day human perception resizes and reworks how reality is read. The planetary thinking, then, configures these clashes between civilizations as of minor importance. Indeed, it is the way that notions of scale and perceptions of rescaling shape *Cyclonopedia* and jolt the reader into reconsiderations and reconfigurations with different sets of relations. For example, when Negarestani (2008) describes the interplanetary dispute between Earth and sun, he expands notions of spatial scale by detailing "[t]he disruption of the electromagnetic shield [that] exposes the Earth to planet-devouring solar radiations, which threaten to tear apart the atmosphere and immolate all life on the planet" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 161). In doing so, he re-frames chronology when he describes a "drastic divergence from conventional Apocalyptic and End-Time scenarios which presuppose an eventual chronological unity between Islam and Capitalism. Parsani warns that such a chronological unity never exists. For Islam and Capitalism, the end of time is mapped through chronological disunity on the helical-machinery of the corkscrewing motion" (Negarestani, 2008, p. 177). Here, the focus on human-formed models of history as being cyclic is shown to move in ways that are oblivious to the effect on human life. Negarestani knows the effect that such rescaling has, as he often describes spatio- and chronopolitics in tandem with the tension of surface and subterranean conflicts within the novel. These jolts effectively shake the human-centered model of reality and centralize the planet in the entanglement of relations, contributing to a planetary lens of relations. As Elias and Moraru (2015) explain in *The Planetary Turn*, "if today's planetary life consists in an incessantly thickening, historically unprecedented web of relations among people, cultures, and locales, to comprehend the planetary must entail grasping the

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relationality embedded in it" (p. xii).

Negarestani's increasingly complex investigation of the Middle East reveals multiple and diverse layers of relational webs that I suggest are best understood as assemblages. In these assemblages, objects often gather as cognizant and aware and humans gather as objects. In one quote from *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani describes historical conflicts in the Middle East in particular by saying that, "If people as numbers and numeric contagions constitute the foundation of democracy, ordinary people as dormant war machines form the floods of revolution" (p. 127). Describing these groups of humans "as numeric contagion" or as "dormant war machines" objectifies them as tools being utilized by the planetary consciousness, making them a nonconscious part of a larger assemblage. The conflation of organic and nonorganic confuses understood hierarchies of animacy and rescales relations. To see these "complicities" and diverse correlations in forming assemblages, yields a view of reality in which assemblages are everywhere, multiplying in every direction, some more viscous and changing at slower speeds, some more fluid and impermanent, coming into being almost as fast as they disappear. And at the limit, at the critical threshold when the diagrams of assemblages reach escape velocity, we find the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence, consistency, or exteriority" (Delanda, 2016, p.7).

Mapping these relations between humans and nonhumans and tracing these asymmetrical flows as polydirectional involves a desegregation of privilege and suggests the more diverse components in so-called human scientific advancements that lead to terraforming and geofarming. McLean (2020) states that "[e]nvironments—all environments, so the argument goes—should be understood as the reciprocal cocreation of a variety of human and nonhuman actors" (p. 295). This complicates both the motivation for and supposition that terraforming and geofarming can simply be human directed endeavors for achieving human advancement. Although terraforming and geofarming are central to influential authors' Herbert's

and Robinson's science fictional worlds and narratives, they are almost always present in anthropocentered ways. Both do work to deform naturalized notions of human dominance, whether through the slow metamorphosis of Leto Atreides into a sand worm in *God Emperor of Dune* (1981), or in the pressures being exerted on the terraforming agenda by the purist conservatists known as the Reds in Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1993-1996). However, neither go as far as Negarestani in reimagining the intentionally nonhuman world-forming processes found in *Cyclonopedia*. This is not to say, of course, that some newer media have not also probed into this kind of reverse terraforming. The HBO series *Raised by Wolves* (2020), like the book and television series *Wayward Pines* (2012-2014; 2015), looks at evolutionary changes in humans being made on large temporal scales, while the Netflix show *The A-List* (2018) and Sue Burke's *Semiosis Duology* (2018-2019) deal with changes being made to humans through the influence of vegetal life. China Miéville's *Kraken* (2010), Andrea Hairston's *Mindscape* (2006), and N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) similarly deal with conscious planets influencing human inhabitants. What makes Negarestani's geological consciousness stand out from these, though, is its distinct break from anthropomorphizing the planetary thinking and, instead, relying on the materiality of the planet as a distinctly foreign mode of conscious processing.

Enumerating major moments in terraforming and geofarming texts, Pak (2018) writes that "[b]oth science fiction and speculative science about terraforming represent an important archive of debate about the values and practices that underpin the shaping of an environmental future and a responsive contemporary engagement with anthropogenic climate change. Narratives of terraforming and geoengineering are, at their core, narratives about the Anthropocene" (p. 500). Perhaps just as fruitful to the mission of putting pressure on the ethics of terraforming is what Negarestani accomplishes in his text: the notion of reverse terraforming. Instead of being materially transformed by human interpositions, the planet materially

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shapes and transforms living and dead humans for its own ends. These processes can be horrific in a human-centered model of reality but make perfect sense in a terracentric one. These “[u]nexpected connections are essential [...] because environmental damage cannot be undone by turning back (meaning to stop doing harm) but rather only by going forward, making new connections rather than revitalizing old ones” (Willems, 2017, p. 35). I do not suggest that groups of humans accept mass extinctions as a helpful type of future fossil fuel production, nor that releasing more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere is simply helping future forms of bacteria and life that will thrive in that state; what I am suggesting is that a reorientation of human perspective from an anthropocentric model of reality toward an awareness of a potentially terracentric model like that constructed by Negarestani can decrease the levels of privileging and “anthropocentric narcissism” (Kohn, 2013, p. 19) which drive human action by offering an alternate imagining. Here the important work can be found in fiction, or especially “theory-fiction,” “a contemporary term without a stable, accepted definition,” but one where “literature can be the object of theoretical application” (Szerszynski, 2017, p. 39). The work of speculative literature is especially productive in this kind of endeavor as it pushes for the reader to imagine worlds, relations, and webs of knowledge that are defamiliarized within the world building process and restructured into and familiarized as the world building takes place in the reader’s thinking processes. The novel can function to actually reprogram thinking models themselves as the reader’s processing and decoding of a text rewrites and instructs thought itself. In *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani’s terracentric model of reality provides just such an opportunity for the reader to be reprogrammed by the text in a way that mitigates the myopic privileges and biases inherent to anthropocentric modes of reading reality. Such reframing offers new ways of interacting with the planet itself and in understanding the place of humans in a relational web and as part of assemblages of all sizes and in all directions.

Notes

¹ I use the term “human” here and throughout this article to primarily describe dominant human groups who take part in the traditions of Westernized thought.

² A question originally asked by Thomas Sprigge though, as Bogost points out, made famous by Nagel.

³ Ian Bogost is a key figure within the growing theory of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Reza Negarestani has often been associated with this movement even though Negarestani has moved into a different train of philosophy.

⁴ While found in his larger text *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, this excerpt from John Muir is often anthologized in an essay titled, “Man’s Place in the Universe.” This section of his work specifically tackles the limits in what he sees as the popular model of understanding the universe.

⁵ Nealon’s book looks at key continental philosophers like Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari and delineates the ways that vegetative life can be connected to their most influential and widespread concepts.

⁶ Frank Herbert’s *Dune* series with its desert world of Arrakis and Kim Stanley Robinson’s depiction of a dusty red Mars in his *Mars* trilogy both offer settings similar to the Middle East in their desert landscapes as well as certain cultural components.

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Books in Review

Jörg Matthias Determann

Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World

I.B. Tauris, 2020, hb, 288 pp, \$103.50 / \$82.80,

ISBN 9780755601301

Reviewed by: Joan Grandjean

Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life is closely related to the growing interest that both readers and scholars have been exhibiting towards science fiction (SF) made in the “Global South”—i.e. non-European and American SF—as referenced by *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, edited by Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Over the last few decades, numerous studies on Middle East/North African/South Asian (MENASA) and Muslim SF have been conducted internationally: *Qisas al-khayal al-‘ilmi fi al-‘adab al-‘arabi: dirasa fi-ta’sil al-shakl wa-fanniyatih* by Muhammad Najib al-Talawi (Dar al-Mutanabbi, 1990), *La fantascienza nella letteratura araba*, written by Ada Barbaro (Carocci, 2013), Ian Campbell’s *Arabic Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and *La littérature d’anticipation dystopique et l’expression de la crise dans le monde occidental et arabe* by Kawther Ayed (Éditions universitaires européennes, 2020). It is also worth mentioning some doctoral research carried out on Arabic SF such as Ali Ahmad Yusri Fuhayd’s (2010; Alexandria University, Egypt), as well as Khurshid Eqbal’s on Urdu SF (2012; University of Burdwan, India).

Jörg Matthias Determann (Assistant Professor of History at Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar) knows these references very well and quotes them regularly throughout his book. The aim of the science historian of the Middle East is not to write another history of SF literature, but to study how images and theories have been thought of in what he termed the “scientific imagination,” echoing Gerard Holton’s ideas about the place of science in our culture (1998). In addition to be the literary translation of the MENASA languages for SF (30), scientific

imagination allows Determann “to refer to products as different as science fiction films, journal articles in astrobiology, and books about UFO[s]” (29), without omitting their historical contexts. By associating two fields—astrobiology and alien culture—the book’s *leitmotiv* is to organize the major trends of these two subjects echoing each other in the different Muslim countries and their global community from the 19th to the 21st century.

Determann’s book is composed of six chapters, including the introduction (chap. 1) and the conclusion (chap. 6). The chapters are case studies organized chronologically. It starts from the end of the 19th century with the emergence of scientific journals and popular magazines (chap. 2). From Western missionaries in the Ottoman Empire to Muslim “religious entrepreneurs,” Determann explains how global astronomical exchanges shaped different discourses in astrobiology and its representation in popular culture. The author then compares this phenomenon to SF film productions made during the Cold War period, mainly in Turkey, Pakistan, and Egypt (chap. 3). His analysis shows how they were mostly adaptations of global productions. However, by adapting SF Western culture (hero, romance, ray gun, UFO) with a vernacular aesthetic, such as “local religious and ethnic elements and occasional political commentary” (104), they build a film industry of their own, with its codes and its public. The author then investigates SF textual production in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu, termed as “Islamic UFO religions” from the 1960s onwards, such as the Nation of Islam’s agenda, the influence of Swiss author Erich von Däniken, and the emergence of ufologists in the Middle East and South Asia (ch. 4). The following

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chapter pays attention to fiction texts, including those written by Ibne Safi and Muhammad Zafar Iqbal from Bangladesh, Nihad Sharif from Egypt, and Eliza Vitri Handayani from Indonesia (chap. 5). These authors have become widely known and largely contributed to the SF genre in their respective countries. By creating heroes that entire nations could identify with, SF literature became part of the mainstream, generating new, more empowering types of postcolonial spaces. To tackle these issues from an individual and a collective perspective, the final chapter touches more broadly on imaginations in a variety of formats, such as research in exoplanets and its development in literature, visual art, and video games (chap. 6). The originality of the latter lies in the treatment of futurisms since the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, especially regarding the development of new technologies on Earth as well as in other planets in the Muslim world and its diaspora.

Over the past few years, Determann's research has highlighted the different networks of biological and evolutionary research in the Gulf states (I.B. Tauris, 2015), and the history of space science in the Arab world (I.B. Tauris, 2018). His study on astrobiology and its culture in the Muslim world adds another stone to the edifice of his research on the history of sciences in the MENASA region. Contrary to his previous books, which took a national and a regional perspective, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* adopts a religious perspective in order to separate his research from a governmental and a political standpoint. By using a religious and a cultural prism on the global Islamic community, he offers an unedited historiography of "scientific imagination." Readers who have read *Space, Science and the Arab World* will find an original opening in this latest book, including scientists, cultural productions, and research approached from another scientific domain, providing new reading grids. Determann's research methodology is interesting because he succeeds in combining the study of astrobiology and the Muslim world while mapping the cultural representations associated with it. Even if the only frustration felt was the desire to

learn more about some of the works presented, this book is a valuable reference that draws up a corpus that has never been assembled before. It emphasizes how "scientific imagination" does not necessarily belong to the hard sciences. It is part of a whole. All in all, this book is a good work for both the historian of science and the historian of cultural productions, and offers interesting avenues to analyze how Muslim scientific imagination—from the scientist to the creator and the consumer, and vice versa—operates through history and its multifaceted geography.

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