

REMEMBERING THE FUTURE:
FRANCOPHONE PERSPECTIVES ON THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

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To Adnan, whose eternal optimism is contagious
and whose embrace of difference is inspiring;

to my family, who continue to love
and support me unconditionally;

and to all those whose work for peace
and understanding in Israel-Palestine.

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1989 monograph *Le crime et la mémoire*, sociologist and historian Alfred Grosser notes that in the contemporary world, there are a seemingly endless number of clarion calls to remember past tragedies. “‘Souvenez-vous !’” ‘Souvenez-vous !’ : un peu partout dans le monde retentissent des appels à la mémoire.”¹ The moral imperative behind these calls to remember is two-fold. First, one should remember the victims of the world’s tragedies out of respect for the dead. Second, one should internalize history’s lessons because, as the oft-quoted axiom states, “Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.” *Remembering the Future* considers the possibility of shifting focus from past to future? What if, rather than commanding one another to view current events through the prism of past occurrences, we let ourselves imagine a drastically different future? What if, rather than strictly remembering the past, we decided to “remember” the future? This dissertation explores the problematic nature of imperatives to remember the past and considers the idea that holding on too tightly to traumatic memories may impede one’s ability to progress to a future that improves upon one’s current reality. I reflect on this line of questioning with full knowledge that an imperative to “remember” the future would be no less problematic and complex than one to remember the past.

I begin, nevertheless, by contemplating the complex nature of calls to remember traumatic events of the past, calls whose complexity increases as the passage of time distances us further and further from these events. Even for survivors of trauma, personal

¹ Alfred Grosser, *Le crime et la mémoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 16.

experience does not guarantee one's retention of the event; some survivors become unwilling or unable to recall these painful memories. While this investigation certainly includes analysis of fictional and autofictional survivor accounts of trauma, it focuses more specifically on representations of second-generation accounts of trauma. What do calls to remember past traumas signify for those who have no personal memories of the event? Does the knowledge we garner from second-hand accounts, be it from survivors or from books, truly allow us to remember, or even imagine, what it was like to live the event? Other complications arise when we consider that uniform communal memories rarely exist—even official narratives of events change over time—and that complex events seldom generate facile moral lessons. One of the most complicated aspects of calls to remember the past arises when two groups maintain conflicting versions of an event or a series of events. There is perhaps no better, sustained example of such a problem than in the contested territory of Israel-Palestine.

The dominant narratives of Israelis and Palestinians emphasize memories of past suffering in order to encourage empathy—and moral and military backing—from an international audience, as well as antagonism for the other. Each group is acutely aware of the wrongs they suffered in the past, both those inflicted by the other and by foes external to the current conflict, while exhibiting little empathy for the suffering of the other. The prevailing Israeli narrative paints Jewish history as an extended story of anti-Semitism that culminated in the *Shoah*. The term “Shoah”—which means “catastrophe” in Hebrew—is generally used in place of “Holocaust” in Israel because of the term's recognition of the Jewish specificity of the event.² Drawing mostly unfounded links between Palestinians (and other Arabs) and Nazis, this narrative depicts Palestinians as

² “Shoah” is also generally the preferred term in France, both amongst Jews and non-Jews.

Nazis in different clothes and encourages not only vigilance against repeated genocide but also, at times, preemptively aggressive behavior against Arabs.³ In a similar fashion, the dominant Palestinian narrative emphasizes their people's successive conquests by the Ottomans, the British, and the Zionists, as well as the Arab world's failure to come to their rescue in their struggle against Israel. Most significantly, however, this narrative focuses on the suffering Palestinians continue to undergo at the hands of Israelis. While the call to wipe Israel off the map is no longer an official part of the Palestinian National Charter,⁴ it seems logical that the vilification of Israelis would encourage individual acts of violence against the perceived enemy.

The conflict thus proceeds in a cyclical manner, with each side calling on past injustices to justify violent action against the other. This impasse to peace leads the Franco-Algerian Muslim author Slimane Benaïssa to implicitly pose the following question in his play *L'avenir oublié*: What if the gravest danger in the Middle East is not the possibility of forgetting the past, but rather the possibility that Israelis and Palestinians are neglecting their opportunity to create a different future?⁵ Of course, other questions immediately follow this one: Does remembering the future necessarily

³ For example, during the civil war in Lebanon Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin compared the situation of the Maronites to the fate of the Jews during the *Shoah* and the Arabs—the Palestinians in particular—to Nazis. Historian Charles D. Smith suggests that this attitude helped justify Begin's support of the Christians in Lebanon. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2006) 358. While the majority of the purported links between Palestinians and Nazis are unfounded, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem, did meet with Adolf Hitler in November of 1941 in an attempt to secure German military support against the British. It is possible to trace Nazi influence on the mufti's pronouncement about Jews in his writings after this meeting. Smith, *Palestine* 180 and Neil Caplan, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories* (Chichester, U.K. and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 103. Subsequent references to Smith and Caplan will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴ In 1998, the Palestinian National Council voted to eliminate this clause from the charter. Smith, *Palestine* 476.

⁵ Slimane Benaïssa, *L'avenir oublié* (Paris: Quatre Vents, [1999] 2006). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

imply forgetting the past? Can certain aspects of the past be emphasized in official versions of history so as to encourage a path toward peace? It seems appropriate here to acknowledge the role that *L'avenir oublié*—a text that I read at the outset of my research—had in shaping the central investigation of my dissertation. Grappling with this play raised questions about the intersections between memory and identity, the tensions between past and present, the different discourses that influence our understanding of history, and how these phenomena play out in the Middle East.

Tackling a topic such as this, in which such divergent accounts of the same events exist, requires great attention to terminology. The mere process of naming this conflict carries political, religious, ethnic, and historical burdens. The term, “Israel-Palestine conflict,” perhaps the most frequently used in the United States, glosses over the far-reaching ripple effect of the conflict and the reality that surrounding nations, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, have all been directly involved. The “Israel-Palestine conflict” also obscures the participation, either direct or indirect, of other world powers over the last century, such as England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union (later Russia). While the terms “Jewish-Arab conflict” and “Arab-Israeli conflict” acknowledge that the discord extends beyond the borders of Israel-Palestine, they collapse the categories of “Arab Muslim” and “Arab Christian,” and in so doing disregard the significant population of Jewish Arabs—a group that constitutes an important theme in this investigation, particularly in chapters two and three. The “Middle East conflict,” a term that skirts some of these pitfalls in its vagueness, does not specify Israel-Palestine as the epicenter of the tensions. In addition to the impossibility of choosing the perfect term, determining the appropriate order of words constitutes a sidebar challenge.

Whereas the “Israel-Palestine conflict” gives primacy—however inadvertently—to Israel, a term such as the “Arab-Israeli conflict”⁶ places Israel in a secondary position. With full knowledge of its pitfalls, when referring to the specific region treated in this dissertation, I employ the term “Israel-Palestine.” In an effort to deal evenly with the actors in the conflict, I switch the order and use the term “Arab-Israeli conflict” when dealing with the larger regional conflict.⁷

Stepping outside the borders of the Middle East, this dissertation examines several Francophone perspectives on the conflict, specifically in the literary works of Slimane Benaïssa, Hubert Haddad, Edmond Amran El Maleh, and Elias Sanbar. I use the term “Francophone” in its literal and literary senses. Francophone refers both to the language of publication of the primary texts of this investigation (French), as well as to the birthplaces—or places of longtime residence, as in the case of Sanbar—of the authors (former colonies or protectorates of France). This latter connotation of the term refers to the tendency of literary studies departments to classify texts composed by authors born outside of France as Francophone. Of course, in its reference to French colonialism, Francophone also carries political and historical connotations. Benaïssa, El Maleh, and Haddad were all born in North African countries that were under some form of French rule (though Haddad left Tunisia at such a young age that his memories of his birthplace are vague). Both Tunisia and Morocco were French protectorates—Tunisia from 1881 to 1956 and Morocco from 1912 to 1956—while Algeria was a French colony from 1830 to 1962. Lebanon—where Sanbar moved when he was 15 months old in 1948—was also

⁶ This is the term used by historian Charles D. Smith in Palestine.

⁷ I take my cue here from historian Neil Caplan (5).

once a French protectorate. Though the country received its independence in 1943, the French maintained a strong influence well after the end of the mandate period.⁸

Within Francophone literature, this study takes as its focus the role of memory in the representation of the Israel-Palestine conflict. I demonstrate that, through their explorations of memory, the texts I treat challenge stereotypical articulations of Israeli and Palestinian identity propagated by monolithic versions of history, highlighting hybrid identities and counter-narratives. I contend that this troubling of stereotypes incites a response from the reader. As Wolfgang Iser suggests, when a text contradicts a reader's preconceptions it elicits a dramatic response, "such as throwing a book away or, at the other extreme, being compelled to revise those preconceptions."⁹ In addition to promoting a re-imagining of the actors in the conflict, I show how these texts encourage a more complex rendering of the region's history by exposing the multiplicity of narratives and by uncovering lost, forgotten or obscured stories. Moreover, in their non-linear treatment of history—a feature not generally found in historical accounts—these literary works allow readers to think comparatively about historical events often erroneously perceived as entirely disparate. By revealing the similarities between events separated by temporal distinctions, geographic barriers, and linguistic or cultural dissimilarities, the works treated here facilitate a communal ownership of memory.¹⁰ As textual spaces in which divergent accounts are forced to confront one another, I argue,

⁸ D. K. Fieldhouse, Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914-1958 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹ Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response," Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader, ed. K.M. Newton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 195-199.

¹⁰ I am indebted here to Michael Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional memory," which I treat in depth in chapter one. Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

these works ask us to reconsider the past and reflect on how these polyphonic histories might play out in the future.

In my first three chapters, I argue that Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh destabilize the Israeli-Palestinian binary—and, at times, the larger Jewish-Arab binary—by revealing the similar circumstances, memories, and customs that unite, rather than divide, the two communities. I illustrate how, through their troubling of these binaries, Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh's texts re-narrate the history of the conflict and, to varied degrees, encourage readers to imagine a future for the region that is drastically different from the current reality. Chapter one explores Slimane Benaïssa's use of symmetry as a means of exposing the similarly traumatic histories of Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the common internal tensions that unite them, in his 1999 play *L'avenir oublié*. Chapter two examines Hubert Haddad's ambiguous portrayal of amnesia in his 2007 novel *Palestine*.¹¹ I assert that the Franco-Tunisian Jewish author highlights both the potential salutary effects of forgetting in the interest of reconciliation between warring peoples, as well as the dangers of repressed memories. Chapter three considers the juxtaposition of nostalgic representations of the harmonious relations of Jews and Muslims in Morocco and the discord between the two populations in the Middle East in *Mille ans, un jour*—the 1986 work by Franco-Moroccan Jewish novelist Edmond Amran El Maleh.¹² Finally, in my fourth chapter, I expand my study beyond the North African context, examining a work that takes for granted, rather than challenging, the divisions between Israelis and Palestinians. In this investigation of *Le Bien des absents*—a collection of memoirs by the

¹¹ Hubert Haddad, *Palestine* (Paris: Zulma, 2007). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

¹² Edmond Amran El Maleh, *Mille ans, un jour* (Marseille: André Dimanche, 2002). First published by La Pensée sauvage in 1986. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

Franco-Palestinian Christian author and historian, Elias Sanbar—I show how the author engages in an alternate mode of deconstruction, one that articulates a Palestinian presence through the resurrection of memories, thereby challenging an Israeli identity predicated on Palestinian absence.¹³ Thus, as opposed to the works analyzed in chapters one through three that re-imagine both Israeli and Palestinian (or Jewish and Muslim) narratives, *Le Bien* contests only the official Israeli narrative, reaffirming, for the most part, Palestinian stereotypes about Israelis.

In this project of literary analysis, it is not my goal to offer solutions to the very real life and death political, ethnic, and religious problems that constitute the conflict. Likewise, the authors I treat do not attempt to find political resolutions through their literary texts, though politics are certainly at stake in these works. What this literature does offer, I contend, is a space in which the Israeli and Palestinian narratives may be reexamined, with the critical distance afforded by the genre of fiction—or autofiction, in Sanbar’s case—and the mediation of a language external to Arab-Israeli conflict. It is perhaps through small shifts in the mentalities of readers of these texts that larger political gains may eventually be made.

This study was inspired by my experience in Professor Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller’s informative class, entitled “Struggle of Encounter,” which examined the history of the Middle East and the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Francophone literature.¹⁴ I selected the authors I examine from those treated in the course based on the prominent role that memory plays in their works. Debrauwere-Miller’s edited volume, *Israel-Palestine Conflict in the Francophone World*, constitutes

¹³ Elias Sanbar, *Le Bien des absents* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2001). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

¹⁴ Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, "Struggle of Encounter," Seminar, Vanderbilt University (2008).

another significant influence on my study.¹⁵ In the spring of 2010, Carine Bourget's monograph, *The Star, the Cross, and the Crescent: Religions and Conflicts in Francophone Literature from the Arab World* was published. While Bourget's instructive work deals, in part, with the Israel-Palestine conflict, I did not have access to it until near the end of my writing process. Nevertheless, I reference Bourget's helpful comparison of El Maleh and Albert Memmi in my third chapter.

In an investigation that concerns the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which religion and, to a lesser degree, nationality, often dictate one's alliances, it is impossible to divorce my literary analysis entirely from the authors' biographies. It is therefore important to consider the influence of the authors' backgrounds on their literary production. While Sanbar's Christianity might be thought to grant him outsider status in what is often, if erroneously, considered a strictly Jewish-Muslim conflict,¹⁶ the author's perspective generally does not stray far from that associated with his Palestinian identity. Those of El Maleh, Haddad, and Benaïssa, however, do not fall into the stereotypical pro-Israel or pro-Palestine camps often attributed to the Jewish or Muslim points of view.¹⁷ I contend that the North African authors' experiences with Muslim-Jewish coexistence of

¹⁵ Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, ed., *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

¹⁶ Writing on the effacement of Christians that occurs in the collapse of the categories "Arab" and "Muslim," Kenneth Cragg notes that, "Arabism is so deeply involved in being Muslim, for reasons inherent in Islamic history, that it is thought to belong exclusively to that faith and culture. Yet 'Christian' was a descriptive of Arabs centuries before Islam, and there has been a Christian Arabism, an Arab Christianity, throughout the Muslim centuries since Muhammed's day." Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville and Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991). (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) Viewing the conflict as merely pitting Jews against Muslims also mistakenly portrays the conflict as a strictly religious one, disregarding its significant political component.

¹⁷ North African authors whose works do represent these more stereotypical points of view include the Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi and the Algerian Muslim Nourredine Aba.

the Maghreb¹⁸—or in Haddad’s case the legacy of this coexistence—is integrally related to their willingness to see beyond the dichotomous nature of the conflict. Though the three authors eventually immigrated to France (El Maleh has since returned to Morocco), they were all influenced by the interfaith exchange of their homelands. Even Haddad, whose parents moved the family from Tunisia to Paris when the author was very young, observed the nostalgia for the interreligious harmony of the Maghreb in his childhood neighborhood, the 19th arrondissement. As Haddad recounted in an interview I conducted with him in Paris in the summer of 2009:

J’ai vécu dans [...] un milieu qui était dans une nostalgie infinie d’un monde qu’ils ont fui. Ils l’ont fui, cependant, c’était vraiment leur être, cette arabité, ce pays. Tous ces Juifs qui sont partis ont reconstitué la Tunisie à Belleville [...] avec les mêmes cafés arabes et il y avait les Musulmans qui avaient leur café [à côté].¹⁹

Haddad’s familiarity with and embrace of Arab Jewish identity is apparent in his troubling of both the Israeli-Palestinian and the Jewish-Arab binaries in *Palestine*. While some Jews from Arab lands refuse the category of Arab Jew due to what they perceive as Arab Muslim rejection of Judaism, Haddad upholds its validity.²⁰ In *Palestine*, Haddad portrays Arab culture as constituting a nexus between Jews and Muslims of the Arab world. In this text, we see evidence of hope for renewed interreligious harmony in the author’s depiction of a love affair between the protagonist and a Palestinian woman.

¹⁸ In Arabic, “Maghreb” signifies “setting sun.” This region includes Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, “France and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World*, ed. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller (New York: Routledge, 2010) 19. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

¹⁹ Interview with author on 27 July, 2009. The same trip to Paris also provided the opportunity to interview Slimane Benaïssa and Annie-Paule Derczansky, a journalist who has written on Muslim-Jewish relations in France and coauthor, with Jean-Yves Camus, of *Le monde juif* (Toulouse: Milan, 2001). All interview quotations are printed with permission from the interviewees.

²⁰ As I explain in chapter two, Albert Memmi—a Franco-Tunisian Jew—is one example of such a perspective.

Haddad's novel, *Oholiba des songes*, features a parallel amorous moment between a Jew and a Palestinian Muslim woman.²¹

Benaïssa and El Maleh, who spent more of their formative years in their North African countries of origin than Haddad, call on their personal experience with interreligious exchange in their works. As a child, Benaïssa's family lived in a building also inhabited by a Christian family and a Jewish family. During our interview, the author described the influence this interfaith proximity had on him: "J'ai grandi dans les trois familles [...] dans la même maison. On était très très très proches. Et les adultes aussi, même pendant la guerre [...]. On est restés liés jusqu'au dernier moment, quand la séparation s'est imposée à tout le monde à l'indépendance. Mais cette coexistence, nous l'avons connue."²² The dramatist poetically represents the interfaith dialogues of his youth in his 1999 play *Prophètes sans dieu*.²³ For example, the character "L'auteur enfant" recounts the comments made by his Jewish and Christian friends, such as "Cohen m'a dit que Moïse était bègue" and "Bernard m'a raconté que Jésus a traîné une croix de deux cents kilos sur des kilomètres et qu'il n'est tombé que deux fois" (*Prophètes* 7,8). As for *L'avenir oublié*, Benaïssa's cross-cultural childhood experiences in Algeria literally set the stage for his artistic collaboration with the Jewish Algerian author, André Chouraqui.²⁴

If some refute the category of Arab Jewry, Edmond El Maleh's embrace of this hybrid identity is apparent both in his personal life—evident in his decision to resume

²¹ Hubert Haddad, *Oholiba des songes* (Paris: Zulma, 2007). First published by La Table ronde in 1989. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

²² Interview with author on 24 July, 2009.

²³ Slimane Benaïssa, *Les Prophètes sans dieu* (Paris: Lansmann, 1999). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

²⁴ See chapter one for my analysis of Benaïssa and Chouraqui's relationship.

residence in Morocco after a long hiatus in France—and his literature. In fact, the author gives primacy to his Moroccan identity over his Judaism. Literary critic Larbi Touaf cites El Maleh as affirming, “Je ne suis pas juif marocain, mais Marocain juif”²⁵; the author reaffirmed this sentiment in a personal email correspondence with me. Rather than bemoaning the link between Moroccan nationality and Islam that was fortified during the Arabization movement—as was the case in Algeria and Tunisia as well—“Il affirme [...] que la ‘pluralité de langue et de religion est l’essence d’un Maroc authentique.’”²⁶ Just as El Maleh’s oeuvre affirms a pluralistic definition of Moroccan identity, it also portrays a multiplicity of expressions of Judaism, thus challenging, as I demonstrate, a monolithic Zionist narrative that refutes the authenticity of diasporic Judaism.

Haddad’s novel, which lacks any characters clearly defined as North African, does not locate the alliance between Arab Jews and Arab Muslims within a specific geographical region. By contrast, Benaïssa’s play and, more significantly, El Maleh’s novel—the only work treated that takes place, to a large extent, in North Africa—refer specifically to coexistence in the Maghreb. El Maleh’s character Moha, for example, stresses the amicable exchange that took place between Jews and Muslims in his Berber village, “Il évoquait cette vie communautaire, pétrie dans cette terre, [...] il disait le détail des fêtes religieuses respectives de l’offrande et de l’échange, les mêmes chants d’amour, les mêmes danses [...]” (El Maleh, *Mille ans* 17). El Maleh’s nostalgia for these

²⁵ Larbi Touaf, "Memory, History, and Narrative Ethics in the Writing of Edmond Amran," *Representing Minorities: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (2006), 158.

²⁶ Antoine Pietrobelli, "Subversif, Edmond l'est surtout par son oeuvre littéraire," *Horizons Maghrébins* 56 (2007), 143. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

harmonious relations, which he juxtaposes with the ongoing violence between the two communities in the Middle East, forms a central theme in his oeuvre.

In its depiction of the fictional town of Asfi, Morocco, *Mille ans* also portrays bonds between Christians and Muslims, as well as those between Christians and Jews, most notably through the friendship between Nessim (the Jewish narrator), Majid (a Muslim), and Louis (a Christian). Louis's participation in these friendships is problematic, however, because as a member of the French army, he embodies the colonial power. El Maleh describes the character as harboring antisemitic sentiments and subscribing to the paternalistic *mission civilisatrice*²⁷ (72-77). When El Maleh's Moroccan Jewish characters yearn to return to pre-independence Morocco, the object of their nostalgia is the alliance with their Muslim neighbors, and does not signify a desire to restore colonialism and their subservient position vis-à-vis Christians.

Though less overtly than in El Maleh's oeuvre, Benaïssa's works also mourn the loss of Jewish-Muslim exchange. While Benaïssa evokes the once-close relations between Jews and Muslims in Algeria, he places more emphasis on their deterioration than on their duration. His character, Josette—an Algerian Jew who immigrated to Israel—says the following of her time in North Africa:

En Algérie, on a toujours vécu avec les Arabes. J'ai combattu à leurs côtés pour l'indépendance ; le mari de Zohra était en prison parce qu'il avait collecté de l'argent pour le F.L.N. Mon mari, en tant que secrétaire de mairie, lui rendait visite tous les jours ; ainsi, tous les jours Zohra avait des nouvelles fraîches de son mari. Avec Zohra, on a tout partagé : le bonheur, le malheur, le couffin, le pain, le café, la sucre, tout. Mais, je ne sais pas pourquoi, dès qu'ils ont obtenu l'indépendance, ils ont changé. Ils sont devenus méfiants [...]. [...] En fin de compte, je crois que je préfère un kibboutz et la guerre, plutôt que la paix dans un pays arabe. (Benaïssa, *L'avenir* 22-23)

²⁷ The "mission civilisatrice" refers to the French belief that it was their moral duty to colonize those non-Westerners whom they considered to be ignorant and backwards and ameliorate their position through education and by example.

We note a significant difference here between *L'avenir*'s depictions of the demise of Jewish-Muslim relations in North Africa and how *Mille ans* tells the story. Benaïssa's play reveals the commonly held sentiment amongst North African Jews that their Muslim countrymen expelled them from their homeland after decolonization, despite the Jews' loyalty to their Maghrebi homelands. This opinion, voiced by Benaïssa's character Josette, stands in direct contrast to El Maleh's depiction of the Moroccan Jewish exodus, which he blames on Zionist influence. One factor that distinguishes Benaïssa's viewpoint from that of El Maleh is the hope the former retains for the rectification of interfaith harmony. As evidence, we can point not only to the collaboration between the Jewish and Muslim-Christian protagonists in *L'avenir*, but also to two interreligious amorous relationships—the allusion to a future marriage between Antoine-Nasser (a Palestinian half-Muslim half-Christian) and Yaël (an Israeli Jew) in *L'avenir*, and the fully developed love affair between Rachid (a Palestinian living in Amsterdam) and Sarah (a European Jew whose parents live in Israel) in *Les Papiers d'amour*.²⁸ By contrast, El Maleh portrays the Zionist influence in Morocco and the bloodshed in Israel-Palestine as having engendered irreparable damage.

Benaïssa, like El Maleh, does not ignore the Christian presence in his story. Though the Algerian author does not depict the relations between Palestinian Muslims and Christians as purely harmonious,²⁹ his portrayal of a half-Muslim, half-Christian Palestinian family depicts the metaphorical alliance of the two religious communities under the Palestinian national banner. This interfaith Palestinian family also

²⁸ This play was performed at the Théâtre en Cavale in Geneva in 2009. Though not yet published, the author shared the manuscript with me via email.

²⁹ See the religiously moderate Palestinian uncle's sarcastic comment expressing disapproval of Fatima's marriage to a Christian Arab (Benaïssa *L'avenir*, 39).

problematizes consideration of the conflict as a strictly Jewish versus Muslim affair. I elaborate on the significance of Christianity in *L'avenir* in chapter one.

While Elias Sanbar's Francophone background and literary treatment of the conflict link his work to that of Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh, both his biography and his perspective set his oeuvre apart. Sanbar was born in Palestine. As a result of the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, he and his mother fled to Lebanon when the author was only fifteen months old. Sanbar's memoirs indicate that the author does not maintain memories of harmonious relations with Jews in either Palestine or Lebanon. Most of the stories in *Le Bien des absents* depict Israelis as oppressors and Palestinians as victims. In fact, in his accounts of his time in Lebanon, Sanbar does not describe any contact with Jews. Significantly, though the author makes several references to his Christianity—for example, in “Les tailleurs de pierre”—he does not differentiate between his Christian Palestinian perspective and that of Muslim Palestinians. Sanbar thus subordinates his minority religious identity to a national definition of self. Though Sanbar has resided outside of his native land for almost his entire life—first in Lebanon, then in France—he considers himself Palestinian. I do not mean to suggest that this identification with an imagined homeland is abnormal for those in the diaspora; rather, my goal here is to signal how the simultaneous absence and presence of Palestine functions vis-à-vis Sanbar's self-conception. The memoirist's personal stake and involvement in the conflict—as a participant in the negotiations that preceded the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord—as well as his lack of experience of harmonious relations with Jews, undoubtedly have a bearing on his portrayal of the events he recounts.

Memory, history, and narrative in Israel-Palestine

In his staging of *L'avenir oublié*, author and director Slimane Benaïssa assigns the Israeli characters to one side of the stage and the Palestinian characters to the other. This split stage functions both as a representation of and a challenge to a dichotomous view of the conflict. *L'avenir* demonstrates that though the conflict is often perceived of as being two-sided, multiple narratives exist within both camps. In this investigation, I consider a variety of historiography, looking at accounts that constitute the dominant narratives of both sides, as well as those—particularly those written by Israeli historians—that contest them. I examine, for example, the writings of several foundational Zionists, as well as those of the New Historians, a group of Israeli historians that have questioned widely held beliefs about Israeli history.³⁰ While I include as many Palestinian accounts of the events treated as I have been able to uncover, there are few Palestinian historians who challenge the prevailing beliefs about their history and their relationship to Israelis. For a variety of reasons—most related to a lack of Palestinian resources—a movement comparable to that of the Israeli New Historians has yet to emerge.³¹

Central to my investigation are the traumatic memories that lie at the heart of the prevailing narratives of Jews (both Israelis and the diasporic community) and Palestinians—those of the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*.³² “Nakba,” which signifies

³⁰ The category “New Historians” has included Benny Morris (who now writes from a more mainstream perspective), Ilan Pappé, and Tom Segev, among others. For a concise version of the evolution of Israeli historiography, see Ilan Pappé, “Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians: Part I: The Academic Debate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* (1997): 29-41.

³¹ For an in-depth discussion of the lack of variety of voices in Palestinian historiography, see Caplan 241-44.

³² On the centrality of the *Shoah* in the collective identity of Israelis, see Israeli New Historian Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). On the importance of the *Nakba* in Palestinian memory, see Palestinian scholars Ahmad H. Sadi and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia

“catastrophe” in Arabic—a semantic parallel thus exists between the words “Shoah” and “Nakba”—refers to the Palestinian expulsion from their lands in 1948.³³ Significantly, three traumas—those of the *Shoah* survivors escaping Europe, the post-independence North African Jewish refugees, and post-*Nakba* Palestinian refugees—become inextricably intertwined when both groups of Jewish immigrants begin to inhabit the abandoned Palestinian houses in Israel-Palestine (Caplan 119). (I treat the two latter traumas in chapters three and four.)

In the years following World War II, Israel became home to approximately 350,000 *Shoah* survivors.³⁴ Though the dominant Israeli narrative now links the history of the *Shoah* to Israel’s *raison d’être*,³⁵ a perceptible barrier existed between the *yishuv*³⁶ and the survivors from the time of the latter group’s arrival through the 50s.³⁷ The relationship between native-born Israelis and the newcomers was indeed complex. On the one hand, the survivors elicited feelings of guilt and blame for many members of the *yishuv* whose European relatives had perished in the *Shoah*. These feelings—combined with fear of the survivors’ emotional or physical scars—often manifested in a desire to

University Press, 2007) 4. Subsequent references to Segev and Abu-Lughod will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³³ Of course, the events that took place in Israel-Palestine in 1948 constitute a highly contested history. As I indicate in my first chapter, while the dominant Palestinian narrative maintains that Israelis forced them to leave their lands, the mainstream Israeli narrative holds that Palestinians left voluntarily or were encouraged to do so by their leaders. For a Palestinian account of 1948 see, for example, Nafez Nazzari, [The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee 1948](#) (Beirut: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978) and Elias Sanbar, [Palestine 1948, l’expulsion](#) (Washington: Institut des études palestiniennes, 1984). For one articulation of the Zionist narrative, see David Ben-Gurion, [Memoirs](#) (New York and Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1970). Subsequent references to Sanbar and Ben-Gurion will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁴ Segev, [Seventh Million](#) 154; Nicolas Weill and Annette Wiewiorka, “La construction” [Les cahiers de la Shoah](#) 1 (1994). N. pag. 20 Feb 2010 <<http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/Weill94a/index.html>>. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁵ See my first chapter for analysis of the debates regarding the link between the *Shoah* and the foundation of the State of Israel.

³⁶ “Yishuv” refers to the Jews who resided in pre-1948 Palestine.

³⁷ David Ben-Gurion describes this relationship as marked by a “barrier of blood and silence and agony and loneliness.” Qtd. in Segev, [Seventh Million](#) 179.

avoid survivors, and an unwillingness or inability to listen to their traumatic stories.³⁸ On a macro level, the figure of the survivor did not fit easily into the image of the “new Jew” Israel had tried to fashion for itself: a robust and independent Jew—distinct from the stereotypically passive and bookish Jews of Europe. The country thus celebrated the Warsaw Ghetto uprising,³⁹ but remained unsure of how to incorporate survivors into its narrative. In tension with all of the factors that led many of the *yishuv* to avoid or dismiss survivors was Israel’s dependence on *Shoah* victims’ willingness to settle in Israel in order to convince the international community of the need for a Jewish State (Segev 181). Yet, during the Eichmann trial of 1961, held in Jerusalem, a sea change occurred in attitudes toward survivors, both in Israel and in the international Jewish community (Segev 323-65).⁴⁰ Due to the broadcasting of the trial on television and radio, viewers and listeners strongly identified with the numerous *Shoah* victims that testified (Weill and Wieviorka).

Currently, the *Shoah* memory is perhaps more present in Israel than anywhere else in the world. New Historian Tom Segev maintains, “Just as the Holocaust imposed a posthumous collective identity on its six million victims, so too it formed the collective identity of this new country [Israel]—not just for the survivors who came after the war but for all Israelis, then and now” (11). Israel has institutionalized the memory of the

³⁸ There are, of course, exceptions to this necessarily flattened depiction of early Israeli attitudes to Shoah survivors. The Israeli Defense Forces, who put in place plans to help its survivor-soldiers acclimate to their adopted country, represent just one example (Segev 178). It is also important to note that some—albeit a small number, according to Segev—native-born Israelis protested against the horrid treatment of the survivors by the British (Segev 136). During the Blockade period, the British intercepted most of the ships carrying survivors—considered illegal immigrants—from Europe to Palestine and sent the passengers to prison camps in Palestine, Mauritius and Cypress. Segev 132 and Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999 (London: John Murray Ltd., 2000). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁹ 750 Jewish fighters in the Warsaw ghetto in Poland resisted the Nazis and delayed destruction of the ghetto for almost a month. Paul Johnson, A History of the Jews (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 509.

⁴⁰ See chapter one for a more detailed investigation of the trial.

Shoah through establishments such as *Yad Vashem* (a museum and memorial dedicated to the *Shoah* in Jerusalem) and *Yom HaShoah* (Israel's day of remembrance of the *Shoah*). The emphasis placed on the continued presence of the *Shoah* memory and its transference to younger generations helps fuel Israel's perceived need to constantly be on the offensive militarily. The injunction against criticizing any aspect of Israeli policy that exists in certain settings because of the Jewish State's perceived impunity as the guardian of the *Shoah* memory have led some writers and scholars to call for a "relative forgetting" of the *Shoah*.⁴¹ Some Palestinians also take issue with Israeli deployment of the *Shoah* memory, maintaining that the State exploits "post-Holocaust guilt and sympathy in efforts to sidestep or marginalize legitimate Palestinian claims and concerns" (Caplan 120).⁴²

Like the prevailing Israeli narrative, a traumatic memory—that of the *Nakba*—also forms the core of the Palestinian narrative. According to Palestinian scholars Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, the *Nakba* has become the "key site of Palestinian collective memory and national identity."⁴³ Both traumas have generated duties to remember. While for Israelis, the imperative to remember the *Shoah* is linked to their conviction to guard against the repetition of Jewish genocide, for Palestinians, the duty to remember

⁴¹ French Jewish historian Esther Benbassa proposes an "oubli relatif" as a remedy for what she views as the problematic culture of mourning amongst Jews, particularly apparent in the diaspora. Esther Benbassa, "Comment devient-on un traître?," *De l'autre côté* 2 (2006) 31. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes. In his controversial recent book, Israeli writer and former Knesset member Avraham Burg says of Israel's relation to the *Shoah*, "True, we must not forget, but at the same time we should not be forever held hostage by memory. We should not live in the past, but be cured of it." Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust is Over; We Must Rise from its Ashes*, trans. Israel Amrani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴² Caplan points to Palestinian historian Joseph A. Massad as one example of this Palestinian position.

⁴³ Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 4. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

the *Nakba* is associated with their struggle for international recognition and sovereignty. As Racha Salah—a Palestinian who published a series of letters written while in a Lebanese refugee camp—states, “L’amnésie est notre adversaire le plus redoutable [...], nous ne devons jamais oublier, c’est notre seule chance d’exister.”⁴⁴ Just as there are potentially negative consequences of the tenacious hold of the *Shoah* memory exhibited by Jews, the chance for peace in the Middle East seems dim if the imperative to remember the *Nakba* is tantamount to Palestinian self-identity. Given the vilification of Israelis in the *Nakba* narrative, it is difficult to imagine an adherent of this narrative even considering a relationship between the two populations that would be anything but antagonistic.

Further complicating the relationship between the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* is the ignorance—or even outright denial—of the trauma of the opposing side that both Israelis and Palestinians display. As previously mentioned, the dominant Israeli version of 1948 holds that Palestinians were instructed to leave by Arab leaders. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid feelings of guilt amongst Israelis, there is little conversation about the event in either Israeli schools or in the Israeli media.⁴⁵ In a similar way, Muslim Arab attitudes regarding the *Shoah* are often marked by ignorance or refutation. In Palestine there is little talk of the *Shoah*. As the Palestinian scholar Lena Jayyusi notes, most Palestinian laypeople only hear of the *Shoah* in the context of statements made by Israelis or

⁴⁴ Racha Salah, *L’an prochain à Tibériade: Lettres d’une jeune Palestinienne du Liban* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).

⁴⁵ On Israeli ignorance of the *Nakba*, see Eitan Bronstein, “The Nakba in Hebrew: Israeli-Jewish Awareness of the Palestinian Catastrophe and Internal Refugees,” Nur Masala, *Catastrophe Remembered: Palestine, Israel and the Internal Refugees* (London: Zen Books Ltd, 2005), 217. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

Westerners.⁴⁶ Moreover, the shockingly prevalent denial of the Shoah in the larger Arab world has consequences that reach far beyond mere ignorance.⁴⁷

Perhaps the imperatives to remember the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* would be diminished if each side recognized the trauma of the other and were cognizant of all that differentiates the two disparate events. Edward Said—one of the most famous spokespeople for the Palestinian community—sees this mutual recognition of trauma as vital, but places the onus on the Israelis, writing:

It seems to me essential that there can be no hope of peace unless the stronger community, the Israeli Jews, acknowledges the most powerful memory for Palestinians, namely, the dispossession of an entire people. As the weaker party Palestinians must also face the fact that Israeli Jews see themselves as survivors of the Holocaust, even though that tragedy cannot be allowed to justify Palestinian dispossession.⁴⁸

Said's quotation makes apparent the asymmetry of power inherent in Israeli-Palestinian relations. While the imperative to remember the *Shoah* is linked, for Israelis, to the maintenance and protection of the Jewish homeland they already possess, the desire to commemorate the *Nakba* is associated with Palestinians' struggle to achieve statehood. What is striking in this quotation is not only that Said places the burden of recognition on Israelis, but also the author's own engagement in the competition of memories. While Said describes the trauma of the *Nakba* with the phrase, "the dispossession of an entire people," he names the Holocaust, but does not describe it. Said's rhetorical choice may

⁴⁶ Lena Jayyusi, "Iterability, Cumulativity, and Presence: The Relational Figures of Palestinian History," Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 132. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴⁷ As Robert S. Wistrich writes, "Le monde arabe se montre de plus en plus disposé à croire que le 'mensonge d'Auschwitz', le 'canular' de leur propre extermination est une invention délibérée des Juifs qui fait partie d'un plan véritablement diabolique destiné à établir une domination mondiale." "L'antisémitisme musulman: un danger très actuel," *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah, le monde juif. Antisémitisme et négationnisme dans le monde arabo-musulman: La derive* 180 (2004) 50. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴⁸ Edward Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000), 192.

be related to the author's intended audience. In *The Question of Palestine*—Said's most controversial work related to the conflict—the author bemoans the general American ignorance of the Palestinian plight.⁴⁹ In the above quotation Said calls on Israelis to recognize the traumatic events underlying the *Nakba*, “the most powerful memory for Palestinians,” yet only calls on Palestinians to acknowledge that Israelis “*see themselves* as survivors” of the Holocaust (my emphasis). The words “see themselves” reveal Said's doubt that Israelis are, in fact, survivors of the *Shoah*. It is true that by the year 2000 when Said penned this piece, most *Shoah* survivors had passed away. Moreover, many of Israel's Jews are of Sephardic origin and thus did not personally experience the *Shoah*. But it is no less true that most Palestinians alive today were born after the *Nakba*. Is Said suggesting that Palestinians can more accurately claim the *Nakba* memory than Israelis can claim the *Shoah* memory? Does engagement in a competition of memories advance us in the path toward peace?

The Interconnected histories of North Africa and the Middle East

While the literary representation of Israel-Palestine constitutes my primary investigation in this study, the history of Muslim-Jewish relations in North Africa provides another important backdrop for this project, specifically in my analysis of *Mille ans, un jour* and, to a lesser degree, that of *L'avenir oublié*. In all of El Maleh's oeuvre, the author nostalgically pines for a past in which Jews and Muslims—and, to some

⁴⁹ “The asymmetry between common understanding of Zionism and of the Palestinians, however, has in general suppressed the values and the history of troubles animating the Palestinians throughout this century, since most Americans seem unaware that the Palestinians actually lived in Palestine before Israel came into existence. [...] My task is to present the Palestinian story; the Zionist one is much better known and appreciated.” Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1979) 118. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

extent, French Christians—coexisted in North Africa, blaming political Zionism for the deterioration of the Jewish Maghrebi community and rejecting Israel-Palestine as the embodiment of Judaism’s future. The novelist employs Moroccan memories of Jewish-Muslim kinship precisely in order to condemn the lack of interfaith exchange in the Middle East. Slimane Benaïssa’s Jewish character Josette presents an alternative to this viewpoint. In the passage already cited above, Josette points a finger at the Muslims for the corrosion of these relations, stating, “je ne sais pas pourquoi, dès qu’ils ont obtenu l’indépendance, ils ont changé. Ils sont devenus méfiants [...]” (*L’avenir* 22). Whereas the large majority of El Maleh’s Moroccan Jewish characters who immigrate to Israel seem to regret their decision, Josette states a preference for the Jewish State, even though Israelis live in a constant state of war. “En fin de compte,” she declares, “je crois que je préfère un kibboutz et la guerre, plutôt que la paix dans un pays arabe” (23).

As is apparent from Benaïssa and El Maleh’s disparate treatment of Jewish-Muslim relations in the Maghreb, the nature of these associations is contested. The fictional version of history of Morocco presented in El Maleh’s oeuvre paints the relationship between the two populations as one based on centuries of peaceful exchange, established and maintained independently of the French colonial presence. El Maleh gestures toward the inferior status of Jews in Morocco and acknowledges some isolated instances of Muslim-Jewish antagonism.⁵⁰ But he also underscores Jewish integration into the Moroccan community and the Jews’ official legal protection under Mohammed

⁵⁰ *Mille ans*’ narrator addresses the inferior status of Jews when he notes that, “Aucun Juif ne s’aventurait à faire de la politique, aucun ne se souciait de se livrer à une activité dont on ignorait tout si ce n’est que cela pourrait attirer des ennuis et qu’il convenait de rester juif sans histoire à l’écart de tout” (89). One example of the El Maleh’s description of Muslim-Jewish strife is found on 156-57. See Michael M. Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria* (New York: New York University Press, 1994) 85-113 for descriptions of antisemitic actions carried out by Moroccan Muslims. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

V,⁵¹ despite the influence of Vichy (the fascist French regime in power during Nazi occupation from 1940 to 1944) via the French protectorate in Morocco. El Maleh overlooks the Jews' status as *dhimmis*—one that afforded them the freedom to practice their religion but also imposed social and religious restrictions, as well as a special tax.⁵² Even though the author presents a plurivocal account of Moroccan Jewish life—created by giving voice to a host of narrators emanating from differing regions, classes, eras, even religions—the depiction is filtered through a nostalgic lens. For example, by placing blame for the Moroccan Jewish exodus entirely on Zionist emissaries, El Maleh downplays the increased hostility toward Jews that occurred as a result of the spread of Arab nationalism amongst Moroccan Muslims and increased tensions amongst Jews and Muslims in the Middle East.⁵³

The histories of Jewry in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia share much in common, though we must be careful not to flatten the specificities.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the discourse of Albert Memmi, originally from Tunisia—perhaps the most well known Francophone Jewish Maghrebi author—provides a potent counterpoint to the opinions offered by El Maleh. Far from El Maleh's depiction of Moroccan Jewry as well integrated and secure,

⁵¹ See, for example, El Maleh *Mille ans*, 150. On Mohammed V's protection of the Jews, see C. R. Pennell, *Morocco: From Empire to Independence* (Oxford: One World, 2003) 156.

⁵² *Dhimmis*, from the Arabic world "protected," refers to the Jews and Christians ("the people of the book") of Muslim lands. Morris, *Righteous Victims* and Pierre Lory, "Le judaïsme et les juifs dans le Coran et la tradition musulmane," *Juifs et Musulmans: une histoire partagée, un dialogue à construire*, ed. Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

⁵³ For a historical account of these events, see Laskier, 85-113.

⁵⁴ Emily Gottreich issues this warning in "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98.4 (2008), 433. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) One particular event that sets apart the Algerian Jewish experience is the Crémieux Decree of October 24, 1870, which granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews, though not to their Muslim counterparts. Though these rights were later rescinded under the Vichy regime, in the eyes of Algerian Muslims, this law aligned Jews with the colonial power. Some, but not all, Tunisian Jews became French citizens either in the first half of the 20th-century or under the French protectorate; Moroccan Jews were never granted this right (Debrauwere-Miller, "France," 3, 20). For more on what set apart the experiences of Jews in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, see Laskier, 13-15.

Memmi describes the situation of the North African Jew as one of inferiority and fear. He credits European influence for the Jews' relative safety during colonization—"les colonisations française, anglaise, et italienne [...] ont été ressenties par nos propres masses comme une garantie de survie"—and blames Arab Muslims for inciting the mass exodus of North African Jewry.⁵⁵ The sentiments evoked by Memmi stand in stark contrast to the depiction of Jewish-Muslim relations offered by El Maleh and Haddad. Of the three authors considered in this study, only Benaïssa hints at the Maghrebi Jewish resentment toward their Muslim counterparts, as previously alluded to in my discussion of Josette's comments on the matter.

The questions that arise from these complex and contested histories of interreligious relations in North Africa have significant implications for current Muslim-Jewish affairs in the Middle East. For example, scholars disagree on the extent to which Muslims and Jews peacefully coexisted in North Africa. Was this the norm, as El Maleh claims, or a myth invented by the Parisian left and used against Israel after the 1967 war, as per Albert Memmi's assessment (56, qtd. in Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 4)? It is also difficult to pinpoint what prompted the Jews' mass departure from North Africa. Were they forced to leave because of rising anti-Semitism? Did the foundation of the State of Israel represent the realization of a dream Maghrebi Jews had always maintained? Or, did Zionist emissaries "scare" Jews into making *aliya*⁵⁶ by exaggerating the threat they faced?⁵⁷ A multitude of theories offer explanations to these thorny

⁵⁵ Albert Memmi, *Juifs et arabes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) 13. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁵⁶ Literally "ascent" in Hebrew, "aliya" signifies Jewish immigration to Israel.

⁵⁷ Laskier cites, among other factors, the Moroccan economic crisis of 1947-1949, the spread of Arab nationalism amongst Moroccan Muslims, increased antisemitic violence (such as the pogroms of Oudja and Djéradad in June, 1948), the country's independence from France in 1954, and Zionism's popularity in Morocco (85-113). Moroccan historian Simon Levy, on the other hand, attributes the Jewish exodus

questions. It is beyond the scope of this project to evaluate the accuracy of this historiography; rather, my primary goal is to analyze how the authors I treat call upon this history to make statements about current Muslim-Jewish relations in Israel-Palestine.

Jewish-Muslim relations in France

While North African Jewish-Muslim relations is certainly one of the key historical contexts that inform the work of Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh, we must not lose sight of the fact that the works I examine were all produced in France. The same is of course true for Sanbar, whose work may be influenced as much by interreligious relations in France as by the religious strife of his youth in the Middle East. The French context does not constitute a major concern in this study, since France is not the central subject of the fictional works I treat, and since the reception of these works does not fall under the purview of my investigation. However, since of all the authors I treat reside or have resided in France, it will be useful to consider briefly the ways in which contemporary debates concerning interreligious relations in the hexagon may have shaped the four authors' literary production.

France is simultaneously home to Europe's largest Jewish and Muslim communities. After the decimation of 75,721 French Jews during the *Shoah* (Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 2), Sephardic Jews emigrating from North Africa gained majority status in France in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁸ Large numbers of North and West

primarily to Zionist propaganda; he also accuses Zionists of using "the specter of antisemitism" to scare the Jews into leaving. Qtd. in *Routes of Exile*, dir. Eugene Rosow, 1982. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁵⁸ According to Elie Barnavi's calculations, 68 percent of French Jewry is of Sephardic origin. *Lettre ouverte aux Juifs de France* (Paris: Stock, 2002) 17, qtd. in Debrauwere-Miller, "France," 20.

African Muslims also immigrated to France following the decolonization period. Though many of these Sephardic Jewish and Muslim communities have lived within close proximity of one another—frequently in low-income housing units in the suburbs of France’s largest cities—their relations have often been marred by strife. These interreligious tensions, and the ways in which they are or are not related to the Israel-Palestine conflict have sparked, what Elisabeth Lévy has termed a “civil war among [France’s] intellectuals.”⁵⁹

One topic debated by intellectuals is the explanations behind the increased numbers of antisemitic acts in France. While some are quick to point a finger at France’s Muslim population, others prefer to downplay the severity of anti-Jewish violence in the interest of avoiding the stigmatization of France’s underprivileged Muslim and black youths (Debrauwere-Miller, “France” 12). Some, such as Pierre-André Taguieff and Alain Finkielkraut, decry the openly antisemitic and anti-Zionist sentiments publicly expressed by some French Muslims. Taguieff, in particular, notes the tendency to justify what he terms “Judéophobie” through accusations of Jewish racism against others.⁶⁰ By contrast, others such as Rony Brauman condemn what Brauman views as “coercion using the charge of anti-Semitism” based on the notion that any criticism of Israel implies a willingness to destroy the Jewish State (12). As Debrauwere-Miller asserts in “France and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” though much debate remains as to the causes and effects of Muslim-Jewish tensions in France—most notably regarding the relationship between interfaith strains in the Middle East and those in France—“it would

⁵⁹ Rony Brauman and Alain Finkielkraut, *La Discorde Israël-Palestine, les Juifs, la France, Conversations avec Elisabeth Lévy* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2006), 14-15, qtd. in Debrauwere-Miller, “France,” 12.

⁶⁰ Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Nouvelle judéophobie* (Paris: Mille et une Nuits, 2002) 42-43, qtd. in Debrauwere-Miller, “France,” 12.

be irresponsible and absurd not to admit the fallout of the Middle East conflict in France among [French Muslims and Jews]" (Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 13).⁶¹

During Israel's three-week offensive in Gaza in January of 2009,⁶² the increased strain between France's Jews and Muslims drew international media attention. On January 26, National Public Radio ran a story entitled "Gaza Fighting Reverberates in France."⁶³ As evidence of the increased discord in France, reporter Eleanor Beardsley cited several acts of violence, some of which targeted Jews, one of which targeted Muslims. For her story, Beardsley interviewed Annie-Paule Derczansky—a journalist, as well as the president and co-founder of a Parisian women's Muslim-Jewish friendship group named Les Bâtisseuses de Paix. Les Bâtisseuses is a group that works to unite Muslim and Jewish women—most of whom are of North African origin—through various cultural and social activities that emphasize the commonalities between the two groups. Beardsley asked Derczansky why, out of all the comparable groups that exist in France, hers was the only one to continue to operate during the 2009 violence in the Middle East. The following is Derczansky's thought-provoking response: "We don't talk about the Middle East. I always repeat 'Don't forget, you live in France and you want

⁶¹ The two preceding paragraphs are merely a summary of some of the debate surrounding Muslim-Jewish relations in France. For a more complete explanation, see Debrauwere-Miller, "France," 12-15.

⁶² The war, which was intended to halt the Palestinian rocket fire that had plagued southern Israel for years, took 1,400 Palestinian lives and 13 Israeli lives. Reuters, "Israel Strikes in Gaza After Deadly Rocket," The New York Times 19 March 2010. Many in the international audience saw Israel's response to the violence in Gaza as exaggerated; some have accused Israel of war crimes. Isabel Kershner, "Israel Charges 2 Soldiers in Gaza War Case," The New York Times 11 March 2010.

⁶³ "Gaza Fighting Reverberates in France." Morning Edition. Nat'l Public Radio. WPLN, Nashville, 26 Jan. 2009. Radio. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99861094>

your children [to] grow up together in France. And for that, I ask [...] you to put your pain on the side.”⁶⁴

In July of 2009, Derczansky was generous enough to grant me an interview in Paris and elaborate on her comments recorded in the NPR piece.⁶⁵ Derczansky’s remarks in both interviews raise interesting questions about the roles played by memory and forgetting and how these phenomena are related to current events both in France and Israel-Palestine. In addition to the French citizenship that currently unites French Sephardic Jews and Arab Muslims, the journalist emphasizes the common past shared by the two communities. Founding Les Bâtisseuses de Paix, she explained during our interview, was an attempt to renew the links between the two cultures: “Il faut réussir à remettre en selle cette relation culturelle.” However, while forbidding discussion of the Middle East, Derczansky does ask members of Les Bâtisseuses de Paix to engage in two seemingly opposite processes: they must simultaneously remember and forget. Organized activities such as a recurring workshop on Oriental pastry making,⁶⁶ a custom in which Jewish and Muslim women may have participated in North Africa, encourage these Maghrebi women to recall their common cultural background. Yet, by silencing discussion of Israel-Palestine, Derczansky requires that participants disregard (at least while in each other’s presence) what often constitutes a primary preoccupation for them, as well as part of what fuels their hostility toward the other. In its attempts to negotiate between remembering and forgetting, the example of the Bâtisseuses de Paix is related to all of the primary texts of this study.

⁶⁴ Though she did not dwell on this point, Derczansky also underscored the importance of the women’s gender as a reason for their continued solidarity.

⁶⁵ Our interview took place on 27, July 2009.

⁶⁶ Derczansky informed me that this regularly offered activity draws a crowd of between 20 and 60 people.

Overview of Chapters

Remembering the Future: Francophone Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict explores works that treat the traumatic memories central to the conflict, posing questions about remembering and forgetting. Given the complexities laid out in the preceding pages, a central question presents itself: By what means can the actors in the conflict progress toward peace while remaining faithful to histories that are often defined by trauma and almost always narrated in opposition to one another? Slimane Benaïssa takes up this question in his play, *L'avenir oublié*. In “Slimane Benaïssa’s Dismantling of the Israeli-Palestinian Binary in *L'avenir oublié*,” I explore how the author creates a rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians by revealing the similar tensions that unite, rather than divide, the two populations. I contend that Benaïssa’s emphasis on symmetry—evident in his staging, his casting, his development of plot, even in his collaboration with Jewish author André Chouraqui—creates parallels between the two groups. While the playwright challenges the schisms between Israelis and Palestinians, however, he undergirds divisions within each camp. For example, *L'avenir*’s vision for the future as represented by the collaborative project of the two young male protagonists—one Jewish Israeli, the other a half-Muslim, half-Christian Palestinian—excludes the elder characters. Rather than pointing to any solutions or conclusions offered by Benaïssa, I suggest that it is perhaps the play’s solicitation of a response from its audience members that offers the most hope.

While memory is certainly a prominent theme of *L'avenir oublié*, it is even more central in Hubert Haddad’s *Palestine*, which features an amnesiac protagonist. *Palestine* takes an ambiguous stance on the roles played by forgetting and remembering. My

second chapter, “The Ambiguity of Amnesia in Hubert Haddad’s *Palestine*” argues that Haddad employs the affliction of amnesia as a literary conceit in order to explore the parallels between Jews and Muslims, and specifically between Arab Jews and Arab Muslims. Through the observations of his amnesiac protagonist and the return of the protagonist’s repressed memories, Haddad reveals not only the similar pasts of the Arab Jews and Arab Muslims, but also the ways in which both Palestinians and Arab Jews have been ostracized in Israel by an Israeli leadership dominated by Ashkenazi influence. On the one hand, the novel seems to advocate a forgetting of the past as a remedy to present conflict—the protagonist’s amnesia eradicates his biases toward Palestinians and facilitates his identification with them. In other moments, the novel points to the importance of remembering the suffering of the other, as evidenced, for example, in the Palestinian character Layla. Rather than condoning an erasure of the past, in the end, the novel reveals that we all practice selective remembering and forgetting and underscores the agency we possess in deciding which memories to call upon when constructing our worldviews. *Palestine* advocates neither an obliteration of nor an obsessive focus on the past, but instead encourages the recollection of memories that dismantle the barriers separating communities. I contend that, through his emphasis on the destructive consequences of the erection of artificial boundaries between the self and the other, Haddad makes a plea for the recognition of the presence of the other within the self.

Rather than addressing the salutary effects of forgetting, in *Mille ans, un jour*, Edmond Amran El Maleh condemns the forgetting of several histories. Through his juxtaposition of Muslim-Jewish coexistence in pre-1948 Morocco with the Muslim-Jewish conflict both in Israel-Palestine and Lebanon, El Maleh nostalgically pines for a

return to the former period. The novel also figuratively aligns Palestinians and Sephardic Jews by comparing memories of the Moroccan Jewish exodus to those of massacres of Palestinians in the Lebanon War and equating them, on a metaphorical level, to the *Shoah*. “Locating the Productive Within the Unthinkable: Edmond El Maleh’s Zionist/Nazi Comparisons” explores the shocking associations established by El Maleh and reveals their historical inaccuracies and moral questionability. In its portrayal of Zionist treatment of Moroccan Jews and Palestinians, the novel accuses the Zionists of repeating the racially motivated violence wrought by the Nazis on European Jews and thus implicitly indicts the Zionists for forgetting the lessons of the *Shoah*. Despite the negative implications of these comparisons, however, I reveal El Maleh’s productive destabilization of a Zionist narrative that relegates Sephardim and Arabs to the lower stratum of society and depicts Muslims and Jews as necessarily antagonistic. I also expose El Maleh’s challenge of Zionist claims to have internalized the moral lessons of the *Shoah* by exploring the author’s depictions of racially motivated violence perpetrated by Zionists.

While my analyses of Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh examine how these authors destabilize the Israeli-Palestinian dichotomy through their explorations of memory, in my study of Palestinian author Elias Sanbar’s *Le Bien des absents*, memory holds no less central a role, but has starkly different effects. In “An Alternative Mode of Deconstruction: Elias Sanbar’s Articulation of Palestinian Presence in *Le Bien des absents*,” I demonstrate that Sanbar—rather than creating a rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians—seeks to assert a Palestinian narrative that has been obscured by Zionism. Instead of challenging the binary between Israelis and Palestinians, Sanbar

deconstructs an Israeli narrative—and through this narrative, an Israeli identity—that depends upon the obfuscation of Palestinian memory. I use this chapter to examine an alternative Francophone perspective on the conflict—one that is directly implicated in questions related to Israeli and Palestinian memory. By way of counterexample, Sanbar's memoirs demonstrate the specificity of the North African point of view, indicating that within the Israeli-Palestinian context, the binary between Jew and Muslim may be too ossified to deconstruct, even through literature.

CHAPTER I

SLIMANE BENAÏSSA'S TROUBLING OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN BINARY IN *L'AVENIR OUBLIÉ*

As much as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict hinges on a territorial dispute, a battle also rages over the relating of the region's history. As the conflict plays out on the proverbial world stage, it appears as a competition that exists between the two populations to garner attention from an international audience. The two groups vie to generate empathy for their histories of victimization, as well as military and moral support for their causes. Historian Neil Caplan notes how Israeli and Palestinians' fight to "win sympathy [...] beyond the region" has spilled over into the spheres of "international lobbying, the media, and academia." Caplan further observes how "each side, with dreadful predictability, [...] interpret[s] all the facts of its historical experience as reinforcing its own deep sense of grievance and victimhood at the hands of the other (12, 30). This competition, in which Israelis and Palestinians attempt to paint their suffering as more severe than the other's, only serves to further divide the two camps. In *La société des victimes*, Guillaume Erner describes the damaging results of competition amongst victim groups for recognition of their suffering:

La rivalité mimétique qui peut opposer deux groupes ayant un préjudice est une conséquence de la lutte pour la reconnaissance. Considérer un premier traumatisme comme plus grave qu'un second, c'est infliger à ce dernier une blessure narcissique. La non-reconnaissance est vécue comme une souffrance supplémentaire, parfois aussi insupportable que le traumatisme originel.[...] C'est

la lutte pour la reconnaissance qui finit par opposer ces deux groupes, tous deux porteurs d'une identité meurtrie.¹

Trauma lies at the heart of the foundational narratives of both Israelis and Palestinians. Be it defined by genocide (for Israelis) or expulsion from their homeland (for Palestinians), both groups have legitimate reasons to strive to protect and proclaim their “murdered identity.” It is often the case, however, that Israelis and Palestinians feel the need to deny the other community’s wounds in order to articulate their own traumatic memory.



Figure 1

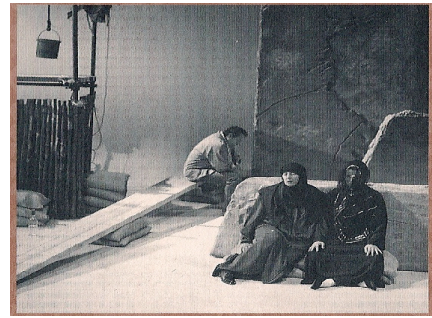


Figure 2

In *L'avenir oublié*, the Franco-Algerian and Muslim playwright/ director Slimane Benaïssa creates a theatrical representation—both visual and metaphorical—of the Israeli-Palestinian victimization competition. Figures 1 and 2² portray the two sides of the halved stage of the MC93 Bobigny theater where Benaïssa produced *L'avenir* in 1999.

¹ Guillaume Erner, *La société des victimes* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 54. While Erner’s comments are certainly applicable to the situation in Israel-Palestine, he sees the competition amongst victims as a worldwide phenomenon. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

² Figure 1 was provided by the author. Figure 2 was scanned from the cover of the play. All images are printed with the author’s permission. My observations of these images are informed by comments that the author shared with me during our interview on 24 July, 2009. Sharing his reactions to the physical space of Israel-Palestine, Benaïssa noted, “tu as un espace israélien qui est très structuré, métallique, j’ai vu des produits de matières modernes, plexiglas... c’est net... Et dans l’espace palestinien, bordélique. Il y a des murs cassés...c’est comme ça. Il y a aussi le fait qu’il y a la guerre, mais elle ne se voit que du côté palestinien... Les dégâts de la guerre ne se voyaient pas. Un mur se casse et le lendemain ils le réparent. Côté palestinien, il reste comme ça.” All quotations from my interview with Benaïssa refer to the same date.

In the play, the split stage functions as a physical representation of the divided Israel-Palestine. Similarly, the two families that populate the stage—one half-Christian, half-Muslim Palestinian and the other Jewish Israeli—serve as allegorical symbols of the Israeli and Palestinians populations. In many ways, the elements of the set design fall in line with viewers' expectations about conditions in Israel-Palestine. Stage right (Figure 1), which houses the Israeli family, resembles the interior of a house and is notable for its cleanliness, its modern architecture, and its harsh angles. Stage left (Figure 2)³—occupied by the Palestinian characters—is the reverse of the image of stage right. Rather than an enclosed and clearly defined space, stage left suggests deterioration and uncertainty. The background appears to be the exterior wall of a dilapidated building. The wooden plank that cuts across the stage indicates a halted construction project, while the slab of concrete brings to mind a roadblock or some other obstruction. Placing these two disparate representations of living conditions side by side calls attention to the hierarchical power relations in Israel-Palestine. *L'avenir's* set design clearly represents the Israeli family as having more resources than their Palestinian neighbors.

Yet, while *L'avenir* clearly points to the unequal distribution of resources amongst Israelis and Palestinians, the play does not constitute a black-and-white representation of the situation in which the Israeli characters merely occupy the role of oppressor and the Palestinians the oppressed. If at first glance the divided stage might seem to confirm the dichotomous nature of the conflict, two important elements of the set trouble this reading. First is the single white sheet that covers the set's background, as well as the floor of the stage. This unifying visual element is complemented by the lack

³ The actress on stage right is portraying that character of Fatima. The actress to her left, unnamed in the *dramatis personae*, provides musical accompaniment, but speaks no lines.

of physical separation between the two sides of the stage. Unlike the wall that separates Israel from the Occupied Territories, no such barrier separates the Israelis and Palestinians of *L'avenir*. Instead, a well (visible in Figures 1 and 2)—literally and metaphorically the centerpiece of the play—marks the distinction between the sides of the stage. Rather than divide the two communities as would a wall, *L'avenir*'s well symbolically unites them. As is evident from the set design alone, *L'avenir* arranges the two groups both in contrast and in parallel. On the one hand, the set design brings to the fore the stark differences in Israeli and Palestinian conditions—a reality which is confirmed in the first scene when we learn that the house of one of the Palestinian characters has been demolished. On the other hand, the presence of both the unifying sheet and the communal well in this theatrical representation highlight the artificiality of the borders that divide Israelis and Palestinians in reality. Referring to the physical proximity as well as the interrelated yet troubled nature of the histories of Israelis and Palestinians, during our interview, Benaïssa comically likened the two communities to “deux amants dans le même lit la nuit d’un divorce.” It was to emphasize the connectedness of the two communities generally regarded as foes that Benaïssa decided to envelop all of the characters figuratively in a single white sheet.

Benaïssa's emphasis on symmetry—evident in his casting and his development of plot—creates additional parallels between the two populations. Moreover, Benaïssa's collaboration with Jewish author André Chouraqui during the writing process, which I describe in further detail below, enhances the cross cultural exchange that defines the play's spirit. These linkages break down the binary between Israelis and Palestinians, revealing that similar tensions link, rather than divide, the two groups. The dramaturge

removes emphasis from the history of enmity that generally defines Israeli-Palestinian relations, and—despite their disparate living circumstances—casts the two families as near mirror images of one another. Rather than interreligious strife, the play focuses on two tensions internal to both communities, the first of which is a generational schism related to differing interpretations of the imperative to remember the past. The sons of each family struggle to define themselves amidst the competing pressures placed on them by, on the one hand, the legacy of their people’s traumatic pasts and the demands to avenge these wrongs suffered, and, on the other, the currently stalled peace process and the lack of amelioration of the Palestinian situation. While the older generation in each family accuses the youth of forgetting the past because of their willingness to consider the other side’s point of view, the sons implicitly counter that the elders have forgotten the possibility of a peaceful future—one that diverges from their current reality. The mothers, in particular, embody the imperative to remember their people’s painful histories. The Israeli mother specifically represents a desire to memorialize this past by erecting metaphorical monuments to the dead. Contesting this focus on the past, the Israeli and Palestinian sons (Joseph and Antoine-Nasser, respectively) collaborate to construct a well—a “monument” that symbolizes the possibility of a sustainable future. In placing these characters side-by-side and center stage, Benaïssa overtly advocates a universal and constructive—rather than restrictive—interpretation of the duty to remember. The second point of contention present in both families revolves around the role played by religion in politics. Whereas the religiously conservative uncles in each family call on religious scriptures to legitimize political positions that exclude cooperation with the opposite side, the sons point to the multiplicity of possible

interpretations of these texts and cast doubt on God's willingness to advocate war amongst his peoples.

Cyril Aslanov adeptly treats Benaïssa's deconstruction of the "opposition between the two camps" as a denouncement of "the absurdity of the conflict" through his analysis of the author's use of symmetrical plot lines. Aslanov notes the author's establishment "of a grey zone between the bipolarized camps" through the creation of the friendship between the Israeli and Palestinian sons and the importance of the "pluralistic polyphony" represented by the two characters' dialogue, which stands in contrast to the monolithic Israeli and Palestinian narratives.⁴ I expand Aslanov's analysis of symmetry by exploring the parallels in Benaïssa's casting and staging as well as in the structure of the plot. Moreover, in my focus on memory, I investigate the stage as physical representation of the public sphere, and note the author's commentary on what I term "constructive" versus "restrictive" interpretations of the past.

The simplicity of *L'avenir*'s set design and the symmetry of its plot lines stand in contrast to the play's untidy ending, which offers reason for both hope and despair. The sons' discovery of a water source for their well and the announcement made by Antoine-Nasser of his intentions to marry a Jewish Israeli offer hope that peace and coexistence may come to the Middle East. On the other hand, the last few lines of *L'avenir* indicate that Joseph—who, throughout the play had planned to abandon the army as a moral objector—will return to his post. Given Joseph's struggle to define himself outside of his

⁴ Cyril Aslanov, "Slimane Benaïssa or the Voice of Dissidence," *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World*, ed. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller (New York: Routledge, 2010), 68 and 70. Benaïssa also uses the literary device of symmetry as a means of drawing parallels between characters in his 1996 play *Les Fils de l'amertume*. Janice B. Gross, "Performing the Future of Memory: Algerian Playwrights in France," *Modern Drama* 73 (2003): 73-93. Subsequent references to Aslanov and Gross will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

prescribed role as a soldier, it seems that Joseph makes the decision to return to his army service by default. I argue that even as Benaïssa deconstructs the Israeli-Palestinian binary through depictions of parallel memories and similar tensions in both camps, he undergirds those schisms that separate youth and elders, as well as religious conservatives from religious moderates. The play's vision for the future, as represented by the collaboration between Antoine-Nasser and Joseph, excludes not only elders, but also women. Due to the persistence of the internal divisions within the Israeli and Palestinian communities in the play, even the union between the two central characters is not enough to solve the crisis. As we shall see, it is perhaps Benaïssa's solicitation of a response from his audience members that offers the most hope.

As a playwright, Benaïssa privileges the spoken over the written word and maintains a relationship to his audience members, distinct from that of a novelist.⁵ Janice B. Gross reveals that the dramaturge employs the medium of drama to call people's attention to pressing matters, noting that, "theater [...] enjoins others to 'listen' especially when the message is an urgent one and not often heard" ("Performing" 76). Gross points out how theater allows the playwright to literally stage dialogue and "to express a multiplicity of views in a dynamic and direct mode of confrontation." I extend Gross's analysis by showing how—more than merely portraying dialogue between his characters—Benaïssa encourages participation in dialogue on the part of his audience members. Further, whereas Gross reads Benaïssa's use of symmetrical structure and the medium of theater as allowing the author to avoid "privileging one [view] to the exclusion of others," I note that while the author favors neither the Israeli nor the Palestinian side, his

⁵ Benaïssa has published several novels as well, including a novelistic version of *Les fils de l'amertume* (Paris: Plon, 1999); *Le silence de la falaise* (Paris: Plon, 2001); *La dernière nuit d'un damné* (Paris: Plon, 2003); and *Les colères du silence* (Paris: Plon, 2005).

vision for the future excludes both woman and the elders. In a play that stresses symmetry, it is essential to investigate these imbalances.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the symmetry evident in the staging, casting, and plotline of *L'avenir oublié* as manifestations of Benaïssa's troubling of the Israeli-Palestinian dichotomy. Next, I home in on the schism between youth and elders generated by differing interpretations of loyalty to the past. I analyze specifically here the way in which the matriarchs in each family function as an embodiment of the past, while the sons represent hope for a different future. The third section continues to explore tensions related to the duty to remember the past, focusing specifically on how they play out in the Jewish family. In the following section, I treat the debates over the role of religion in politics and the way in which their shared struggle over this matter unites Joseph and Antoine-Nasser. Finally, I explore the ways in which *L'avenir* solicits a response from its audience members, in particular those who attended the performances at the MC93 Bobigny theater, a significant portion of whom were Jews and Muslims.⁶

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the play, it is essential to note the political and geographic context in which *L'avenir* was produced and the significance of choosing Bobigny as a site to stage the play. Bobigny is a Parisian suburb where Jews of North African origin and Muslims of North and West African origins continue to live in close proximity, though not always in each other's good graces. Due to a variety of factors—including the betrayal many Sephardic Jews continue to feel as a result of being made unwelcome by their Muslim countrymen after the decolonization of North Africa

⁶ On the significance of the demographics of Bobigny as they relate to *L'avenir*, see Janice B. Gross, "The Tragedy of Algeria: Slimane Benaïssa's Drama of Terrorism," *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002), 387 and Aslanov, 14. In addition to the twenty-five performances at MC93 Bobigny, *L'avenir* had a short run of three performances at a theater in Strasbourg. (Information garnered from interview.)

and the resentment of French Muslims when they compare their difficult economic circumstances and social stigmatization to the Jews' relative economic success and ability to integrate socially⁷—the two communities' relationship is often contentious despite their often similar origins (Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 9-10). France has seen a trend toward self-segregation amongst Jews and Muslims that has escalated since the 1990s (Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 8). One expression of this inward-looking mentality is consistent support for each community's respective "side" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 10-12).⁸ Thus, while *L'avenir* takes place on foreign soil, the issues explored are not unfamiliar to the play's Francophone readers and spectators, particularly those in Bobigny in 1999 who had already experienced a decade of deteriorating relations. As the demographics of Bobigny suggest, in addition to destabilizing the Israeli-Palestinian binary, the performance of the play may also present an opportunity to bring together its Jewish and Muslim French spectators.

Dismantling the Binary

The symmetrical staging of *L'avenir* renders it impossible for the audience to ignore the similarities in the plot lines that unfold on either side of the divided stage. The Palestinian and Israeli families have identical structures. Both families are comprised of a mother—a widow, who lost her husband during the 1967 War—an only son, and the

⁷ For more on the strife between Jews and Muslims in the Parisian suburbs and its link to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see Leila Shahid, et al., *Les banlieues, le Proche-Orient et nous* (Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2006).

⁸ See Debrauwere-Miller's "France" for an in-depth explanation of the roles played by the radicalization of Islam and the new "Judeophobia" in French Arab Muslims' relationship to the conflict and that played by French Jews' diasporic identities.

mothers' two brothers, one a religious conservative and the other more moderate.

Additionally, the conflicts in each family are very similar and develop in nearly the same order; the tensions in the Palestinian family that come to light in Act II are near mirror images of those that erupt in the Israeli family in Act I. Each act pits mother against son or uncle against uncle.

Benaïssa's static staging, which confines the Israeli family to one side of the stage and the Palestinian family to the other—points to the historically entrenched positions of the two sides in the conflict. The older characters in the play never enter into dialogue with members of the other “side,” just as, in reality, meaningful exchange between Israelis and Palestinians is often lacking.⁹ The fixed position of all of the elder characters, who are consigned to opposing sides of the stage, draws attention to the significance of the exchange between the younger characters, which occurs center stage. Whereas the elders are characterized by their stasis and separation from the other side, the youth are depicted as fluid and united.

Through his dramatization, Benaïssa makes a statement about the characters' comprehension of the interactions between memory and identity in the public sphere. Whereas the mothers and religious uncles can be said to espouse a competitive view of the public sphere in which various groups compete for recognition (such as that described by Erner), we can argue that the youth understand this space to be “multidirectional,” a concept outlined by Michael Rothberg in his seminal work *Multidirectional Memory*. As an alternative to the competitive view of the public sphere that envisions this space “as a

⁹ In the play, the two secular uncles are an exception to this rule. Despite their empathy toward the other side, however, neither directly engages with the other. While, in reality, Israeli-Palestinian relations are marked by a lack of exchange, there are a number of instances of artistic collaboration, such as the West-Eastern Divan, as well as social and political organizations, such as Ta'ayush, Zochrot, and Combatants For Peace that work to bridge the divides between the two groups.

pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle,” Rothberg promotes a view of the public sphere “as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interaction with others” (Rothberg 5). While *L’avenir*’s elder characters remain unshakable in their political and/or religious convictions throughout the play, the sons show signs of character development. Through their verbal exchange, the sons question not only societal and religious attitudes, but also their own. “Both the subjects and the spaces of the public,” Rothberg adds, “are open to continual reconstruction.” Like the public sphere, the theater—which may in most instances be conceived of as a “pregiven” or “limited” space, with a delineated stage, demarcated character roles, and, most frequently, distinct separation between actors and audience—actually offers multiple possibilities to extend these boundaries. Benaïssa capitalizes on this potential by directing his players to begin acting before the curtain rises,¹⁰ by casting actors in multiple roles, and by extending the dialogue to post-performance discussions that encourage audience participation.¹¹ These discussions allow the director to take advantage of the community formed through the shared experience between actors and audience that coalesces during a performance.¹²

Particularly in the context of the religiously heterogeneous audience of Bobigny,

¹⁰ During our interview, Benaïssa explained that as audience members file in, they observe the two youths on stage transporting sacks of sand from one corner to center stage, next to the well.

¹¹ Information about discussions following performances of *L’avenir* garnered during interview with author. Benaïssa also organized or participated in post-play debates or lectures in conjunction with his plays *Le Conseil de discipline* (Brussels, 1994) and *Les Papiers de l’Amour* (Geneva, 2009). For more information on the discussions following *Conseil*, see Thierry Guichard, “Slimane Benaïssa, le fils de l’humanisme,” *Matricule des anges* (44), 17. For a list of the Jewish and Arab studies intellectuals whose lectures accompanied the production of *Les Papiers*—an as-yet unpublished play that treats the love affair between an Israeli and a Palestinian—see *Le Théâtre en Cavale*, June 14 2009 <www.cavale.ch/site0809/05_papiers.html>.

¹² For more on the formation of community amongst audience members, see Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Formas of Political Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 7.

Benaïssa created a multidirectional theatrical space by encouraging dialogue and collaboration between groups that are often pit against one another in an immutable binary.

The multidirectionality of the performance, in addition to the symmetry of the staging, the casting, and the plot trump the rigid division of the set, and underscores the sameness of the two communities, rather than their differences. Benaïssa highlights the shared humanity of the historical “foes” by casting, in both the Paris and Strasbourg productions, only one actress to play both the Israeli and the Palestinian mothers, and two actors to play both sets of uncles.¹³ As opposed to the Israeli-Palestinian context, in which one’s religion often determines on which side of the barrier one is located, actors of both religions were assigned to play the role of the other, necessitating a move to the opposite side of the stage. Significantly, in the 1999 production at MC93 Bobigny, Benaïssa—a Muslim by birth—played the role of Isac, the religiously moderate Jewish uncle.¹⁴ Figure 3 shows the writer/ director in his role as actor, donning a *kippa*, or skullcap.¹⁵ In this way, Benaïssa took advantage of the opportunity afforded by the genre of theater to “play the other.” “C’est ça la fonction essentielle du théâtre,” he declared during our interview, adding, “Si je ne joue pas l’autre, je ne résous aucun problème avec l’autre. Si moi je ne te joue pas et toi tu ne me joues pas, il n’y a rien qui se passe. Toi tu seras toujours toi et aussi étrangère pour moi et moi je serai aussi étranger pour toi.” Of course, audience members are attuned to the dual roles played by the actors, and their recognition of this doubling serves to further underscore the oneness of the two

¹³ In the stage directions, Benaïssa writes, “La mère et les deux oncles peuvent être joués par les mêmes acteurs lorsqu’on passe d’une famille à l’autre” (6).

¹⁴ Information garnered during interview with Benaïssa.

¹⁵ In this scene, Isac shares the stage with his sister, Josette, played by Martine Vandeville. Benaïssa also provided this image to me.

populations.¹⁶ I take up the literary technique of doubling and the theme of “playing the other” again in my second chapter, where I treat Hubert Haddad’s 2007 novel *Palestine*.



Figure 3

Indeed, Benaïssa’s multidirectional project began long before the play was performed, as a collaborative effort between the author and André Chouraqui—a Jewish Algerian who immigrated to Israel in 1965.¹⁷ Benaïssa had originally planned to write a stage adaptation of Chouraqui’s *Lettre à un ami arabe*, but after grappling with the inherent difficulties in this project (*Lettre* does not lend itself well to the stage), he settled on telling his own tale of a friendship between a Jew and a non-Jewish Arab.¹⁸ The following quotation taken from Chouraqui’s postscript is indicative of the spirit in which the book was written and how it served as inspiration for Benaïssa:

Those who believe that [the Near East is destined for war] demonstrate [...] a complete lack of magnanimity and faith [...]. [...] The belief in a war destiny prolongs hostilities endlessly [...]. [...] Israel has to fight for peace with the same faith, courage and selflessness that it has fought to guarantee its survival. This

¹⁶ Though he is referring to a slightly different context—the audience’s recognition that the same actor plays different roles from one performance to the next—Marvin Carlson’s comments about actors’ doubling are nonetheless illuminating here: “The recycled body of an actor [...] will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process.” Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 8.

¹⁷ The following note appears just after Benaïssa’s name on the title page of *L’avenir oublié*: “avec la complicité de André Chouraqui.”

¹⁸ André Chouraqui, *Lettre à un ami arabe* (Tours: Mame, 1969). *Lettre*—which straddles the line between novel and essay—also tells the tale of a friendship between two young men, one Israeli and one Palestinian. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

time it must do so hand in hand with its friends, more numerous than one might suppose, among the Arabs.¹⁹

Like *Lettre, L'avenir* not only depicts a Jewish-Arab friendship, but also attempts to break down the barriers between the two groups creating possibilities for more interfaith alliances. Despite Benaïssa's role as principle writer, Chouraqui served as an advisor (the two authors met in Israel/ Palestine during the writing process²⁰) and embraced the final project. Beyond the Jewish-Muslim alliance that Benaïssa and Chouraqui's collaboration represents, the playwright's choice of Chouraqui as partner in this project is significant for several reasons. First, Chouraqui, like Benaïssa, lived in Algeria for many years and thus witnessed both periods of relative peace between Jews, Muslims, and Christians as well as the souring of these relationships (due, in large part, to the effects of decolonization). Chouraqui (deceased since 2007) also had first-hand knowledge of Jewish-Muslim relations in Israel and even served as vice-mayor of Jerusalem for some time. As the first scholar to translate the Koran into French (he translated the Torah and New Testament as well), Chouraqui was intimately familiar with all three Abrahamic religions. As a translator, Chouraqui was obligated to meditate on the relationships between languages and religions, and to invent ways to render foreign concepts accessible to a French audience. In a similar vein, *L'avenir* aims not only to render comprehensible to an average theater-going French audience the infinitely complex Israel-Palestine conflict, but also to "translate" each side's position to the other.

¹⁹ André Chouraqui, *Letter to an Arab Friend*, trans. William V. Gugli (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 266-67. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

²⁰ Information provided on book jacket.

Even if Benaïssa was the principle creator of *L'avenir*, it is significant that the play was developed through a dialogic interaction between a Muslim and a Jew. Benaïssa characterizes his partnership with Chouraqui in this way: “*L'avenir oublié* est le fruit d'une rencontre entre deux poètes qui croient fortement en la paix.”²¹ Given the often antagonistic history between Jews and Arabs (Arab Muslims and Arab Christians) that underlies *L'avenir*, this poetic alliance makes a potent political statement. It is not only the two youthful characters that emblemize Rothberg's multidirectionality, but the symbolic creation of the work as a whole, which, to recap Rothberg, came “into being through [a] dialogical interaction with others” (5).

Beyond his own participation in a Muslim-Jewish alliance both as an actor and as a writer/director, Benaïssa also promotes interfaith exchange amongst his audience members. By staging his play at the MC93 Bobigny theater, Benaïssa purposefully provided a place for theatergoers of differing faiths—particularly Jews and Muslims—to convene. Benaïssa sees the space of the theater as one that attracts a uniquely heterogeneous audience. As the Jesus character says in Benaïssa's 1999 play *Prophètes sans dieu*, “A la mosquée n'entrent que les musulmans, à la synagogue que les juifs et à l'église que les chrétiens. Et l'entrée est gratuite. Mais au théâtre, tous sont là : juifs, chrétiens, musulmans, laïques, non-croyants...et ils ont payé leur place” (39). Benaïssa capitalized on the inherent diversity of his audience at Bobigny by organizing debates after the performances.²² It is Benaïssa's hope that just as the writer, director, and actors step out of their assigned roles to engage in spontaneous discussion at the end of the play,

²¹ E-mail from the author. 19 Apr. 2009.

²² Information garnered during interview.

audience members may begin to distance themselves from the roles they normally play as “Jew,” “Muslim,” or “Christian.”

Generation gaps: Forgetting the past versus forgetting the future

While all of the characters in Benaïssa’s *L’avenir* are allegorical in nature, the mothers are perhaps the most so. In fact, though Benaïssa names Josette and Fatima in the *dramatis personae*, throughout the play he attributes their speeches simply to “La mere,” a stylistic choice that underscores the figurative nature of these characters. Josette, in particular, acts as the voice of a range of experiences so diverse that one person could not possibly have lived them all, claiming the 20th-century traumas of both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews as her own. Josette supposedly witnessed not only antisemitism in Western Europe—“En Allemagne, j’ai baissé la tête parce que j’étais juive... en France parce que je portais l’étoile de David”—but also the souring of relations between Jews and Muslims in Algeria—“En Algérie, on a toujours vécu avec les Arabes. [...] Mais, je ne sais pas pourquoi, dès qu’ils ont obtenu l’indépendance, ils ont changé. Ils sont devenus méfiants” (*L’avenir* 12, 22). What is more important than determining the accuracy of Josette’s claims is observing that the character has adopted both of these traumatic experiences into her personal narrative. Commenting on Josette’s relationship to the *Shoah*—the trauma that defines her worldview—during our interview Benaïssa noted that his character considers this event to be inextricably linked to Jewish identity. He observed, “elle porte ce malheur-là: si je suis juif, c’est que j’ai vécu la Shoah [...]. Être juif, c’est ça.” Though Josette’s story represents a less likely trajectory

than Fatima's, both mothers embody a physical connection to their people's histories and feel personally betrayed when their sons interpret differently the lessons of this history.

For Josette, the history of antisemitism—the apex of which was the *Shoah*—justifies the existence of the State of Israel and legitimizes any military action taken in its defense. According to Fatima, Israelis are the Palestinians' primary enemy, having continually persecuted her people since 1948. For Josette, Joseph's betrayal comes when he announces his decision to abandon his army post due to his disapproval of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands:

Joseph. Je n'irai pas rejoindre mon poste...

[...]

La mère. Mais les territoires, c'est le grand Israël ! Et ton père, mort pour ce grand Israël, qu'est-ce que tu en fais ? (*L'avenir* 10)

Like Josette, Fatima holds that it is the family members who perished as a result of the conflict to whom Antoine-Nasser owes allegiance. It is not surprising, then, that Fatima is repelled when Antoine-Nasser reveals that he has enlisted in the Israeli army and is prepared to fight against Palestinians and other Arabs. "On nous a chassé de nos villages," Fatima reminds her son, "on nous a exilés dans des camps où sont morts tes grands-parents. Nous avons connu avec les Juifs toutes sortes de répressions. Tu ne peux pas te mettre au garde-à-vous dans leurs rangs sans que je me sente déshonorée. C'est injuste, c'est de la trahison" (30).²³ For both Josette and Fatima, their community's painful histories are so central to their beings that both describe their reactions to the news of their sons' betrayal by employing bodily metaphors.

²³ When Fatima and Brahim express disbelief that an Arab Israeli would be allowed to enlist in the Israeli army, Antoine-Nasser explains that he passed himself off as a Bedouin. The question of service in the Israeli army constitutes yet another parallel in *L'avenir*, although we learn later that Antoine-Nasser's plan to join the ranks is in fact a lie he tells in order to prepare his family for the even more shocking news that he plan to reveal later: he is in love with an Israeli woman, Yaël, whom he intends to marry (44-45). I treat briefly Yaël's character later in this chapter.

Though she does not refer to the *Nakba* by name, it is this trauma that Fatima makes reference to here. Just as our attention is drawn to the doubling that takes place in *L'avenir* as a result of Benaïssa's use of symmetry, as readers, we must also remain conscious of the two oppositional views of nearly every event that constitutes the historiography of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hayden White's influential work on historical narratives, in which the theorist observes the necessity of representing past events in an "'imaginary'" way, provides an apt lens through which to analyze these divergent narratives.²⁴ The dominant Israeli narrative of 1948 maintains that Palestinians left their homes either of their own accord or as a result of an injunction from their own leaders. In the novel *Palestine*, the subject of my second chapter, Hubert Haddad's character of the Iraqi Jew verbalizes this view of history when he states, "Ceux-là [les Palestiniens] ont fui leurs villages sous l'injonction des chefs de guerre musulmans" (139). The dominant Palestinian narrative of the *Nakba*, on the other hand, holds Israelis responsible for creating this Palestinian exodus. In her use of the verbs *chasser* and *exiler*, Fatima clearly embodies the latter view of history. It is the trauma of the *Nakba* that Fatima carries inside her.

Joseph describes his mother as a "douleur personnifiée" and the frequency of Josette's own connections between her body and pain bear this connection out (45). Every instance of fear or sadness triggers a corporeal reaction in Josette: sirens incite stomach cramps and she "hears" the explosion of a bomb with her lungs (7, 8). While enjoining Joseph to stop drinking, she imagines that his destructive behavior will have

²⁴ White asks, "How else can any 'past,' which is by definition comprised of events, processes, structures, and so forth that are considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an 'imaginary' way?" White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23.1 (1984), 33.

harmful consequences on her own body: “Arrête de boire, je te dis. Tu vas me faire saigner...” (13). It is not surprising, then, that when she accuses Joseph of forgetting the *Shoah*—equating his challenge of Israeli policies with turning a blind eye to this traumatic event—she uses a corporal metaphor to describe her grief. She exclaims, “L’oubli de Joseph est une ablation de mon sein. Il est sa perdition dans des ténèbres que je n’ai jamais appris à éclairer. S’il oublie, que restera-t-il de moi en lui? Et sans moi, qu’est-il?” (15-16). As we shall see later, the emotional distance Joseph maintains from the event fuels Josette’s fear. She considers it her maternal duty to transmit to her son her grief and pain. It is as if the successful transmission of the memories of the *Shoah* and the emotions tied to them were the test of Josette’s mothering and as if her failure would result in a mastectomy.

Several passages point to Josette’s inability to conceive of Joseph as a being entirely separate from self. We need look no further than the name she chooses for her son—the masculine version of her own name (Aslanov 3-4). In one very telling moment, Josette speaks of her desire to view Joseph’s birth as an opportunity to cut herself off from her painful past and look toward a hopeful future. Josette claims that “avec [Joseph], j’ai coupé le cordon final et j’ai bâti l’espoir,” but her character points to the contrary (13). It seems clear that Josette has neither distanced herself from her past, nor come to terms with Joseph’s postpartum physical separation—a moment implicitly referenced through the near rhyme of “cordon final” and “cordon umbilical.” For Josette, neither cord has been severed; both her traumatic past and her son’s body still function as integral parts of her being.

While Benaïssa places less emphasis on Fatima's body than on Josette's, he nevertheless portrays her reaction to Antoine-Nasser's betrayal as corporal. After enumerating the successive traumas suffered by Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis, Fatima claims that her son's willingness to serve the enemy dishonors all aspects of her son's identity, as well as her own. In response to Antoine-Nasser's question, "Qui ai-je trahi?," Fatima emphatically responds, "Ta religion, ta race, tes origines, tes oncles, tes frères... Moi, je me sens trahie dans mes entrailles !" (30) Benaïssa's use of the word "entrailles," which also appears in the French expression "le fruit de mes entrailles," creates a parallel between this line and Josette's reference to her breast. Both mothers liken their sons' betrayals to injuries to intimate parts of their bodies, which, significantly, are also associated with maternity.

For Fatima, Antoine-Nasser's loyalty to his history seems to depend simply on avoidance of aiding the enemy. In fact, it seems appropriate to label Fatima—who calls for a "Jérusalem... sans guerre !—a pacifist (27). For Josette, on the other hand, Joseph's loyalty depends on his active participation in the army:

La mère. Si nous avons été tellement persécutés dans le passé, c'est parce que nous n'avons jamais eu notre armée à nous. Aujourd'hui, Dieu merci, nous savons nous défendre. Tu ne peux pas déserter notre armée.

Joseph. L'armée ne doit pas défendre des valeurs, elle doit défendre des positions.

La mère. Tu défends ce qu'on te dit de défendre. (11)

Here, Josette raises the stakes of Joseph's engagement with the army; accepting his duty as a soldier is not only a service he owes to his mother, but also to the legacy of all the Jews of world history, and even to God, whom Josette thanks for Israeli military savvy.

For Josette, the Jews' history of victimization justifies any military action taken in their own defense, and she blindly accepts the decisions of those in power.

Though Joseph and Antoine-Nasser express ambivalence about violent conflict now, both discuss their earlier involvement in violence. Joseph maintains, “J’ai prouvé que j’étais un soldat, et un bon” (12). But Joseph equates being a “good soldier” with a willingness to employ torture, an act he is no longer willing to carry out: “J’ai eu à torturer et à être présent pendant que d’autres le faisaient, à vomir parce que je ne supportais pas... Alors, ça suffit.” In contrast, Antoine-Nasser speaks of the symbolic glory of violence against the enemy—of revolt against the ‘oppressor’—explaining that at an earlier point in his life, he interpreted this aggression as a sign of faithfulness to his people, and to his mother in particular. In a poetic soliloquy, in which Antoine-Nasser symbolically embodies the entirety of Palestinian youth, he addresses the Intifada movement²⁵ in an apostrophe: “Intifada, mon enfance, je t’ai inventée pour apaiser la brûlure des défaites de nos pères. Intifada, ma dignité, la pierre ma donné l’idée de me jeter dans le giron de l’ennemi et a redonné à ma mère l’honneur de ses seins” (41). Antoine-Nasser aligns violence here with the words “dignité” and “honneur” and imbues aggression with the ironically soothing power to “apaiser la brûlure des défaites.”

While for Joseph, it is the violation of human rights that incites his resistance to military service, Antoine-Nasser’s disillusionment with violent revolt stems from what he judges to be the ultimately impotent response to the Intifada from the international audience. He notes the initial success of the symbolic Palestinian rebellion in raising

²⁵ In Arabic, “Intifada” means the “shaking off” (of a condition) and is often translated as “uprising” or “resistance” in English. The term refers to two popular Palestinian uprisings against Israelis: the first lasted from 1987 to 1993 and the second from September 2000-2005 (Smith 563 and Caplan 197-201). Since L’avenir was staged in 1999, we know that Antoine-Nasser is referring to the first Intifada.

international awareness about Israeli injustices—“Ils ont jugé que j’*étais* poétique et que cela valait plus que les armes automatiques”—but focuses on what he determines to be its eventual failure: “Ma révolte a épuisé la pierre, et le silence du monde a épuisé ma révolte” (41). While Antoine-Nasser’s frustration is understandable, especially in light of the Arab League’s refusal to financially support the Intifada in 1988, his assessment of the Intifada neglects to take into account the numerous gains made, including the successful collaboration of various factions of Palestinian leadership (hitherto fractious groups), the unification of various elements of Palestinian society under a common cause, and international condemnation of what was seen as Israel’s excessively violent reaction to the movement (Smith 420-24 and Caplan 200). Regardless of the historical inaccuracy of Antoine-Nasser’s assessment, it is clear that, like Joseph, he has determined that aggression has failed to dramatically alter the situation in Israel-Palestine. Nevertheless, both sons must contend with those who interpret engagement in violence against the other as synonymous with faithfulness to history. Earlier in their lives, both Joseph and Antoine-Nasser proved their loyalty to this history, and specifically to their mothers, through participation in this violence. In the soliloquy above, Antoine-Nasser repeats the metaphor of the mother’s breast, articulated earlier by Josette: “[la pierre] a redonné à ma mère l’honneur de ses seins” (41). This repeated metaphor underscores the irony of aligning this body part normally associated with sustaining life with a paradoxical desire to take life away.

Both through their collaborative construction of the well and their conversation, Joseph and Antoine-Nasser place emphasis on life and the future. That the well represents hope for a improved future is apparent in Antoine-Nasser’s use of the future

tense when dreaming out loud to Joseph of the food and festivals that the well water will make possible, “Ah, tu verras les tomates que j’aurai l’été prochain ! [...] Tu verras les festins qu’on se fera quand tu viendras en permission !” (42, emphasis mine). In order to fully appreciate the well’s symbolic capacity to create change, it is important to note both its placement and its structure. As a structure that descends into the ground, the well represents a non-space and neutral territory; it exists neither in Israel nor Palestine. Given its central location and its symbolic value, however, the well has the power to overturn existing animosities and power structures. As Benaïssa noted in our interview, the well exists in “la négation et comme il est au milieu, il est dans une force d’éclater le reste.” The well represents a physical monument to the future—one that stands in contrast to the metaphorical monuments to the past erected by the play’s elder characters. While the youth are capable of envisioning a future that differs from their current reality, in “forgetting the future,” the elders seem to be hopelessly ensnared in the cyclical nature of the conflict.

The playwright’s emphasis on the characters’ positions in this scene alludes to a potential reversal of the power dynamics in Israel-Palestine. In the first few lines of the scene, the writer reveals that Joseph is digging at the bottom of the well while Antoine-Nasser is on higher ground:

Antoine-Nasser: Eh, Joseph ! Ça va, là en bas ?

Joseph : Et toi, là-haut, ça va ? (42)

Cyril Aslanov notes the intertextual relationship established between this scene and its biblical antecedent in Genesis 37-50, the section of the Torah that recounts how Joseph’s brothers threw him to the bottom of a pit and then sold him into slavery to a group of Ishmaelites. As Aslanov rightly points out, unlike the biblical Joseph, Benaïssa’s

character emerges from the depths of the well a free man; thus “Benaïssa’s happy end [...] hints at the fact that the happy end of one side of the conflict does not preclude the possibility of a happy end for the other” (70-1). According to the critic, this scene supports a reading of *L’avenir* as a play penned in favor of a two-state solution. Building on Aslanov’s commentary here, I would add that while the characters’ positions in this scene may be indicative of a hope for a reversal of the Israeli-Palestinian hierarchy, what is perhaps more significant is the fact that Joseph and Antoine-Nasser are collaborating on a common project—one that will benefit equally both of their communities—in this scene and throughout the play. In the vision for the future offered by *L’avenir*, they place more emphasis on the alliance formed between the two communities—one that would be celebrated during the “festins” Antoine-Nasser dreams of—rather than each group’s position in the political hierarchy (42).

Though Benaïssa takes care to give equal weight to the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives in *L’avenir*—the author’s non-partisan point of view is facilitated, as Janice B. Gross notes, by the playwright’s use of symmetry (Gross, “Performing” 76)—the structure of the play creates several conspicuous asymmetries. For example, various elements of the *L’avenir*’s plot and staging indicate that the author’s hope lies with the youthful male characters. Joseph and Antoine-Nasser are the only characters to occupy center stage (near the well); the youth also speak *L’avenir*’s last lines. The play presents a vision for the future that excludes the elder characters and does not involve any women. Yaël, Antoine-Nasser’s intended Israeli bride whose name is mentioned once and who never appears on stage, is only included in the plan for the future through her involvement with Antoine-Nasser. Benaïssa’s privileging of the youthful voice reveals

both the author's hope for improved relations between Israelis and Palestinians in the future and his estimation that those who have been in charge for the last six decades have failed to dramatically ameliorate the situation. While it is comforting to imagine interfaith harmony in the future, it seems unlikely that a small segment of the population (young men) can bring about such drastic change.

The Duty to remember the past

While differing interpretations of the duty to remember the past certainly mark the relations between sons and mothers in both families, Benaïssa explores these questions more fully in the context of the Israeli family. In this chapter section, I discuss two oppositions: the first is what I term “lived” and “learned” memory and the second is between the “restrictive” and “constructive” interpretations of the duty to remember the *Shoah*—as they are embodied in the schism between Josette and Joseph. The *Shoah* constitutes the event around which these questions revolve. In treating the imperative to remember the *Shoah*, *L'avenir* implicitly asks the question of what, precisely, one is being asked to remember. In truth, the survivors' memories of living the actual event are not comparable to the next generation's memories of learning the history of the event. For Josette, who represents what I term a “lived memory” of the *Shoah*, references to the *Shoah* trigger both emotional and physical reactions, and she believes that the same should hold true for all Jews. She maintains that memories are true only when they dictate how the body acts; in the case of the *Shoah*, memories must elicit a corporal manifestation of sadness. In other words, if one is capable of considering this event on an intellectual level without reacting to it physically, one is not truly remembering; rather,

one is simply reciting history. “Quand je vois des images de la Shoah,” Josette declares, “les larmes me coulent spontanément des yeux. La mémoire, c’est quand l’Histoire passe de la tête au corps. Mais quand l’Histoire s’arrête à la tête, elle reste de l’histoire. J’ai peur que pour Joseph, tout se soit arrêté à sa tête et que son corps ne réagisse plus” (17). In opposing *Histoire* with *histoire*, Benaïssa is not referring to the general distinction made between official versions of history and personal history or personal stories (we recall that *histoire* carries a double meaning in French). Rather, Benaïssa’s use of upper case refers to the importance one accords to this history. For Josette, the official Zionist version of history is synonymous with her own personal story; for her, *Histoire* and *histoire* are one and the same. The memory of the *Shoah* is the central feature of her meta-narrative; it resides not only in her mind, but is embedded throughout her body (including her breast). Joseph, on the other hand, has intellectualized the *Shoah* and is able to consider the event with a certain amount of distance. Joseph recognizes, of course, that the *Shoah* is a part of the Jewish experience, but refutes the view that it constitutes Judaism’s apex.

It is perhaps the religiously moderate uncle, Isac, who best accounts for the difference between Josette and Joseph’s attitudes to the *Shoah*. “Toi, tu as vécu la Shoah,” Isac points out, “lui, il l’a apprise à l’école. Ce n’est pas la même chose” (17). Drawing a distinction between his generation’s “lived memory” of the *Shoah* and Joseph’s “learned memory” of the event, Isac maintains that the different reactions outlined above by Josette are natural ones. These inherent distinctions between Joseph and Josette’s memories of the *Shoah* are supported by literary critic Marianne Hirsch’s idea of “postmemory.” Hirsch describes postmemory—her term for learned memory—as

a distinct form of memory “because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.”²⁶ In other words, regardless of how much Joseph learns about the *Shoah* through his mother or through his studies, he will never have direct access to these memories. Joseph’s memory will never be personal, but rather forever mediated through another source, and no matter how hard Josette tries, she cannot control Joseph’s emotional connection to (or distance from) the event.

Despite the intrinsic differences between Joseph’s learned memory and her own, Josette seeks to transplant her memories of the *Shoah* (and her consequential unwavering support of Israel’s policies) to her son. By equating her own legacy strictly with the transmission of the *Shoah* memory and an accompanying provincial worldview—“S’il oublie, que restera-t-il de moi en lui?”—Josette reveals her belief that a “restrictive” definition of the duty to remember the *Shoah* is *the* essential characteristic that must define her son (15-16). In labeling Josette’s interpretation of the duty to remember “restrictive,” I am referring to the way in which she employs the *Shoah* memory as justification for any measure taken in Israel’s defense, but turns a blind eye to the suffering of others. Returning briefly to a quotation already cited above allows us to note the dangers of such a restricted definition. In the lines, “L’oubli de Joseph est une ablation de mon sein. Il est sa perdition dans des ténèbres que je n’ai jamais appris à éclairer,” the reader notes the incongruity of the extremely violent metaphor that she employs to describe Joseph’s forgetting—the mauling of a mother’s body—that Josette

²⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997) 22. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

projects onto Joseph's desire for peace (16). Josette's counterintuitive pairing of a desire for peace with violence is mirrored by her coupling of Joseph's forgetting with darkness ("ténèbres") and her own memory with enlightenment ("éclairer"). While the reader certainly sympathizes with Josette's anxieties about Joseph's "forgetting" of the *Shoah*, viewed from a different angle, it is possible to flip this binary between darkness and enlightenment. Given that Joseph has proven that he has not, in fact, forgotten the horrors of the *Shoah*, but rather has interpreted the duty to remember in a different more efficacious way, it can be argued that it is he—not she—that personifies enlightened thinking.

Jewish historian and theoretician Esther Benbassa takes up the theme of memory and the *Shoah* in her essay "Comment devient-on un traître?," which points to the dangers of the central role played by the *Shoah* in the identities of secular Jews. Benbassa labels the mentality such as the one embodied by Josette "le culte de la Shoah,"²⁷ and explains that, in the absence of a religious identity, members of the *culte* consider the *Shoah* to be *the* defining characteristic of Judaism; the *culte* "a étoffé l'identité des juifs sécularisés" ("Traître" 30). Benbassa pens "Comment devient-on un traître?" as a response to criticism she received when she questioned the uniqueness of the *Shoah* in an article entitled "The Shoah as Religion" ("Traitor" 234-35). In this article, which was published on September 11, 2000 in the newspaper *Libération*, the historian does not cast doubt on the historical specificity of the *Shoah*, but rather upholds

²⁷ Esther Benbassa, "Comment devient-on un traître?," *De l'autre côté* 2 (2006) 26. Alan Astro translates this phrase as "the Shoah as religion," but I have decided to use the French term so as to highlight the secular aspect of this worldview; where indicated, I use Astro's translation of the article. Esther Benbassa, "How One Becomes a Traitor," trans. Alan Astro, *Israel-Palestine Conflict in the Francophone World*, ed. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller (New York: Routledge, 2010) 232-49. Subsequent references to both texts will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

the merit of speaking comparatively about different genocides. According to Benbassa, her willingness to compare the Jewish genocide to others incited the wrath of “droves of journalists [...] mouthing the opinions of the high priests of the Holocaust” (“Traitor” 235). The critical debate in which Benbassa found herself dates back to the 1970s and 1980s when denial of the *Shoah* began to surface and scholars responded with “defensive” claims maintaining the uniqueness of the event.²⁸

The controversial Barbie trial of 1987 constitutes a significant moment in this debate. During the trial, the defense—countering claims of the uniqueness of the *Shoah*—argued that the crimes committed by Klaus Barbie as head of the Gestapo in Lyon were no worse than those carried out by the European powers during the colonial era.²⁹ The defense also accused “Jewish pain of obstructing the world’s memory” of the suffering of other groups.³⁰ Deriding the defense for its immoral practices, Alain Finkielkraut holds that the trial revived the competition of memories between Resistance fighters and Jews and between Europeans and non-Europeans (19). Rather than securing the *Shoah* memory in the public’s mind, Finkielkraut maintains that it was as if the trial had “commanded us to forget its lessons” (73).

According to Benbassa, the criticism she received is indicative of a larger trend in France in which Jewish community institutions have tended to unconditionally support Israel and the politicization of the *Shoah* in which Israeli leadership has engaged

²⁸ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship," *Holocaust and Gender Studies* 13.1 (1999) 30. On the denial of the *Shoah*, see also Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les Assassins de la mémoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

²⁹ This controversial trial, which took place in Lyon, brought attention to the role of the *Shoah* memory, both within France and in the larger, international sphere. Klaus Barbie was eventually sentenced to life in prison for the crimes against humanity committed as head of the Gestapo in Lyon. Olivier Laliou, "L'invention du 'Devoir de mémoire'," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 69 (2001) 83.

³⁰ Alain Finkielkraut, *Remembering in Vain: The Klaus Barbie Trial and Crimes Against Humanity*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus and Sima Godfrey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 36. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

(“Traitor” 235). The historian posits that such a mentality is due, in part, to the *culte de la Shoah*, whose members continually mourn the *Shoah*’s victims, while constructing memorials to the past both physical and figurative. Believing that the Jewish tragedy of the *Shoah* trumps all other suffering, cultists use their self-proclaimed victim status as a justification for any measures taken in their self-defense.

As demonstrated in many of her quotations throughout *L’avenir* (some of which have already been cited), it is evident that, for Josette, remembering the *Shoah* translates automatically into categorical support and defense of Israel. To take just one example, we can consider the following declaration that Josette makes to Joseph: “Qui n’aurait pas voulu, après la *Shoah*, poser sa valise en Terre Promise et vivre la paix ? L’Histoire nous a obligés, au lendemain des camps, à reprendre le maquis. La terre est à nous, pas la paix” (*L’avenir* 12). Josette believes that continued Israeli engagement in violent action against their Arab adversaries is both inevitable and a righteous course of action. (We note once again Josette’s reference to *Histoire*, as opposed to *histoire*, indicating here the character’s view of the teleological nature of H/history.) To her, this mentality represents faithfulness to her memories and to the Jews’ past suffering. In fact, Josette interprets Joseph’s “forgetting” of the *Shoah* as more dangerous to his well-being than service in the armed forces; “il faut lui rebâtir la mémoire pour sa survie,” she declares to Isac (16).

Esther Benbassa argues that the danger for the future of Judaism posed by the *culte* is that it prevents younger generations from benefiting from the temporal distance that separates them from the *Shoah*. The imperative “We must never forget!” effectively eliminates the healing that the passage of time would foster. She writes that the “omnipresent duty to remember” “[risque] d’écarter les générations à venir d’un

judaïsme défini par tout ce qui lui avait enlevé sa vitalité et non par le futur qu'elles étaient susceptibles de bâtir en prenant leurs distances avec le passé" ("Traître" 31).³¹ In *Souffrance*, Benbassa points out that the Torah gives the command to remember, *Zakhor*, numerous times,³² but only once does this command refer to a negative event—Amalek's attack against the Jews—and, even in this instance, Jews are instructed to remember that they vanquished Amalek with God's help.³³ On the contrary, the calls to remember the *Shoah*—particularly prevalent in Israel—are not associated with hope in redemption; rather, they have helped establish a "la perpétuelle inquiétude dans laquelle vivent les Juifs, ce 'trionphalisme de la souffrance' qui les referme sur eux-mêmes, les éloignant de l'universalisme qui longtemps a été la leur" (Benbassa, *Souffrance* 242). Rather than this obsessive memory, Esther Benbassa proposes the rather ambiguous solution of "un oubli relatif," which would allow younger generations to benefit from their temporal distance from the *Shoah* ("Traître" 31).³⁴ We might argue that Slimane Benaïssa's character, Joseph, practices "un oubli relatif" that allows him to resist adopting his mother's worldview. Joseph's identity is detached enough from the *Shoah* that he is able to see beyond this horrific event; unlike Josette, his worldview is not confined to the prism of the *Shoah*.

Esther Benbassa clearly wants to establish a link between Jews' relationship to the *Shoah* and their capacity for empathy for other groups of victims in the world. What remains unclear throughout her oeuvre is whether it is forgetting or remembering—or a

³¹ This sentence was omitted in the English translation.

³² The command *Zakhor* is repeated 169 times in the Torah. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, *Envisager Dieu Avec Edmond Jabès* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007) 302. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³³ Esther Benbassa, *La souffrance comme identité* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), 252. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁴ Astro translates this phrase as "the dose of forgetfulness necessary for life to go on" ("Traitor," 236). I use Benbassa's original phrase since it is less wordy.

combination of the two—that will facilitate these connections. A look at Benbassa’s earlier work, specifically *Les Juifs ont-ils un avenir?* (2001), reveals an evolution of her stance on forgetting. In *Les Juifs*, Benbassa speaks in defense of the Jewish imperative to remember. She states, “[...] we should not forget the *Shoah*. For, to forget it would inevitably mean to close our eyes to what is happening to others, to humanity. Let me repeat, emphatically, that the *Shoah* must not be forgotten.”³⁵ By 2007 however—the year that Benbassa publishes both “Comment devient-on un traître?” and *La souffrance comme identité*—the author no longer speaks of the duty to remember, but rather of the importance of forgetting. In fact, in *Souffrance*, Benbassa dedicates her final chapter to the right to forget (“Le droit à l’oubli”). Here, she challenges the guardians of the memory of the *Shoah* to release their tenacious hold on the narration of Jewish history:

Ceux qui, sans répit, veillent sur la mémoire et en font un devoir sont-ils prêts à lâcher prise pour autoriser l’oubli, qui n’est pas effacement de l’événement, mais seulement sortie de la mémoire, désormais confiée à l’histoire, comme on laissait hier au ‘texte’ la charge de rappeler, à cadence régulière, les désastres du passé ? Ces narrations ritualisées servaient de conservatoires à la mémoire, tout en libérant la conscience des Juifs du poids de l’événement et du devoir d’indéfiniment le revivre. C’est de cette sorte d’oubli que je parle ici, et c’est la narration historique, substitut séculier du texte religieux, qui est en mesure d’entamer ce passage salutaire. (*Souffrance* 250).

This passage indicates Benbassa’s desire to release Jews from the duty to remember by relegating this obligation to “history,” a history that would be revisited with enough regularity that it would prevent forgetting. Such a shift would free Jews of the burden of continually carrying with them these agonizing memories.

A similar ambiguity related to forgetting and remembering exists in *L’avenir*. For example, when Josette accuses Joseph of having forgotten the *Shoah*, Isac comes to his

³⁵ Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, *Les Juifs ont-ils un avenir?* (Paris: Hachette, 2002) 87. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

nephew's aid, claiming that he can prove that Joseph remembers all the central facts of the event. Isac then poses Joseph a series of questions regarding the basic facts of the *Shoah*: "c'est quoi la deuxième guerre mondiale ?," "Quelle était l'idéologie du fascisme ?," and "Combien de Juifs ont été exterminés ?" (*L'avenir* 16). Joseph's satisfactory answers to these questions convince his uncle that his memory of the *Shoah* is sufficient, and Isac declares to Josette, "Tu vois, il n'a rien oublié de l'essentiel." However, even as Isac defends Joseph against his mother's attacks, he nonetheless concedes that his nephew has forgotten to some extent: "Beaucoup de gens oublient et ne s'en aperçoivent même pas. Je crois que ton fils a la mémoire surchargée. Alors, il oublie pour se libérer l'esprit, pour se soulager... C'est humain." Isac's comment here is in the same spirit as Esther Benbassa's language cited above regarding the beneficial effects of forgetting. (It is important to note, however, that *L'avenir* was published several years before all of the Benbassa texts that I reference in this chapter.) Joseph's "oubli relatif" of the *Shoah* allows his conscience to be free of the "devoir d'indéfiniment [...] revivre" the *Shoah*. For the character Isac, just as for the historian Benbassa, this forgetting provides both liberation ("se libérer") and relief ("se soulager"). In my discussion of Hubert Haddad's amnesiac protagonist in *Palestine* in my second chapter, I explore further the potential benefits of forgetting one's painful past, as well as the dangers inherent in repressing memories.

While Isac appreciates the salutary effects of this "oubli relatif," Josette categorically denounces forgetting as an illness. Because of her constantly embattled state of mind, Josette maintains a distorted sense of what it means to be at peace. In a reference probably aimed at the Jews of the diaspora, most of whom do not live in

constant fear for their lives as do Israelis, Josette paradoxically diagnoses those who are at peace as being victims of an illness: “L’oubli est une maladie de gens qui vivent en paix. La tranquillité fait perdre le fil de la mémoire. L’insouciance fait qu’on oublie,” she declares (16). According to Josette, war creates the need for memory among its actors, while times of peace generate an illness marked by forgetting. Josette’s counterintuitive alignment of words that normally carry positive connotations (in line with the other odd parallels she draws between her peace-loving son and violence, as well as linking Joseph’s enlightened worldview with darkness)—“peace,” “tranquility,” and “carefree” with “sickness”—reveals a warped worldview. Her cult-like mentality, which equates Jewish identity with an obsessive memory of the *Shoah*, renders her incapable of imagining a peaceful future for Israel-Palestine.

The *Shoah* as traumatic memory

Despite Benaïssa’s clear problematization of Josette’s attitude regarding the past, the author’s depiction of this character is not without compassion. Rather, Josette’s inability to free herself from the burden of constantly reliving the *Shoah* is pitiable; the author portrays her as a survivor still suffering the effects of trauma, one who painfully and continually relives her past experiences as present occurrences. Trauma then might explain why Josette cannot help but relate all her current experiences to the *Shoah*, why memories of the event invade her daily life. Shoshana Felman describes the distorted sense of temporality experienced by trauma survivors: “The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after [...]. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed

through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.”³⁶

Many of Josette’s lines cited above support the reading of this character as a trauma sufferer, but perhaps most emblematic are her descriptions of her physical responses to images that suggest the *Shoah*: “Quand je vois des images de la Shoah, les larmes me coulent spontanément des yeux” (*L’avenir* 17). Trauma theorists tell us that the recurring presence of a harrowing memory is often the result of an inability to narrativize and thus gain mastery over the traumatic event.³⁷

Josette’s obsession with transmitting the memory of the *Shoah* to her son further supports reading her character as suffering from trauma. If Josette is so concerned with the maintenance of Israeli security forces and with Joseph’s participation in the army, it is because she is hyper-aware of the existential threat faced by Israelis from what she regards as the entirely hostile Arab world. “N’oublie pas,” she tells Joseph, “que derrière les Palestiniens, il y a tous les autres... et les autres aussi” (11). This constant sense of danger and fear that a Jewish genocide could reoccur propel Josette to testify incessantly, Cassandra-like, to her experience in an attempt to warn others. As Caruth explains, “through the act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time—in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare—can be transformed into the imperative of a speaking that awakens others.”³⁸ Despite Josette’s repeated testimony, however, she is unable to transmit her lived memories of the *Shoah* to her son.

³⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁷ On the importance of narrativization of the traumatic event, see Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” (Felman and Laub 69).

³⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 108. Felman and Laub underscore the potential for testimony to heal

While Josette's character certainly provides insight into the individual's relationship to a traumatic event, given the allegorical nature of Benaïssa's play in general, and of Josette's character in particular, it seems important to explore how Josette's trauma is representative of a cultural tendency as it applies to Jewish Israeli society. Jeffrey Alexander, a theorist of cultural trauma, posits that events are not inherently traumatic but rather are coded as such when "Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go."³⁹ When it proceeds normally, this "trauma creation" results not only in locating the root of the suffering of the concerned group, but also promoting an ownership on the part of this group for the suffering of others (Alexander 1). Members of these groups "[...] define their solidary relationships in ways that [...] allow them to share the sufferings of others." It seems clear that Josette, and the portion of the Jewish Israeli population that she represents, have not experienced this empathy. (Similarly, due in part to their ignorance of the *Shoah* and the antisemitic propaganda prevalent in the Arab world, many Palestinians do not experience empathy for Israelis either.)⁴⁰ These Israelis do not recognize Palestinians' suffering, let alone consider their own complicity in this situation. Yahu, religiously conservative uncle, is

survivors of traumatic events (69). Though the play does not provide evidence that Josette has reaped the curative benefits of testifying to her trauma, it is nonetheless interesting to consider this as another possible motivation.

³⁹ Jeffrey Alexander, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴⁰ On Palestinian ignorance of the *Shoah*, see Palestinian scholar Lena Jayyusi who writes, "Most ordinary Palestinians only know of the Holocaust in the context of developments and pronouncements (often by U.S. and other Western figures) encountered in the news and routinely used in a context of justification of official Israeli needs and positions and/ or neglect of their own predicament" (132). On the promulgation of antisemitic propaganda in the Arab world and amongst Arab Muslim in Europe, see Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, "France" 11. As a demonstration of the lack of Palestinian empathy for Israeli suffering at the hands of Palestinians, see the recent celebrations of Dalal Mughrabi, the leader of the deadliest terrorist attack ever carried out against Israelis. Isabel Kershner, "Palestinians Honor a Figure Reviled in Israel as a Terrorist," *The New York Times* 12 March 2010: A9.

another of Benaïssa's characters who cannot relate to Joseph's concern for the Palestinians. This uncle admonishes Joseph for his willingness to aid Christian and Muslim Arabs, referring to Joseph's well-building project as "[une] preuve de solidarité avec l'ennemi" and maintaining that "Un ami arabe, ça n'existe pas" (*L'avenir* 24).

In an attempt to explain the lack of empathy that Josette and Yahou embody, Alexander acknowledges that the recognition of the cause of one's own suffering does not always lead to compassion for others; some groups fail to recognize suffering of others: "By denying the reality of others' suffering, people not only diffuse their own responsibility for the suffering but often project the responsibility for their own suffering on these others" (1). One could argue that, in large part, both Israelis and Palestinians have failed to see beyond their own suffering. Why is this the case?

In an effort to explore this question as it relates to the Israeli side of the equation, we can look to the ways in which Israel has successfully institutionalized remembrance of the *Shoah* through establishments such as Yad Vashem and events such as *Shoah* Remembrance Day.⁴¹ Israeli institutions draw explicit links between the events of the *Shoah* and the country's present need to defend itself; various traditions work to keep the wound of the *Shoah* fresh in the minds of Israel's population. In Tom Segev's analysis of Yad Vashem he notes that, "The visitor is left to conclude that there is much in common between the Nazis' plan to destroy the Jews and the Arabs [sic] enmity to Israel" (*Seventh Million* 425). The messages imparted to museum visitors are clear: every Israeli adversary is potentially of the same magnitude as the Nazis; current Israeli soldiers are

⁴¹ *Yad Vashem* is the *Shoah* memorial and museum located in Jerusalem. *Yom HaZikaron laShoah ve-laGvura*, or *Yom HaShoah*, inaugurated in 1951, marks the day when the nation of Israel commemorates the victims of the Shoah. At ten in the morning, air raid sirens ring out and for two minutes the country comes to a standstill to pay silent tribute to the dead.

not only fighting to keep Israel safe today, but out of a desire to avenge the past wrongs done to the Jewish people.

Alexander posits that eventually efforts such as *Shoah* Remembrance Day will fail to incite strong emotional reactions on the part of the public, but thus far it seems that his predictions have not materialized. He writes:

Intended to remember and commemorate the trauma process, efforts to institutionalize the lessons of the trauma will eventually prove unable to evoke the strong emotions, the sentiments of betrayal, and the affirmations of sacrality that were once so powerfully associated with it. No longer deeply preoccupying, the reconstructed collective identity remains, nevertheless, a fundamental resource for resolving future social problems and disturbances of collective consciousness.
(23)

What Alexander describes here is similar to Benbassa's idea of an "oubli relatif," the possibility of which is obscured by the *culte*. In Israel, it appears that the institutionalized remembrance of the *Shoah* continues to evoke the "strong emotions" and "sentiments of betrayal" that it has since the 1960s and that the country has not moved on to the next stage of healing, which would allow for the trauma to act as a constructive event.

The 1960s, and specifically the Eichmann trial of 1961, marked a turning point in Israeli attitudes toward the *Shoah*. Adolf Eichmann, a former Nazi who had played an integral role in the deportation of Jews to extermination camps, was captured in Argentina by the Israeli secret services. In 1962, he was convicted of crimes against humanity as well as crimes against the Jewish people and executed (Segev 323-65). Whereas in the decades following World War II, many Israelis maintained an uncomfortable relationship with survivors, after the Eichmann trial, Israelis (as well as Jews in the diaspora) strongly identified with *Shoah* victims (Weill and Wieviorka). This empathy for the victims was facilitated by public prosecutor Gideon Hausner's decision

to underscore the role of witnesses (Weill and Wiewiorka). Due to the broadcasting of the trial on both television and radio, diasporic Jews from around the world had a similar reaction. The trial also contributed to the view of the *Shoah* as a unique and uniquely Jewish event. Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion expressed these sentiments in a letter regarding the trial:

The Holocaust that the Nazis wreaked on the Jewish people is not like other atrocities that the Nazis committed in the world, [...] but a unique episode that has no equal, an attempt to totally destroy the Jewish people [...]. It is the particular duty of the State of Israel [...] to recount this episode in its full magnitude and horror, without ignoring the Nazi regime's other crimes against humanity—but not as one of these crimes, rather as the only crime that has no parallel in human history. (Segev 329-30)

Israel's efforts to represent the *Shoah* as unique through the highly publicized Eichmann trial were largely successful amongst Israelis, diasporic Jews, and the general world audience (Rothberg 176-77). Another outcome of the trial with far-reaching consequences for the Middle East region was, according to Michael Rothberg, the establishment of a link between “the narrative of Jewish suffering” and “a particular Israeli worldview that emphasized Zionist resistance as well as Arab collaboration with the Nazis” (177). As Weill and Wiewiorka argue, the trial resulted in an altered Israeli perception of Arabs, and led to the Israelis experiencing the Six-day War “sur un mode ‘génocidaire,’” ever conscious of the threats to Israel's existence.

Despite the hope provided by Benaïssa's character Joseph in the fictional world of the play, as well as the many actual organizations that work toward peace and mutual recognition, Josette and Yahou's disregard for Palestinian suffering mirrors a similar mindset held by many Israeli citizens and politicians.⁴² This unwillingness to see, or

⁴² See, for example, Israel's recent announcement that it would construct 1,600 settler homes in part of the occupied West Bank it has annexed, a decision supported by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Ethan

unawareness of, the anguish of the other seems to be due, in large part, to the institutionalization of the *Shoah* memory.

Perhaps another reason that many Israelis have not progressed to the empathy stage of Alexander's sociocultural paradigm is that suffering endured by the other—the Palestinians—at the hands of the Israeli government has been obscured in mainstream Israel. For example, the history of the *Nakba* is not generally taught in Israeli schools nor widely discussed by Israeli media (Bronstein 217). Through his use of symmetry, Benaïssa reveals the similarities between Israelis and Palestinians and the traumatic experiences that lie at the heart of both communities' narratives. One of the play's effects is the promotion of acknowledgement of the suffering of both sides, as well as both sides' complicity in perpetuating this suffering. In this way, *L'avenir* encourages movement toward the empathy stage of trauma creation, if not among Israelis and Palestinians, then at least among readers of the play.

Though *L'avenir* exposes the traumatic experiences suffered by both Israelis and Palestinians, the term "Nakba" cannot be found in *L'avenir*, an odd choice on Benaïssa's part given the play's emphasis on symmetry and its frequent mention of the *Shoah*. While the author certainly alludes to the *Nakba* through the Palestinian characters' repeated references to their forced departure (*chasser*) (30, 34); to exile (25, 31, 32); and to the hardships of life in refugee camps (29, 30, 31), the lack of reference to the event widely regarded as the "key site of Palestinian collective memory and national identity" (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 4)—constitutes a conspicuous absence in the play. What explains this semi-silence in *L'avenir*? Is this an effort on Benaïssa's part to avoid direct

Bronner, "As Biden Visits, Israel Unveils Plan for New Settlements," [New York Times](#) 10 March 2010: A4.

comparisons between the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*—comparisons that might encourage the competition amongst victims that Erner denounces? Perhaps this asymmetry is meant to represent the Western world’s relative ignorance of the *Nakba*—referenced by Edward Said in *The Question of Palestine*—especially when compared to the omnipresence of the *Shoah* narrative. A third possible motivation to avoid direct mention of the *Nakba* stems from a desire on the author’s part to combat the negation or ignorance of the *Shoah* that is all-too common in the Arab world? Such a reading is supported by a comment Benaïssa made during our interview regarding the lack of Arab empathy for Jewish suffering during the *Shoah*. “Sur ce terrain-là, les Arabes n’ont pas intégré la Shoah comme un drame humanitaire,” he declared, adding, “C’est-à-dire qu’eux-mêmes [ne sont pas rentrés] dans l’humanitaire pour dire [...] [le] malheur [des Juifs] on le prend en charge.”

While the play encourages empathy for the Palestinian characters through its multiple allusions to Palestinian suffering at the hands of Israelis, omitting any direct references to the *Nakba* while mentioning the *Shoah* several times seems to subordinate Palestinian trauma while it highlights Jewish trauma. This semi-silence regarding the *Nakba* constitutes another conspicuous imbalance in the play.

Conflicting calls to action

If, in *L’avenir*, Josette represents those Israelis who cannot see beyond their own suffering, Joseph embodies those who are acutely aware of others’ agony. Joseph believes that working for peace in Israel/ Palestine is “la meilleure façon d’honorer...[la] douleur [de sa mère]” (12). He acknowledges and honors Jewish suffering during the *Shoah*, but is intent on creating a better future, rather than building memorials to the past. In response to his mother’s disavowal of the possibility of peace, Joseph responds, “C’est

à nous de lui inventer une paix.” The legacy of the *Shoah* propels Joseph to advocate on behalf of all of humanity—all the victims of racism, hatred, and discrimination. In a spirited speech to his mother and uncle, Joseph declares:

Je connais tout de la Shoah. J’aime l’histoire du peuple juif et je voudrais le prouver aux yeux de l’humanité. Non pas en construisant des monuments funéraires sur des collines, mais en devenant moi-même un monument d’anti-racisme et de dialogue, un monument d’humanité, de tolérance et d’intelligence, un monument exemplaire de beauté et d’espoir au nom de tous les gazés, les brûlés, les déportés du monde, qu’ils soient Juifs ou non. C’est cela le destin du peuple juif, parce qu’il est le peuple de l’Alliance. (17)

In his stance against the “monuments funéraires,” Joseph opposes not only these physical monuments, but also the belief that Israel itself is a metaphorical monument to those who perished in the *Shoah*.

The vision of Israel as living monument is embodied in the Haim Guri poem, “From That Fire,” that is always read at memorial ceremonies at Yad Vashem:

We have avenged your bitter and lonely deaths
With our fist, heavy and hot.
We have established a monument here to the burnt ghetto,
A living monument that will never end.⁴³

In establishing such a strong link between Israel and the *Shoah*, Guri’s poem raises the question of the relationship between the two events. Does Israel owe its existence to horrific events of the *Shoah* or would a Jewish homeland have come into existence without such large-scale trauma? Taking the latter position, Esther Benbassa asserts that “Post-World War II mythology [...] downplays the role of Zionism from the end of the nineteenth century on” (“Traitor” 233). While Benbassa is correct in maintaining the importance of Zionism’s nineteenth century roots, such a view downplays the international support—particularly that of the United States—necessary for the

⁴³ Haim Guri, “From That Fire,” *Readings for Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Hahasbara and Yad Vashem, 1975) 60, qtd. in Segev *Seventh Million*, 427.

foundation of the State of Israel, which certainly was influenced by empathy for Jewish suffering during the *Shoah* and a desperate search for a solution to the “Jewish problem.” In his treatment of the United Nations’ ratification of the partition of Palestine, Melvin Urofsky underscores the role of U.S. lobbying in favor of Zionists and the constant consideration of the *Shoah* survivors: “the success of the Zionist effort in 1947 represented nearly five years of work, organization, publicity, education, and the careful cultivation of key people in different fields [...]. In the process, the plight of displaced persons in Europe played an ever-present role.”⁴⁴ We will never know what the fate of Zionism would have been if not for Nazi genocide, for it is impossible to separate the foundation of the State of Israel from the surrounding historical circumstances. At the same time, however, it is essential to bear in mind the danger of considering the two events to be inextricably linked. If we follow the logic of a mentality such as this, it suggests that the continued existence of Israel necessitates a sustained existential threat to the Jewish people.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, regardless of the historical accuracy of linking the foundation of Israel to the *Shoah*, it is undeniable that the two events are closely associated in the dominant Zionist narrative of Israel. According to this account of history, Israel represents the rebirth of the Jewish people after centuries of oppression, the apex of which was the *Shoah*.

In contrast to the sentiments of Guri’s poem, Benaïssa’s character Joseph’s Judaism is not defined by rituals of mourning, but rather by a mission to advocate on behalf of all of the world’s oppressed. We can argue that, in the imagined context of

⁴⁴ Melvin I. Urofsky, *We are one!: American Jewry and Israel* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1978) 147, qtd. in Smith *Palestine*, 198.

⁴⁵ Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, “The Jewish Writer in Post-Dreyfus France,” Seminar, Vanderbilt University (2007).

Benaïssa's play, Joseph's mentality is in line with Esther Benbassa's model of "un oubli relatif"; Joseph is simultaneously able to maintain a familiarity with the events of the *Shoah* as well as positive feelings about his Jewish identity. In contrast to Josette's position, it is Joseph's belief that seeing the State of Israel only as a nation built from the embers of "the burnt ghetto" will engender more ghettos and more burning.

Josette paints her schism with Joseph as a binary—in which she represents remembering the *Shoah* and he forgetting. Clearly, a more nuanced view of Israeli's relationship to the *Shoah* is necessary. The following quotation from Tom Segev, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Joseph's monument monologue cited above, is one example of such a view. As Segev points out, due to some Israelis' failure to adopt the "humanistic lessons of the Holocaust," some have called for Israelis to forget the event all together.⁴⁶ Segev, however, contests this position, maintaining that:

it does not follow from the risks inherent in Israeli memorial culture that Israelis would do best to forget the Holocaust. Indeed, they cannot and should not forget it. They need, rather, to draw different conclusions. The Holocaust summons all to preserve democracy, to fight racism, and to defend human rights...Instilling the humanist lessons of the Holocaust will be difficult as long as the country is fighting to defend itself and justify its very existence; but it is essential. (517)

L'avenir's ambiguous ending mirrors the complexity Segev points to here. Though Joseph seems to have internalized the humanistic lessons of the *Shoah*, his serious consideration of returning to the army reveals the extreme difficulty of applying these lessons, given the current political reality of the region.

Another important point alluded to by Segev is the idea that the duty to remember the *Shoah* should not be a Jewish imperative alone. French philosopher Alain

⁴⁶ Segev writes, "Most Israelis...seem to lack the optimism necessary to accept the humanistic lessons of the Holocaust, and, in recognition of that, some people have gone so far as to advocate forgetting the Holocaust altogether." Segev *Seventh Million*, 502.

Finkielkraut echoes Segev's assertion, stating, "The obsession with the Shoah is not a Jewish affair. It is because our societies have placed equality at the foundation of living together that a sacred terror surrounds the names of Auschwitz, of Treblinka, of Maidanek, or of Sobibor. And that the Jews should not be the exclusive heirs of the obligations born of the duty of memory."⁴⁷ Whereas Benaïssa's character Joseph places the onus of drawing universal and humanistic lesson from the *Shoah* on Jews when he declares, "C'est cela le destin du peuple juif, parce qu'il est le peuple de l'Alliance," Finkielkraut argues that this burden belongs to all humanity (*L'avenir* 17). Perhaps if Israelis were willing to accept the multiplicity of interpretations of the imperative to remember the *Shoah*, as well as the possibility that others might share the burden of remembering, they would be less encumbered by this traumatic event in the Jewish past.

Between a rock and a hard place

The political reality with which both Joseph and Antoine-Nasser struggle in *L'avenir* is one in which religion and politics have been fused. In both their families, the religiously conservative uncle represents the political position that is founded on the literal interpretation of religious texts. Yahou, for example, legitimizes the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands by referencing God's promise of the Holy Land to the Jews: "Je suis sûr que cette terre est mienne, je suis sûr de faire partie d'un peuple élu, je suis sûr que le Messie viendra" (18). Abou-Daoud, for his part, speaks in support of pan-Islamism as a means of countering Israeli military force: "L'unité des Arabes a toujours été un échec politique. Elle sera, si Dieu veut, une réussite islamique" (34). In both families, the sons and the religiously moderate uncles counter the legitimacy of linking

⁴⁷ Brauman and Finkielkraut 14.

politics with religion. In what follows, I will analyze how Joseph and Antoine-Nasser's common challenge of this position serves as a means of uniting the two characters, further crystallizing how similar internal tensions unite rather than divide Israelis and Palestinians.

One of the common issues that the sons raise is the inherent multiplicity of meaning in religious texts and politicians' manipulations of the scriptures to suit their needs. But before proceeding to my treatment of the sons' wrestling with these issues, it will be useful to examine briefly Benaïssa's treatment of the conflicting versions of history told by the religious scriptures in *Prophètes sans dieu*, a play staged in the same year as *L'avenir*. *Prophètes* features only four characters: Moses, Jesus, and two incarnations of the "author"—the author as a child and the author as an adult. In a nod to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, much of the play is spent anticipating Mohamed's arrival, though he never actually arrives. Benaïssa explores the conflicting versions of biblical history in the following exchange:

L'auteur enfant: Jésus ! Marc dit que quand tu étais sur la croix, tu as crié : 'Mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-Tu abandonné ?' Et Luc : 'Père, pardonne-leur, ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font.' Et Jean : 'J'ai soif !' ... Jésus, tu peux me répéter ce que tu as dit réellement ? ...

Jésus: J'ai dû dire tout cela, et plus peut-être. Mais chacun entend ce qu'il veut bien entendre. (*Prophètes* 19)

Benaïssa points here to the distinct versions of the Jesus story recounted in the Gospels; differing interpretations of Scripture in all three monotheistic religions is a theme that spans the author's *oeuvre*.

But despite the Scriptures' conflicting versions of history and the multitude of interpretations that a single line of Scripture can evoke, religious texts are nonetheless adopted to legitimize political positions. It is to this selective picking and choosing—

especially prevalent in Israel-Palestine because of the ways religion is tied to claims about the land—to which Antoine-Nasser and Joseph turn their attention in the final section of *L'avenir*.

Antoine-Nasser : Si Dieu a donné le Coran à l'ange Gabriel verset par verset, c'est parce que tout le Coran d'un coup l'aurait empêché de voler. Le poids des Ecritures réfrène souvent l'envol. Quand ce qu'elles nous apportent en compréhension est aussi aliénation, on n'a plus besoin d'aller chercher les ennemis à l'extérieur : on les trouve déjà en nous-mêmes.

Comment se dire autrement ?

Joseph : Dieu est grand dans sa simplicité ; Il nous parle comme à des enfants pour protéger notre innocence. Et nous, on s'acharne à vouloir être adultes pour le défendre en perdant notre innocence. Parfois, je me dis : 'Est-ce vraiment défendre Dieu, ce que nous faisons ? Ou est-ce en désespoir de Dieu que nous nous défendons en son nom ?'

Refaire les mots, changer la langue, débusquer la syntaxe de guerre pour une grammaire de paix, et dire aux analphabètes la perte des lettrés. Etre au pied de la lettre trahi par elle parce qu'elle ne dit pas 'je sais, je me tais'. Je range ma révolte parmi mes livres d'enfant et je rallie les combats légendaires au nom de la légende, souvent contre la paix.

Comment se dire autrement ? (*L'avenir* 46-47)

In these final monologues constituting the play's last words, Antoine-Nasser and Joseph bond in their common criticism of the role that the Scriptures play in the politics of their people. Antoine-Nasser speaks specifically of the divisive nature of the Koran. In addition to establishing divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims, Antoine-Nasser maintains that differing interpretations of the sacred text creates chasms within the Palestinian (and/or Muslim) community: "[...] on...trouve [les ennemis] déjà en nous-mêmes" (46). Although the Koran provides a set of common beliefs to his people, the holy text also "alienates" co-religionists from one another. As Antoine-Nasser points out, the rifts in the community of Muslims, often caused by differing interpretations of the

same text, hinder progress. “Le poids des Ecritures réfrène souvent l’envol,” he laments (46). Critique of the abuse of Islam to satisfy political means is also a prominent theme in Benaïssa’s *Les fils de l’amertume* (Gross, “Tragedy” 381).

Once again, in an effort to represent the whole Palestinian nation in an allegorical manner, Benaïssa makes Antoine-Nasser half-Muslim, half-Christian. We note that in the passage cited above, Antoine-Nasser refers to the Koran, not to the Christian Bible. However, both Antoine-Nasser and his family seem to identify more closely with the Muslim religion, perhaps because his father, the Christian, has been dead for some time. Cyril Aslanov reads Benaïssa’s decision to portray *L’avenir*’s sole Christian character as deceased as a means of alluding to the “diminution of the Arab Christian component of the Palestinian population as a result of the migration of the elites and of the rise of intransigent Islamism within the Arab populations of Israel and Palestine” (“Dissidence” 69). Aslanov goes on to posit that the effaced nature of the Christian character suggests that the burden of reconciliation falls on Jews and Arab Muslims, rather than on Christians. While Aslanov’s is certainly a plausible interpretation, I contend that the most significant function of the deceased Christian character is to destabilize a dichotomous (Jewish versus Muslim) view of the conflict. I interpret the character’s religion as holding more weight than his death; whereas the character’s Christianity constitutes a unique element of the play, his death constitutes another parallelism. (We recall that Joseph’s father also perished in the 1967 War.)

Rather than faulting differing interpretations of the Scriptures for the lack of progress, as does Antoine-Nasser, Joseph blames his coreligionists’ unwillingness to recognize the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the Torah. In the final scene of

L'avenir, Joseph expresses reservations about the application of God's biblical commands in a modern context and notes that, while in the secular world, language is often adapted according to changing contexts, when it comes to religion, God's word is considered unalterable: "Jusqu'à quand va-t-on tricher sur tout ? ... Les financiers changent de langage tous les jours pour s'adapter au cours de la monnaie, alors que la parole de Dieu est invariable et ne s'adapte pas au désarroi des fidèles" (46). But even more than the invariability of God's words, it is politicians' misinterpretation and exploitation of the Scriptures that Joseph finds particularly offensive. He exclaims, "La terre nous est promise, mais il n'est pas dit qu'on doit faire la guerre pour ça ! ... Ils sont capables de faire mentir Dieu pour arriver à leurs fins" (*L'avenir* 43). Positioning himself in contrast to his coreligionists' use of the bible as justification of military action, Joseph laments the fact that many Israelis have chosen to see a "syntax of war" in the words of the Torah, rather than a "grammar of peace": "Refaire les mots, changer la langue, débusquer la syntaxe de guerre pour une grammaire de paix, et dire aux analphabètes la perdition des lettrés" (47). Due to these hawkish interpretations, Joseph asserts his opinion that those in charge of interpreting God's words and spreading his message ("les lettrés") have betrayed the others ("les analphabètes"). Rather than being on the side of God, these religious leaders represent "la perdition."

Violent interpretations of religious messages have preoccupied Benaïssa throughout his career. In *Prophètes sans dieu*, the dramaturge turns to the prophets Moses, Jesus, and Mohamed in an attempt to understand religious wars. In response to the Jesus and Moses characters' questions as to why the character of the author has conjured them to the stage, he explains, "Bien sûr que je vous ai inventés. Parce que je

cherche à comprendre pourquoi on s'entretue pour des religions. Je vous ai inventés pour que vous me disiez à quelle date Dieu a pris les armes" (*Prophètes* 28). In the final scene of *L'avenir oublié*, Joseph is on a similar quest to the character of the author in *Prophètes*. Returning to Joseph's final monologue, we note his combination of the two expressions *interpréter au pied de la lettre* and *être au pied du mur* in the phrase "Être au pied de la lettre trahi par elle parce qu'elle ne dit pas 'je sais, je me tais'" (*L'avenir* 47). Through this play on words, Benaïssa again calls attention to Joseph's feeling of entrapment created by misinterpretation of the Scriptures. For Joseph, the holy word (*la lettre*) has transformed into a wall (*le mur*), one that Joseph is backed up against. Despite his pacifist bent and his objections to the abuse of God's words, Joseph sees no alternatives but to follow the call to arms that his coreligionists' interpret in the Torah. In his final lines, "je range ma révolte...et je rallie les combats légendaires," it seems clear that Joseph will return to the ranks of the Israeli army, albeit with a muddied conscience (*L'avenir* 47). Does Joseph's probable return to his post represent an opportunity for the character to positively affect the direction of the Israeli army, to transform its mission to a peaceful one, as is suggested by the line "Refaire les mots, changer la langue, débusquer la syntaxe de guerre pour une grammaire de paix, et dire aux analphabètes la perdition des lettrés"? Or does his decision signify an abandonment of his rebellion, a willingness to turn the other cheek and blindly accept the decisions of the authorities? *L'avenir's* ambiguous final scene leaves the reader/ spectator in suspense.

Conclusion

In Joseph and Antoine-Nasser's final monologues in *L'avenir*, Benaïssa again highlights the parallels between Israelis and Palestinians by pointing out similar schisms that lie at the heart of both communities. Antoine-Nasser, for example, inherently challenges the dichotomy when he reveals that Palestinians' enemies are not restricted to outsiders, but rather already exist "en nous-mêmes" (*L'avenir* 46). However, as is apparent from the play's ambiguous ending in which Joseph indicates his likely return to his army post, Benaïssa's deconstruction of the Israeli-Palestinian binary proves insufficient to solve the conflict, even within the confines of the play. While *L'avenir* certainly advocates collaboration, dialogue, a willingness to see commonalities with the other, as well as a constructive—rather than restrictive—interpretation of the duty to remember the past, the play does not suggest that this path will be easy to find amongst all that has obscured it over the last six decades.

The question posed by each son at the conclusion of his monologue—"Comment se dire autrement?"—points to the inherent difficulties in placing oneself outside the parameters of a collective identity defined by trauma or by the literal interpretation of religious scriptures (46-47). For, even as the play destabilizes the Israeli-Palestinian dichotomy, it undergirds the tensions internal to both groups. Antoine-Nasser and Joseph find themselves at the crossroads of these rifts and their collaborative efforts prove incapable of overpowering them.

If, for the time being, the sons seem destined to be caught in the cyclical nature of the conflict, the same is not necessarily true for audience members. While Benaïssa avoids the temptation to provide facile answers, the open-ended nature of the final

scene—which concludes with a question mark rather than a period—begs a response from readers and audience members. The fact that the sons do not solve their identity crises inspires the audience to grapple with the serious issues delineated in this provocative theater piece. During our interview Benaïssa confirmed his hope that the questions posed by the sons would encourage the kind of dialogue amongst readers and spectators that so far has not been possible in the political arena. He commented, “l’espoir est dans ce dialogue. [...] [Ce sont] de vraies interrogations. Mais dans la politique on est loin de ces questions-là. [...] Le dialogue commence par un vrai questionnement.”

The post-play discussions that took place after each production in Paris provided a forum for audience members to begin to exchange ideas, if not to formally answer the question, “Comment se dire autrement ?” It is worth recalling that Benaïssa’s intended readers/ audience members are not Israelis or Palestinians, but rather French speakers, and that the conflict is not entirely external to France.⁴⁸ In fact, recalling the specific location of the MC93 Bobigny theater, we are reminded that the target audience was, in large part, the Jews and Muslims of North African descent that populate the area of Bobigny. Thus, the final question of the play asks not only how Israelis and Palestinians can break free of the cycle of violence that has defined their relationship, but also how French Jews and Muslims can move past their antagonistic relationship. Benaïssa’s choice of the medium of drama privileges the spoken over the written word and thus eschews the finality and irrevocability often associated with written text (and problematized by the sons in their final monologues). Moreover, the structure of

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between the Israel-Palestine conflict and France, see Debrauwere-Miller, “France” 1-22.

Benaïssa's plays which highlight the "intermingling of voices (multiple characters), temporal frames (past, present, future), discourses (narrative, dialogue, music), and styles (serious, lyrical, comic)" encourages discussion (Gross, "Tragedy" 375). According to Benaïssa—who, regrettably, constitutes my sole source of information regarding these aspects of *L'avenir*⁴⁹—the play and post-play discussions marked the first time that some Jewish audience members had truly listened to the Arab Muslim or Arab Christian perspective and vice versa. "Ils sont sourds les uns pour les autres," he explained. In the playwright's opinion, these exchanges of opinion, even though they occasionally resulted in fights ("bagarres"), constitute a necessary first step in the effort to improve interreligious relations.

The play does not successfully unite the two families nor promise that the future will be remembered. Abou-Daoud's questions—"Comment peut-on ressembler à l'ennemi ? Comment peut-on se reconnaître en lui sans nier notre Dieu, sans humilier notre prophète ?"—go unanswered (36). However, the multidirectional spirit of *L'avenir*, which seeks to push beyond the boundaries of fixed notions of identity—encourages dialogue and exchange amongst readers and viewers of the play. Though *L'avenir*'s elder characters remain oblivious to the common language that they share with members of the opposing camp, viewers and readers are compelled to recognize the commonalities. Spectators, in particular, cannot ignore the significance of the continued presence of the well at the play's end and its symbolic value as a communal gathering area, a provider of sustenance, and most important, a monument to the future. Audience members will also note that the play closes with a conversation between the Israeli and Palestinian sons—a dialogue that takes place center stage, in close proximity to the well. As Rothberg

⁴⁹ To my knowledge, no recordings of these discussions exist.

optimistically states in his comments regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, “The unspeakable acknowledgement that ‘enemy’ peoples share a common, if unequal, history is the utopian moment underlying the ideology of competitive victimization” (313). It is through this recognition of similarities, often of similarly traumatic histories, that rivalries amongst victim groups may cede to new alliances.

CHAPTER II

THE AMBIGUITY OF AMNESIA IN HUBERT HADDAD'S *PALESTINE*

Hubert Haddad's 2007 novel *Palestine* opens as the protagonist, Cham—an Israeli soldier—agrees to perform one final round with his superior, Tzvi, at his assigned station before going on leave. Suddenly, a group of Palestinian militants attack the men, killing Tzvi and capturing Cham, whom they subsequently leave for dead at the bottom of an empty grave. As he hovers between life and death, the protagonist is overcome by amnesia. The following quotation includes a poetic description of Cham's memory loss, which Haddad likens to death, as well as foreshadowing of the protagonist's imminent rebirth:

Faut-il disparaître de soi, des buées du corps et des souvenirs plus raréfiés que l'air ? [...] Un tel tremblement de tout l'être pulvérise les images : le gouffre a bu son sang et la mémoire. [...] Un poids l'écrase ; il s'enfonce dans la lourdeur inconnue. [...] Quelque chose se déchiquette et s'éparpille autour d'une vague souvenance. Plus un bruit bientôt, même le pouls cesse son feulement temporel. [...] À peine les ténèbres désignées, c'est l'œil qui cligne. La lame la plus fine tranche entre l'instant nouveau et l'oubli sans fond. D'un coup le néant ravale les milliards d'années et recrache au hasard un soupir de résurrection. (24-25)

This short excerpt encapsulates several of the novel's themes: the loss and recovery of memory, death and resurrection, the discovery of the unknown, and the tension between predetermination and chance. This chapter will touch on all of these themes, but will focus specifically on Haddad's exploration of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the author's depiction of the roles that forgetting and remembering play in this fraught region.

In its treatment of forgetting and remembering, *Palestine* serves as a response to many of the questions I explored in chapter one in my analysis of Slimane Benaïssa's *L'avenir oublié*. What are the consequences of forgetting one's history? What happens if one forgets the possibility of a future? Must Israelis and Palestinians forget in order to arrive at a peaceful future in the Middle East? Is this forgetting possible? In *L'avenir oublié*, much of the tension revolves around the difficulty of being faithful to one's past and creating a sustainable future when that future depends upon coexisting with one's historical enemies. While for Benaïssa's Joseph and Antoine-Nasser, this coexistence becomes possible through a reinterpretation of the duty of memory, for Haddad's Cham, both forgetting (due to the protagonist's amnesia) and remembering (the recall of repressed memories) symbolically facilitate coexistence. Like Benaïssa, Haddad seeks to break down the artificial barriers that separate Israelis and Palestinians. The author accomplishes this through his depiction of an amnesiac who moves with relative ease between these two worlds.

Following Cham's near escape from death and the onset of his amnesia, a Palestinian widow and her daughter, Asmahane and Falastín, take the soldier in and nurse him back to health. It is at this point that the protagonist's rebirth occurs. After communicating to the blind Asmahane the uncanny resemblance between the comatose protagonist and her long-lost brother, Nessim, Falastín disguises him as that brother.¹

This identity assignment serves to protect the protagonist from the Israeli forces, since the

¹ Once the protagonist receives his new identity, Haddad refers to him as Nessim rather than as Cham. Depending on which part of the story I am referencing, I will refer to the character either as Cham, Nessim, or simply, "the protagonist."

general consensus based on his appearance—he was found wearing a *keffiyeh*² and typical peasant attire—is that he is actually one of his assailants. Only Falastín, who at one point addresses the protagonist in English rather than in Arabic, seems to be the wiser. The improbability of this scenario is striking on many levels, not the least of which is that the protagonist could so easily fall into the conveniently vacated role of Nessim, his “vague sosie” (5). On the other hand, it is the protagonist’s inherent physical and cultural similarities to the Palestinians that make this rebirth possible. Thus, on an allegorical level, the alignment of Cham and Nessim points to the parallels between Israelis and Palestinians and the forced nature of the barriers that have been used to separate the groups. In this way, the protagonist represents the entirety of the population of Israel-Palestine. Just as several communities occupy the same land, multiple identities inhabit the protagonist’s body. Haddad references this multiplicity and the cultural proximity of Arab Jews and Palestinians by naming the Palestinian incarnation of the protagonist Nessim, a moniker that exists in both cultures. Significantly, Edmond El Maleh’s Jewish Moroccan protagonist in *Mille ans, un jour* is bears the same name.

The uncanny alignment of Cham and Nessim is one of several doublings that take place in the novel. The protagonist and Falastín, who eventually fall in love, are also conceived as doppelgangers. For example, both characters are frequently compared to ghosts and other morbid or otherworldly figures: *épouvantail, spectre, fantôme, sépulcre, morts* (27, 51 and 154, 33, 78, 105). Moreover, in the descriptions of their romantic involvement, Haddad constantly emphasizes the incestuous nature of their relationship.

² A checkered head cloth, both tradition garb for Arab nomads and a symbol of Palestinian nationalism adopted during the Arab Revolt of 1936 to 1939. Rebecca L. Torstrick, *Culture and Customs of Israel* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2004) 117. Yassir Arafat, who was rarely photographed without a *keffiyeh*, helped popularize the garment.

When read as allegorical representations of the Israeli and Palestinian populations, Nessim and Falastín's incestuous relationship echoes the perverted nature of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Though the two communities are closely related in terms of history, language, religion, and culture, the Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims are nevertheless constantly at war.

In the chapters that follow Cham's "rebirth" as Nessim, the protagonist—still an amnesiac—experiences the harsh reality of daily life in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories: the never-ending lines and humiliations of the road blocks, the constant threat of attacks by Tsahal,³ and a lack of resources and of hope. Gradually, Nessim develops the mentality and consciousness of a Palestinian and begins to harbor hateful feelings toward Israelis. Ironically, the catalyst for this metamorphosis is the amnesia that Nessim suffers due to the abuse inflicted on him by the militants. Thus, it is the violence inflicted on him by the other that allows the protagonist to empathize with this same other. The amnesia serves a double purpose in Cham's transformation. Its most obvious effect is to eradicate the biases toward Palestinians that the protagonist had undoubtedly internalized as a result of being part of the Israeli army. On a more symbolic level, however, in concealing his conscious level of memories, the amnesia also allows suppressed memories to rise to the surface. The return of these suppressed memories, which reveal the protagonist's Arab background, further contribute to his identification with the Palestinians. The kinship felt by the protagonist is a result not only of a common language, physiognomy, and culture, but also, what is portrayed as, a common victimization at the hands of political Zionism.

³ *Tsahal* is the Hebrew name for the Israeli army.

Although in the context of Israel-Palestine, the term “Arab” is often used to designate non-Jews, either Muslim or Christian, Jews may be qualified as “Arab” when they come from Arab countries in either North Africa or the Middle East. As Ammiel Alcalay points out, however, many other terms are used to refer to these groups, including, “Asian, African, North African, Middle Eastern, Turko-Iranian, ‘Sephardo-Oriental’ [...], Sephardi, [...] non-Western, Eastern, [...].”⁴ While I acknowledge that some Jews fit into this category refuse identification as Arab Jews (Gottreich, “Arab Jew” 435), there are several explanations for my use of this term as opposed to the other possibilities. First, there is no truly appropriate term for this diverse group of Jews; “Every category seems to come at the expense of another,” as Alcalay notes. Second, Haddad emphasizes his protagonist’s specific connection to the Arab world. Third, Haddad is deliberately ambiguous as to his protagonist’s specific origins, thus ruling out the use of terms such as “Middle Eastern” or “Turko-Iranian.”

In this chapter I argue that Haddad employs the affliction of amnesia as a literary device, one that allows him to comment on the similarities between Jews and Muslims, specifically between Arab Jews and Arab Muslims. The author points to links not only in their similar pasts, but also in their common experiences within Israel and the ways in which both groups have been excluded and repressed in Israel. In the first section of the chapter, I investigate the ironic salutary effects of the protagonist’s amnesia—a condition that creates a tabula rasa for the protagonist enables him to interact with Palestinians free of his biases—as well as its detrimental consequences: with his Israeli identity occluded,

⁴ Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 37. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

the protagonist reverses his antagonism, making the Israelis the object of his hatred. Next, I examine the return of the protagonist's repressed memories—a phenomenon prompted by his amnesia—and note how Haddad aligns the plights of the Palestinians and Arab Jews. The following section looks at Haddad's character of the Iraqi Jew and explores the interconnectedness of the histories of the Iraqi Jews and the Palestinians. In the final section of this chapter, I study specific moments of interaction between self and other in *Palestine* and highlight Haddad's call for the importance of the recognition of the other within the self.

What at first glance seems to be advocating for the salutary effects of forgetting in the process of reconciliation is later revealed to be an exploration of the selective remembering and forgetting that we all practice, whether consciously or unconsciously. In a sense, we all suffer from amnesia. Haddad seems acutely aware of this forgetting. In July of 2009, when I interviewed Hubert Haddad in Paris, he explained that in writing *Palestine*, he was unconsciously returning to a theme he had begun investigating in another novel composed twenty-five years earlier. “J’avais occulté. J’avais oublié... Quand j’ai écrit *Palestine* c’est un peu comme si j’avais pris la dernière page... et j’avais poursuivi 25 ans après. Comme quoi il y a tout un travail sous-terrain en permanence.”⁵ The author is referring here to the love story that takes place between a Jew and Palestinian Muslim in his 1989 novel *Oholiba des songes*. It was not until he reread his earlier work that the connection became clear to him. On a conscious level, the author had forgotten the characters with whom he had lived so intimately during the writing process. But when they reappear—albeit in a different form—a quarter century later, Haddad realized that these characters, this plot line, the problematic represented by

⁵ Interview with author on 27 July, 2010. Printed with permission from the author.

the Jewish-Muslim conflict had never ceased to concern him. This anecdote points not only to the “amnesia” that afflicts us all, but also to the persistent lives of those memories we repress.

The Ambiguity of amnesia

After several days of recuperation in Asmahane and Falastín’s house, Nessim regains his consciousness and begins interacting with those around him. Haddad describes the protagonist’s restorative process not only as the healing of his wounds, but symbolically both as a rebirth and as an awakening. On one level, the protagonist is reborn as a Palestinian; his new identity of Nessim becomes the filter through which he evaluates his post-coma experiences. On a more symbolic level, this metamorphosis represents the possibility of the awakening of the Israeli consciousness to the plight of the Palestinians; it signifies the opportunity for an Israeli to assess the situation of the Palestinians without bias. Describing Nessim’s reawakening/ rebirth, Haddad likens Israeli prejudices to bad dreams: “Après des jours et des nuits de délire comateux, [...] la vie a reflué avec un autre sang. Lavé des mauvais rêves, il s’est peu à peu réanimé dans la fraîcheur de la convalescence” (*Palestine* 52). With this quotation and others, Haddad places a surprising emphasis on the positive consequences of the protagonist’s amnesia—a phenomenon normally considered a malady—and it is tempting for the reader to consider the significant role that forgetting might play in a peace process. After all, the protagonist’s amnesia eradicates his enmity for Palestinians, makes possible his identification with them, and, in effect, grants them amnesty. On the other hand, the protagonist’s affliction makes him unaware of his multiple identities; the amnesia merely

reverses his alterity. In the protagonist's incarnation as Cham, his Arab identity is simultaneously repressed and abhorred, as is—on an allegorical level—the Palestinian other that is located within the Israeli self. As Nessim, the protagonist's Israeli identity is the object of his denial and hatred. At no point in the novel does the protagonist succeed in incorporating the multiple facets of his identity. Given the disastrous fate of the protagonist at the novel's conclusion—he commits suicide—it cannot be argued that Haddad entirely condones forgetting. In this section of the chapter, I explore Haddad's ambiguous portrayal of amnesia, highlighting both the positive consequences of forgetting—the protagonist's identification with and pardoning of the Palestinians, the eradication of his hatred—as well as the negative outcomes—his distancing from Israelis and willingness to take on a terrorist mission.

The protagonist's adoption of the Palestinian identity is partly by default; his memories of his former life are inaccessible and his identity as Nessim—assigned to him by Falastín—is all that he knows. Despite the seeming randomness of this assignment, Haddad underscores the kinship Nessim feels toward the Palestinians, and the particular pull he feels toward Falastín. In his role as Nessim, the protagonist experiences the everyday injustices faced by Palestinians living in the territories. For example, at the security checkpoints he suffers the agony of interminable waits, the degradation of strip searches and insults, and the frustration of being subject to the whims of Israeli soldiers. Nessim demonstrates his identification with the Palestinians by including himself in their collective condition, employing the first person plural. He bemoans to Falastín, “Nous sommes bannis de chez nous, délogés, dépossédés, tous captifs. Partout des murs dressés, des barrages, des routes de détournement. Est-ce qu'on peut vivre comme ça,

parqués dans les enclos et les cages d'une ménagerie ? Veut-on nous pousser au suicide, à la dévastation ? Je hais notre sort, je les déteste tous à en perdre l'esprit..." (109).

Viewing the Palestinians' situation with fresh eyes, Nessim is struck by their precarious predicament: they are simultaneously kicked out and caged in, treated as captive animals on display for the world to ignore. For the protagonist, this identity shift signifies a complete disengagement from and even a hatred of his former self and his former community. "Je les déteste tous à en perdre l'esprit," he declares. In losing his memory, the protagonist has already lost his mind to a certain extent; paradoxically, it is only through this loss that he is able to gain a new perspective on the Palestinians.

Haddad explores further Nessim's distancing from Israelis when he places the protagonist in an Israeli context, for example, on a bus filled with Israeli passengers en route to Jerusalem. Near the end of the novel, long separated from Falastin, Nessim decides to undertake a suicide mission. In order to facilitate his entry into Israel, the terrorist network supplies him with stolen Israeli papers. The papers are in fact his own—those that had been taken from him the night before his capture. Even when surrounded by other Israelis—even when he is posing as one of them—Nessim experiences them as other. He observes the Israeli passengers, focusing particularly on a group of settlers as they exit the bus. The narrator—voicing Nessim's thoughts—remarks, "Ces gens-là, et tous les autres encore dans leur siège, il les observe sans passion, comme des phénomènes d'un autre monde, étonné d'être lui-même salué ou pris en confiance. Sa propre étrangeté lui semble si totale qu'il évite d'écartier les mains de son visage" (140). Nessim's reversed notion of alterity is quite evident here. His own people now represent the other; he feels no affinity toward them and cannot even bear to

see or be seen by these Israelis. Their trust of him, even their acknowledgement of him, surprises the protagonist.

That Nessim's expression of his reversed alterity occurs while observing Israeli settlers is significant. Israeli settlers are civilians who live in settlements located within the Palestinian occupied territories in lands that were taken from Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian forces during the 1967 War, which Israel launched in response to the Egyptian occupation of Sinai and their blockade of the Straits of Tiran—a major point of entry for Israeli imports.⁶ While supporters of the settlements hold them to be necessary for Israeli security, detractors claim they infringe on Palestinian rights. The United Nations considers these settlements to be illegal, yet many still exist today in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Israeli policy regarding the settlements has been inconsistent, ranging from assistance for settlers to their forced removal.⁷ Debate over the settlements has been a major sticking point in peace negotiations, as evidenced by the uproar created in March of 2010 when Israel announced its plan to construct 1,600 new settler homes in the West Bank during Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel-Palestine, a visit designed to reinvigorate peace negotiations.⁸ It is not surprising, then, through Nessim's "Palestinian" eyes, the settlers represent a reviled segment of the Israeli population.

⁶ War commenced when Israel attacked Egypt in response to Egyptian President Gamal Nasser's occupation of Sinai, as well as his blockading of the Straits of Tiran—a principal conduit of shipping to Israel. (Egypt's military actions were in response to Syria's request for aid against supposed Israeli amassment of troops on its northern border.) Smith *Palestine* 285-93 and Mike Berry and Greg Philo, *Israel and Palestine: Competing Histories* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006) 43-44. Subsequent references to Berry and Philo's *Israel and Palestine* will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁷ Gershon Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

⁸ "As Biden Visits, Israel Unveils Plan for New Settlements," *New York Times* 10 March 2010: A4.

Nessim's amnesia simultaneously facilitates his identification with Palestinians and leads to his hatred of Israelis. In spite of the amnesia's negative consequences (not least of which is the suicide mission Nessim undertakes), during our interview, Haddad spoke of the salutary effects of the protagonist's amnesia, a phenomenon that for the author connotes a renewed innocence. Likening his protagonist's comatose experience to the rituals practiced in Orphic Temples during antiquity,⁹ he observed, "Il est allé si loin dans cette expérience fondamentale qu'il s'est retrouvé dans une sorte d'innocence, un regard nouveau où il n'y avait pas le moindre jugement, ni politique, ni d'aucune sorte." Haddad's unexpected emphasis on the positive implications of amnesia prompts questions about the role that forgetting can play in conflict resolution. Within the confines of the novel, the protagonist is unaware of his double identity. For the reader, however—who never loses sight of the protagonist's original Israeli identity or of the political context of the novel—Nessim's new worldview might represent a pardoning by the Israelis of the Palestinians. The protagonist's amnesia, which eliminates his prejudices and rancor, symbolizes the possibility of Israelis granting amnesty to Palestinians. In coupling the phenomenon of amnesia with the possibility of amnesty, Haddad invites the reader to contemplate the roles that forgetting and forgiving might play in an Arab-Israeli peace process. In order to move past difficult histories, states sometimes grant amnesty to specific persons or groups, an act that establishes a kind of forced forgetting. As an example, we can look to French Prime Minister Georges Pompidou's 1971 pardoning of Paul Touvier—a convicted Nazi collaborator who escaped his 1946 death sentence by going into hiding. This is one of many instances of

⁹ Orphics, practitioners of an ancient Greek religion, believed that humans proceeded through a series of lives through reincarnation.

amnesty investigated by Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Significantly, it is precisely amnesty's close relationship to amnesia that makes the philosopher uneasy.

The proximity between the two phenomena, he writes, "which is more than phonetic, or even semantic, [...] signals the existence of a secret pact with the denial of memory, which [...] distances it from forgiving, after first suggesting a close simulation."¹⁰

Forgiveness based on forced forgetting, Ricoeur suggests, is not only less worthy than true forgiveness, but may also have dangerous repercussions.

Countering his emphasis on the salutary effects of Nessim's amnesia, Haddad also expressed discomfort regarding the role of forgetting. During our interview, Haddad emphatically denied intending to address the question of the right to forget (a question explored in my first chapter). "Il n'y a pas de droit à l'oubli, il y a le droit à la mémoire [...] Quand on vous demande d'oublier c'est qu'on n'a pas la conscience tranquille [...] Dans la pauvre humanité, s'il n'y a pas de mémoire, il n'y a plus personne. Parce que [...] au bout de l'oubli, on ne sait même pas se tenir debout, on tombe par terre." *Palestine's* conclusion, which might be said to go "au bout de l'oubli" in displaying the protagonist's shock at rediscovering his original identity, supports Haddad's opinion on the catastrophic consequences of forgetting. On the other hand, and in seeming contradiction with this statement, Haddad acknowledged the positive attributes of forgetting and the relief it can bring, noting, "l'oubli sera une bénédiction quand il sera temps [...] De même que les Palestiniens, ils pourront oublier quand on aura rendu leur territoire, ils pourront accepter d'oublier."

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 453. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

While *Palestine* provides an opportunity for Haddad to dream about the undoing of hatred, a process that might be facilitated by the dulling of memory, he does not celebrate the denial of history, a possible outcome of forgetting. In fact, he explores the dire consequences of negationism when he writes of the Palestinian terrorist Omar's denial of the *Shoah*. Omar uses these negationist claims, as well as those of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, to justify violent actions against the Jews. The character argues that "l'holocauste est une mystification des traîtres occidentaux pour s'accaparer nos terres, je l'ai appris à l'école coranique. Même Arafat était un valet du lobby juif. Il y a bien deux bandes bleues sur leur drapeau, hein ? Ces chiens veulent s'étendre du Nil à l'Euphrate ! Mais nous les jetterons tous à la mer..." (91). Omar's denial of history helps justify his involvement in terrorist activities, a path that Haddad clearly does not advocate. In the same text and, at times within his depiction of the same character, Haddad explores both the negative and positive consequences of forgetting as regards to conflict resolution.

The Return of repressed memories

While the two most obvious effects of amnesia on the protagonist are his identification with the Palestinians and his distancing from Israelis, there is a third, more subtle, result. This is the creation of the necessary conditions for the return of the protagonist's repressed memories of his Arab heritage. This outcome is intimately connected to the other two consequences of forgetting in that Nessim's recall of these repressed memories contributes to his embrace of his Palestinian identity, as well as to his casting off his former self. For the reader familiar with the history of the region, the parallels constructed between the protagonist's Palestinian self and his Jewish Arab self

serve to highlight not only the shared histories of Arab Jews and Arab Muslims, but also the common struggles of Arab Jews and Palestinians in Israel.

Though Haddad never explicitly identifies his protagonist as an Arab Jew, the author includes several clues throughout the text. One obvious example occurs when, in his post-coma delirium, the protagonist cries out for his mother in Arabic (12).¹¹ (Despite the facts that they are surrounded by Arab nations and that they have a significant Arab-speaking population within their own borders—made up of both Israeli Arabs and Jews of Arab heritage, most Israelis of Ashkenazi origin do not speak Arabic.¹²) The protagonist's "Arab appearance" and ability to speak Arabic, both results of his Arabic heritage, facilitate his entry into the Palestinian community. During his terrorist mission, when Nessim is instructed to "feign" Israeli citizenship, a co-conspirator warns him, "Et méfie-toi, tu es bien trop typé arabe !" (148). Omar, another terrorist, also comments on Nessim's resemblance to the photo of Cham. "Regarde-toi dans la glace," he instructs him. "Même pas besoin de changer la photo, c'est deux gouttes d'eau avec dix ans de différence !" (143). During his time as Nessim, no one questions the validity of the protagonist's identity based on his appearance; on the

¹¹ Early on in the novel, there are several other instances in which Haddad emphasizes the fact that Nessim understands Arabic (18, 30). As the story progresses, the protagonist is able to converse with the Palestinians and even pass as one of them. From a linguistic standpoint, this requires some suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. In Israel, many second and third generation immigrants from Arab lands are no longer fluent in Arabic; moreover, the plethora of varieties of Arabic often impedes understanding between speakers from different countries. Bernard Spolsky and Elana Shohamy, The Languages of Israel: Policy, Ideology and Practice (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1999), 211 and 141-42. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

¹² Though there are some Arabic language classes in Jewish schools in Israel, Spolsky and Shohamy write that "A number of studies of the teaching of Arabic in Jewish schools [...] all testify to the negative attitude to Arabic, its low status, and to the ineffectiveness of teaching." Despite acknowledgement on the part of some Israelis of the utility of knowledge of Arabic in terms of diplomacy and national security, many Israelis are uninterested in learning what they view as the language of their enemies and of those Arab immigrants "who are feared as a potential fifth column" (146, 118).

contrary, doubts are cast about his ability to pass for Israeli.¹³ Convincing others and himself of his original identity requires a concerted effort. Even though he has been furnished with his own passport, the terrorists instruct him to memorize the information contained in the document by repeating it over and over again to himself (143). That such a rigorous process of reclaiming his original identity is necessary not only underscores the irony of Haddad's text, but also reveals the precarious position of Arab Jews in Israel. For example, it is not unheard of for Arab Jews to be mistaken for Palestinians and consequently beaten or imprisoned by Israeli police.¹⁴

Whereas in his role as Cham the protagonist's "typé arabe" physiognomy might make him the object of prejudice, as Nessim his physical appearance has positive consequences: it is the basis for his own feelings of kinship toward the Palestinians. While wandering the Palestinian H1 territory in Hebron, Nessim recognizes himself in the faces of passers-by. "Il croisait désespérément les regards en quête d'un signe de reconnaissance. Une apparence de familiarité émanait pourtant des physionomies ; il déambulait parmi des frères et des mères immémoriaux, des enfants nimbés d'ancestralité, d'intimes inconnus aux yeux d'éternité" (95-96). Due to his sense of loss brought on by his amnesia, the protagonist actively searches for clues to his identity—places and people that trigger a sense of home. This desperate quest opens his eyes to the "apparence de familiarité" that emanates from the bodies around him, as if calling out to him to take notice. Though those that surround him remain unknown, their physical

¹³ However, there are several instances in *Palestine* in which other physical markers (his recent bullet wound, a *keffiyeh* found in his bag) or his ability to speak Hebrew lead Israeli officials to question the protagonist's identity (60, 144, 116).

¹⁴ Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19-20 (1988), 25. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

appearances awaken in Nessim feelings of affinity. His familial bond to the Palestinians (“frères et mères”) encompasses not only the past (“l’ancestralité”), but also the future (“aux yeux d’éternité”). This bond that Nessim senses symbolizes the linguistic, cultural, religious, and historical similarities between the Arab Jews and the Arab Muslims. His feelings of affinity recall times of peaceful coexistence between the two groups—that existed at various points in North Africa—and signal a hope on the part of Haddad that these times might return.

Some theorists would dismiss Haddad’s alignment of Arab Jews and Arab Muslims as nostalgic renderings that overlook the oppressed status of the Jews in Arab lands. As *dhimmi*s, though they were able to freely practice their religion, Jews (and other non-Muslim peoples of the book) suffered certain social and religious restrictions and were forced to pay special taxes. In addition to underscoring the inequalities the Jews of Muslim lands faced in the past, these critics question the possibility of continued Arab Jewish identity given the paucity of Jews residing in Arab countries today. For example, in his essay entitled, “Qu’est-ce qu’un juif arabe?,” The Tunisian Jew, Albert Memmi, qualifies the concept of peaceful coexistence between the Jews and Muslims of Arab lands as a myth propagated both by the Western political left and the Arabs, who use it as cannon fodder against Israel (*Juifs et arabes* 56-57). In fact, Memmi goes so far as to claim that though the Jews of North Africa could once be considered Jewish Arabs due to the morals, culture, music and cooking that they shared with their Arabo-Muslim counterparts, this category is no longer a possibility: “[...] certes, nous fûmes des Juifs-Arabes [...] mais faut-il rester un *Juif-Arabe* si l’on doit, pour cela, trembler pour sa vie et l’avenir des ses enfants?” (49). For Memmi, the oppression of the Jews and the violence

perpetrated against them by Arab Muslim regimes and population is to blame for this lost identity. Naïm Kattan, an Iraqi Jew, also speaks to the difficulty of the category of Arab Jews, though perhaps less cynically. After reviewing the ideological trajectory of Arab states from the 1940s to today which has culminated in varying degrees of Islamism, Kattan writes:

Dans ce brouhaha, un juif ne pouvait être écouté que s'il dénonçait bruyamment le sionisme en Israël. Phénomène rare, rarissime même s'il a existé. Forcé, plus ou moins ouvertement, à quitter son pays, il devint quasiment impossible pour le juif de se déclarer arabe sans affirmer une adhésion à un nationalisme dont le principal ennemi est le sionisme.¹⁵

Regardless of the (im)possibility of maintaining a Jewish presence in the Arab world, and looking beyond who is to blame for the religious hegemony that has taken root in the region, even Albert Memmi concedes that both Palestinians and Arab Jews are victims of history and that both constitute social problems that Israel must address (13, 140). In drawing similarities between the situation of the Palestinian and the Arab Jew in Israel, Haddad, too, is calling for radical social change in Israel-Palestine.

Haddad aligns Israel's two others—the Palestinian and the Arab Jew—by figuring them as two parts of the protagonist's identity. In so doing, he also calls attention to the related ethical issues the two groups must face. Though the exclusion of and prejudice against Arab Jews may be less widely recognized than that against the Palestinians, much scholarly work confirms the ethnic exclusion of the former group.¹⁶ For example, cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat demonstrates how the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionists

¹⁵ Naïm Kattan, "Juif d'origine et de culture arabes," *Covenant* September 2006: 3.

¹⁶ Notably, Shohat "Sephardim" and Aziza Khazzoom, "'The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel,'" *American Sociological Review* 68.4 (2003): 481-510, whom I cite extensively. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

have both sought to cleanse Arab Jews of their Arabness and inspire feelings of shame (8, 25). While Shohat's rather polemical argument vilifies the Ashkenazi Zionists for their exclusion of Arab Jews,¹⁷ sociologist Aziza Khazzoum places the relationship between Ashkenazi and Arab Jews within a larger historical context and partially shifts the blame away from the Ashkenazim for their exclusion of Arab Jews. Laying out her theory of the "Great Chain of orientalism," Khazzoum likens the process of orientalism and exclusion to a game of tag that she traces back to Western Europe.¹⁸ Building on Edward Said's theory of orientalism,¹⁹ Khazzoum shows how, in reaction to Western Europe's orientaling of Western Jews, the latter group—after internalizing the negative image the former group projected onto them—in turn, orientalized the Jews of Eastern Europe. The next target in the "chain of orientalism" was the Arab Jews, followed by the Arab Muslims, and specifically the Palestinians. Khazzoum's chain model is compelling in that it allows us to grasp the interconnectedness of relations between the different groups in Israel-Palestine, but it obscures, to some extent, the hierarchical relationship between the groups. Due to their foundational role in political Zionism and the fact that their arrival pre-dated that of Arab Jews, Ashkenazi Jews hold the most political power in Israel. While perhaps still not fully accepted into mainstream Israeli culture, Arab Jews nevertheless benefit from a higher socio-economic status than Palestinian Arabs.²⁰ In

¹⁷ An example of Shohat's exaggerated language, consider this sentence: "In many respects, European Zionism has been an immense confidence trick played on Sephardim, a cultural massacre of immense proportions, an attempt, partially successful, to wipe out, in a generation or two, millennia of rooted Oriental civilization, unified even in its diversity" ("Sephardim" 32).

¹⁸ Gil Anidjar also focuses on the link between the ideology of Ashkenazi Zionists and Western Europe. See *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 33.

¹⁹ I am referring here to Said's definition of Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random Books, 1978), 3.

²⁰ Khazzoum does not distinguish between Muslim and Christian Arabs, indicating that both groups were orientalized by Arab Jews to the same extent. I take my cue from Haddad here who focuses specifically on the relations between Arab Jews and Arab Muslims.

“bestowing” his protagonist with amnesia, Haddad reverses the imposed hierarchy of identity in the protagonist’s mind. Whereas Cham seems to consider himself part of the Israeli elite, Nessim locates himself as a part of the masses, somewhere in between the two bottom echelons of society.

In addition to highlighting the similarities between Arab Jews and Palestinians, in his role as Arab Jew the protagonist also serves as a symbolic rapprochement between the highest and lowest tiers of the socioeconomic ladder in Israel/Palestine—Israeli Jews of Ashkenazi origin and Palestinian Arabs. Whereas in the past Arab Jews have been used by Zionists as a “buffer” (Alcalay 42) between these two groups, Haddad’s protagonist moves without much difficulty between them, underscoring for the reader, if not for himself, all that binds them. Calling attention to the precarious predicament of the Arab Jew in Israel—a group that has ties to both Ashkenazi Jews and Palestinian Arabs, but is used to keep these groups apart rather than bring them together—serves to further dismantle the ethnic barriers that exist in Israel.

Haddad’s protagonist’s Arab identity is not explicit, however; rather, it is hinted at throughout the text. In addition, the protagonist’s remembrances of his Arabness remain vague and abstract, not tied to any specific nationality. As Haddad stated in our interview, this haziness was deliberate: “Je n’ai pas voulu le préciser. C’est évident que c’est un Juif arabe ou au moins un Juif séfarade, peut-être un Juif irakien ou un Juif du Moyen Orient.”²¹ The novelist’s intentional ambiguity as to the protagonist’s heritage allows him to skirt some of the complexities of the category of the Arab Jew—a category

²¹ Interview with author (27 July 2009). All references to my interview with Haddad denote this same meeting.

that encompasses centuries of history of fairly different regions²²—not all of whom experienced amicable relations with their Muslim neighbors. Haddad’s medium of fiction allows him to figure the protagonist’s Arabness as a tie to Arab Muslims, without having to concern himself too much with the historical accuracy of this claim.

However, despite this desire for ambiguity for his protagonist in *Palestine*, the author lends some concreteness to his depiction of the Arab Jew in Israel through his portrait of the “man with *kippa* [skullcap],” an Iraqi Jew whom Nessim meets while on the bus to Jerusalem, en route to the projected location of his suicide mission. Taking Nessim’s Israeli identity for granted, the man speaks candidly about his Iraqi background and his feelings toward Palestinians. Though he recognizes the common features between his people’s diasporic experience and the exile and expulsion of Palestinians, he does not empathize with the latter group, declaring, “je n’ai rien contre ces gens-là, je suis presque comme eux, à part la religion” (139). He goes on to explain, “Ma famille vient de Bagdad. Tous les Juifs ont dû fuir les persécutions après le pogrom de 1941, après la guerre de 1947. À Bagdad, comme à Damas ou à Amman. Ils étaient bien huit cent mille, à peine moins que les Palestiniens de l’exode.” What is most striking about these words is the tension exposed between his recognition of the similarities between the histories of Iraqi Jews and Palestinians and the “us versus them” mentality under which he nevertheless operates. The reader notes the stark contrast between his avowal, “je suis presque comme eux” and his figuring of the Jews as distinct from “ces gens-là.” The Iraqi Jew’s use of the expression “ces gens-là” mirrors Nessim’s use of the same

²² Emily Gottreich warns of the danger of “flattening” the history of diverse groups of Jews by using the category “Arab Jews” (“Arab Jews” 433).

expression (already cited in this chapter) on the following page.²³ Juxtaposition of these two moments reveals the many levels of irony at play in this encounter. Though the attentive reader is aware that both characters represent the same group—that of Arab Jews—the characters’ gestures toward the other through the expression “ces gens-là” refer to different, antagonistic groups. The dramatic irony is underscored when, due to his reversed alterity, the protagonist refers to his former self, Cham, in evoking “ces gens-là.” While the protagonist remains ignorant of his double identity until the novel’s denouement, the reader’s knowledge of this doubling underscores both the cultural proximity between Arab Jews and Palestinians, as well as the common struggles of the two groups in Israel.

Interrelated histories: Iraqi Jews and Palestinians

The character of the Iraqi Jew not only lends specificity to Haddad’s portrayal of the Arab Jew in Israel, but also provides insight into what the protagonist’s pre-amnesia identity might have been.²⁴ The character’s purpose is clear, but why, we might ask, out of all the communities of diasporic Jews in Israel, does Haddad choose to locate his character within the Iraqi experience? In this section, I will examine the surprising links between the history of the Iraqi Jews and that of the Palestinians and situate these historical connections within my larger discussion of forgetting and remembering. Prior to the Jewish exodus from Iraq, most of which occurred between 1949 and 1951, Jews had coexisted with the diverse Muslim and Christian populations. Similarly, the history

²³ Nessim thinks, “Ces gens-là, et tous les autres dans leur siège, il les observe sans passion, comme des phénomènes d’un autre monde, étonné d’être lui-même salué ou pris on confidence” (140).

²⁴ For more information on the experience of Iraqi Jews in Israel, see the excellent documentary Forget Baghdad, dir. Samir, prod. Dschoint Ventschr and Filmproduktion, 2003.

of Palestine includes periods of relative peace between Muslims, Christians and Jews, such as the years between the Muslim conquest and the arrival of the Crusaders, as well as the four centuries of Ottoman rule. (Though the three religious groups did not all benefit from the same rights, the society was fairly pluralistic.)²⁵ There are also significant similarities between the *Nakba* and the *Farhud*—the Arabic term for the event that the “man with the *kippa*” terms “the 1941 pogrom.” Following the British invasion and occupation of Iraq, non-Jewish Iraqi citizens, soldiers, and policemen turned against the Jews whom they associated with both the British and the Iraqi puppet regime, killing approximately 130 civilians.²⁶ Though the *Farhud* did not directly lead to a definitive Jewish exodus—many initially fled the country, but most returned shortly thereafter—like the *Nakba*, the event remained etched in Iraqi Jews’ minds as crucial turning point in their history, a point of no return for their residence in Iraq.²⁷ The *Farhud*’s powerful afterlife may also have been due, in part, to exaggerated reports of the event disseminated by the National Council of the *yishuv* that described the bloodshed as “massacre,” and even a “Holocaust,” as Shenhav asserts.²⁸

According to historian Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, the events that truly prompted Iraqi Jews to make *aliya*²⁹ were the anti-Zionist demonstrations of 1947, the anti-Zionist speeches broadcast by the media occurring at the same time, and the attack on the Jews of

²⁵ Smith, *Palestine* 9, 11.

²⁶ Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier and Sara Reguer, Eds., *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 350. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

²⁷ Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, *Zionism in an Arab Country: Jews in Iraq in the 1940s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 14-19. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) See also Elie Kedourie, "The Break Between Muslims and Jews in Iraq," *Jews Among Arabs: Contacts and Boundaries*, ed. Mark R. Cohen and Abraham Udovitch (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1989), 33.

²⁸ Yehouda Shenhav, "The Jews of Iraq, Zionist Ideology, and the Property of the Palestinian Refugees of 1948: An Anomaly of Accounting," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31.4 (1999), 607. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

²⁹ A Hebrew word meaning “ascent,” *aliya* signifies Jewish immigration to Israel.

Falluja on January 28, 1948. The protests, anti-Zionist rhetoric, and violence coincided with the United Nations debate of, and then decision to, partition Palestine on November 29, 1947—a decision unanimously rejected by the Arab world.³⁰ Iraqi volunteers who were on their way to Palestine to combat the Zionists carried out the attack in Falluja. Though this attack occurred in early 1948, it may be what Haddad is referring to when the Iraqi Jew speaks of “la guerre de 1947.” The Falluja attack did not truly constitute a war, though around 150 Jews were killed and 600 injured.³¹ Qualifying the event as a war points to Haddad’s desire to portray the “man with the *kippa*’s” perceived of the gravity of the situation. Citing 1947 rather than 1948 may indicate that the character considers the attacks part of the violent demonstrations that targeted Zionists in Iraq following the United Nations’ ratification of the partition of Palestine. The inaccuracy of the number of Iraqi Jewish exiles cited is striking. Only approximately 123,000 Jews made *aliya* between 1949 and 1951. Despite the fact that only about 133,000 Jews resided in Iraq at this time, the “man with the *kippa*” puts the figure at 800,000.³² Whether these inaccuracies represent faulty research on the part of Haddad or purposeful embellishment (or ignorance) on the character’s part, what is significant is the conflation

³⁰ Berry and Philo [Israel and Palestine](#), 25-28, Caplan [Israel-Palestine](#) 110, and Smith [Palestine](#), 194-207.

³¹ See Meir-Glitzstein, [Zionism](#) 33 on the history of the Iraqi Jews. Other historical trends that negatively affected the welfare of Iraq’s Jewish community were the rise of Pan-Arabism and the Iraqi national movement (Shenhav, “The Jews of Iraq” 609).

³² Shenhav, “The Jews of Iraq”; Reeva Spector Simon, “Iraq” 348; and Meir-Glitzstein, [Zionism](#) xiv. The Iraqi Jew’s perception of the number of Palestinians living in Palestine before 1948 is more in line with the American historian Charles D. Smith, who puts the number at 860,000 and estimates that 133,000 remained in Palestine after the *Nakba* (207). Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi maintains that 1.4 million Palestinians were either expelled or fled in 1948. Rashid Khalidi, [Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 179. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

of the Jewish Iraqi and Palestinian histories³³: “Ils [les Juifs d’Irak] étaient bien huit cent mille, à peine moins que les Palestiniens de l’exode” (*Palestine* 139).

However, the most significant connection between the Iraqi Jews and Palestinians remains unspoken in *Palestine*. This correlation dates back to 1951 when the Iraqi legislature blocked all the assets of the Jews who, though they had renounced their Iraqi citizenship in order to immigrate to Israel, continued to reside in Iraq while waiting for the opportunity to leave.³⁴ On March 19, 1951, Israel’s foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, responded by declaring that the actions of the Iraqi government had “[...] forced [the Israeli government] to link the two accounts,” that of Iraqi Jews and that of Palestinian refugees.³⁵ The Israeli government planned to subtract what the Iraqi government owed the Jews from the amount it would pay to the Palestinians as compensation for their lost property. This was a strategic move that negatively affected both the Palestinians and the Iraqi Jews; the Palestinians received less money in reparations from Israelis and the Iraqi Jews received none at all. This caused severe economic hardship for the Iraqi Jews—once one of the richest Jewish communities in the Middle East (Meir-Glitzstein xiv). Excluding the important detail of the two peoples’ interconnected fates from his account suggests the character’s blindness to present ties, despite his recognition of past similarities. This omission also serves to pardon the Israeli government for the wrongs committed against both groups (Palestinians and Iraqi Jews), as well as to situate the speaker’s allegiance and self-conception squarely within the Zionist/ Orientalist framework.

³³ Another plausible explanation is that these exaggerations represent the overblown reports of the *Farhud* circulated by *Yishuv* institutions (Shenhav 607).

³⁴ This law concerned the assets of some 70,000 Jews (Shenhav 617). See also Simon et. al. 365; Kedourie 55-56.

³⁵ Knesset Record, Third Session of the First Knesset, viii, 1358-59, cited in Shenhav 619.

Haddad's "man with the *kippa*" further absolves the Israeli government when the character contrasts the Israeli and Arab governments' treatment of refugees. Releasing Israelis from any responsibility for the *Nakba*—"Ceux-là [les Palestiniens] ont fui leurs villages sous l'injonction des chefs de guerre musulmans"—Nessim's interlocutor blames instead the Arab countries of the Middle East. "Réfugiés pour réfugiés, le minuscule Israël a su intégrer les siens, en faire des citoyens. Les Palestiniens rejetés de tous, et d'abord des pays arabes, ont été parqués par milliers sur nos frontières pour nous rendre la vie impossible" (139). Despite the "man with the *kippa*"'s claims about the successful integration of immigrants in Israel, Arab Jews still largely exist on the fringes of Israeli society, as research already cited in this chapter shows. One concrete way in which the Ashkenazim exerted their superiority was in their placement of the Arab Jews upon their arrival to Israel—frequently in *ma'abarot*, remote villages with little infrastructure, often on the border of Arab territories and thus subject to more frequent attacks (Shohat 14). As literary critic Ammiel Alcalay points out, this strategic assignment of Arab Jewish immigrants served a dual purpose. Militarily, Arab Jews acted as a "buffer zone for continuing acts of resistance by exiled Palestinians"; in terms of their acculturation, this positioning served to initiate Arab Jews "into the state's rites of power, suspicion, and fear regarding the Arabs" (Alcalay 42). Due to a variety of circumstances, including the policies that placed Arab Jews in these villages, these Jews were discouraged from seeing the ties that bound them to their Palestinian neighbors. In his novel *Yasmin*, Israeli author Eli Amir treats the potential and eventual failure of Arab Jews to bridge the gap between Israelis of European descent and Christian and Muslim Arabs.³⁶

³⁶ Eli Amir, *Yasmin* (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat, 2005), cited in Burg, *The Holocaust is Over* 24-25.

Haddad clearly portrays his Iraqi Jewish character as one who has adopted the prevailing Zionist narrative as his own. Moreover, the character's divisive worldview overshadows whatever kinship he may feel with the Palestinians. In fact, the Iraqi Jew offers a glimpse into a possible version of the protagonist's pre-amnesia mentality and demonstrates how, in adopting the dominant Zionist narrative, one must repress certain facets of Arab Jewishness. The "man with the *kippa*" has suppressed a counter-narrative that would acknowledge Zionism's role in the Iraqi Jewish exodus and its disregard for the financial interests of Iraqi Jews upon their arrival in Israel.

In the early 1940s, British intervention in Iraq and the rise of pan-Arabism contributed to antisemitic sentiment in Iraq. The rise of Zionism, however, also likely played a role. Shenhav maintains that overblown Zionist accounts of violence against Iraqi Jews contributed to these Jews' sense of insecurity in Iraq (Shenhav 607). This repression constitutes a significant difference between the positions of Israel's two others. For the Palestinians, assertion of the trauma they endured at the hands of Zionists is an integral part of their identity and national consciousness; on the contrary, in adopting an Israeli identity the trauma of the Arab Jews is silenced. As Shohat asserts, "while Palestinians have been authorized to foster the collective militancy of nostalgia in exile [...], Sephardim have been forced by their no-exit situation to repress their communal nostalgia" (12-13). Shenhav draws a similar distinction between the Palestinians and Arab Jews, noting that, "while Palestinians possess a clear counter-narrative [to the Zionist master narrative], the Mizrahi story is a fractured one embedded in the history of both groups" (625). Arab Jews are forced to silence the trauma that sets them apart from their Ashkenazi coreligionists. Though Haddad's protagonist is not cognizant (until the

end of the novel) of the forms of repression we might imagine he has undergone, his links to both Palestinians and Arab Jews allows the reader to view the situations of the two populations side by side and see the connections between them.

In addition to serving as a foil/double for the protagonist, the character of the Iraqi Jew also exemplifies how all narratives are selective and how all humans succumb to a certain amount of forgetting. Forgetting is as much a part of the act of storytelling as remembering. This repression of memories, this selective telling of history, is its own form of amnesia. In the context of Israel-Palestine, the majority of actors in the conflict “forget” their common histories and focus instead on what divides them. In *Palestine*, the Israeli adjutant Mazeltof points out this aspect of Israeli-Palestinian relations. While in close proximity to the Cave of the Patriarchs,³⁷ he remarks to Falastín, “C’est amusant...Vous musulmans et nous, juifs, nous ne parvenons à être d’accord que sur des fables. Voilà le seul endroit au monde où on trouve une synagogue et une mosquée sous un même toit. Mais croyez-vous vraiment qu’Adam et Ève, Abraham et les autres soient inhumés là-dedans ?” (84). In spite of the documented historical, cultural, and linguistic similarities between Palestinians and Israelis, one of the few acknowledged similarities of the two communities remains the shared holy sites.³⁸ The sanctity of these sites is based on religious texts, qualified here by Mazeltof as “fables,” and yet these “fables” are one of the few instances of “common ground” between Israelis and Palestinians. The history of the Cave of the Patriarchs adds another level of irony to Mazeltof’s comment; even

³⁷ The Cave of the Patriarchs, located in Hebron, is believed by both Jews and Muslims to be the burial site of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

³⁸ It is worth pointing out here that the biblical figures believed to be buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs are considered holy figures for Christians, as well as for Jews and Muslims. In its glossing over of the Christian role in the Israel-Palestine conflict, Mazeltof’s comment may suggest the diminished Christian Palestinian presence. It may also point to his sharing in a dichotomous (Jewish versus Muslim) understanding of the conflict.

though Jews and Muslims agree on the holiness of this site, much blood was shed here during the Baruch Goldstein massacre, an event cited several times in the novel.³⁹

On a larger scale, the city of Hebron, the setting of *Palestine*, tells a similar history. This city, the second holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest in Islam, is one of the most conflict-ridden areas in Israel-Palestine. While the character of the Iraqi Jew provides insight into memories that were potentially repressed by the protagonist, his story also reveals his own selective memory, arguably another form of amnesia. Both Mazeltov's comments and the setting of Hebron point to the selective remembering that afflicts the majority of Israel-Palestine. Rather than rejoice in the proximity of the two religions, most focus instead on events such as the Baruch Goldstein massacre and those cited by the Iraqi Jew—the massacres at Gush Etzion, Kfar Etzion, and Deir Yassin. The Iraqi Jew comments to Nessim:

Gush Etzion, ça ne vous dit rien? La Légion arabe y massacra tous les mâles adultes un triste jour de mai 1947, après des mois de résistance héroïque, plus de deux cents Juifs assassins! [...] Je sais à quoi vous pensez [...]. La Haganah et le *Stern gang*, hein? Les bombes de l'Irgoun dans les marchés arabes? Le massacre de Deir Yassin un moi avant celui de Kfar Etzion, comme si l'un acquittait l'autre? Nous avons subi les pires carnages depuis des millénaires, et les fils et petits-fils de nous exterminateurs nous font maintenant la leçon. (138)

In this passage, the Iraqi Jew points to the cycle of violence that has marked Israeli and Palestinian relations, with references to violence perpetrated Israelis (Deir Yassin, Hagana, the Stern gang, the Irgoun) as well as that carried out by Palestinians (the massacres at the Etzion bloc). In April of 1948, Jewish forces carried out a massacre in the Arab village of Deir Yassin, committing a litany of atrocities. The Jewish brutality in this incident was broadcast by Arab media and served both to scare many Arabs into

³⁹ In 1994, Goldstein, an Israeli, killed twenty-nine Muslims while they were praying at the Ibrahimi Mosque (Smith 459).

fleeing their homes and to incite retaliation among those who stayed. In fact, Israeli New Historian Benny Morris reports that the Arabs that attacked the Etzion bloc cried out “Deir Yassin!” In May of 1948, Arab forces executed almost all of the approximately 500 inhabitants of Gush Etzion and Kfar Etzion, two of the villages that made up the Etzion bloc.⁴⁰ (The Hagana and the Irgun were both Jewish paramilitary groups in pre-1948 Palestine, while LEHI—known as the “Stern gang” after their founder Abraham Stern—was a Zionist terrorist organization in the 1940s. All three groups combated the British, during the Mandate Period, as well as against the Palestinians.⁴¹) Rather than bemoaning this perpetual violence, however, the Iraqi Jew grants impunity to the Israelis by calling upon what he views as the Jews’ history of victimization: “Nous avons subi les pires carnages depuis des millénaires.” Overlooking the similarities that link the two communities, the Iraqi Jew clearly ranks Jewish suffering higher than that of Palestinians. I treat the comparison and ranking of suffering that the Iraqi Jew engages in here in chapters one and three.

Falastín’s aunt Layla’s discussion of the Baruch Goldstein massacre provides an interesting counterpoint to the Iraqi Jew’s references to Hebron’s bloody history. While Layla certainly laments the loss of Palestinian life and their decreased freedom that occurred as a result of the protests that followed the massacre—“[Goldstein] a décimé la foule en criant ‘Joyeux Pourim !’ [...] Après les émeutes et les protestations qui suivirent, l’occupant condamna tous les accès à la vieille ville et rasa des dizaines de maison. C’est

⁴⁰ Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 126-28, 167-71. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) See also Ahron Bregman, *Israel's Wars, 1947-93* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 13. Subsequent references to Morris and Bregman will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴¹ Smith 178-79, 562-564.

toujours les victimes qu'on sanctionne !”—her outlook remains that of an optimist and a pacifist (75). Rather than seeking revenge, Layla keeps in mind the suffering of the other—“Dans cette ville, autrefois, [...] il y a eu des massacres des Juifs [...]”—and the fact that both sides have been guilty of fanaticism, which, in her opinion is ultimately futile (74). “Tout ça pour dire que la raison l'emportera sur l'intolérance et le fanatisme,” she concludes to Falastin (75). While the Iraqi Jew's recognition of a certain amount of the suffering endured by Palestinians is apparent, he appears to choose to focus on their history of enmity. Layla, on the other hand, remains conscious of the painful histories of both communities and maintains empathy for the other.

Recognizing the other within the self

Haddad underscores the tragic irony of the instances in which shared holy sites have engendered violence rather than understanding between Muslims and Jews. Adding to this paradox is the fact that practitioners of both religions have ignored the Koran and the Torah's calls to embrace the other. Instead, both religious scriptures have been interpreted as a call to arms against infidels. Haddad reveals this tension in an exchange between two Palestinian characters, Omar (a terrorist) and Manastir (a pacifist). When Omar cites the Koran as justification for violent action against those who oppose him, Manastir counters, “J'ai lu moi aussi le Coran [...] : ‘Et si l'un des sectateurs te demande asile, accorde-le-lui, afin qu'il entende la parole divine, puis conduis-le en un lieu de sécurité. Car ces gens-là ne savent pas.’ Cet extrait de la neuvième sourate, *At-Tawbah*, l'une des plus critiquées pour son intolérance...” (69).⁴² Manastir's comments point to

⁴² The quotation from the Koran comes from Surat At-Tawbah 9:6 and states: “If any of the polytheists seeks your protection, / grant him the protection until he can hear the words of God / and then convey him

the many inconsistencies inherent in religious texts; the same *surat* can be used to validate conflicting behaviors. Likewise, though a recurring theme in the Torah is Jews' duty toward others,⁴³ its verses are quoted to corroborate violence against Palestinians and those who support their cause. By quoting from Ezechial 14:8,⁴⁴ the Iraqi Jew asserts that pacifists deserve to die.

Haddad investigates the construction of otherness in Israel-Palestine, one that is conceptualized according to ethnic and religious differences, by tracking his protagonist's metamorphosis from the embodiment of the Israeli self to that of the Israeli other.

Despite the proximities between the peoples that constitute this region, despite Islam and Judaism's injunctions to care for the other, greater emphasis is placed on keeping the other at bay. This is accomplished, *Palestine* suggests, through the construction of borders that are maintained by Israeli forces through the use of violence. In Franz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*, the philosopher notes the omnipresence of borders in colonial societies⁴⁵ that delineate the colonizer's space from that of the colonized.

Policemen and soldiers, Fanon holds, constitute the intermediaries between these two worlds and their means of communication, according to the author, is that of aggression:

to his place of safety. / That is because they are a people who do not know." Alan Jones, trans., *The Qur'an* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007) 180.

⁴³ Julia Kristeva writes, "Sans cesse la Torah revient sur les devoirs des Juifs à l'égard des étrangers, et on note qu'aucun autre commandement [...] n'est répété aussi souvent." Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 98. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴⁴ "Je tournerai ma face contre cet homme, je ferai de lui un signe et un sujet de sarcasme, et je l'exterminerai du milieu de mon peuple" (*Palestine* 140).

⁴⁵ Fanon's writings on colonialism refer in general to European colonialism and in particular to the decolonization movement in Algeria. The philosopher makes no mention of Israel-Palestine and though many critics—notably Edward Said in his 1967 book *The Question of Palestine*—have accused Israel of colonialism since the 1967 War, this remains a controversial label. [For a more recent articulation of the Israel-as-colonizer argument, see Joseph A. Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians* (London: Routledge, 2006)]. Due to Fanon's emphasis on the violence necessary to maintain the Manichean aspect of the colonial world, it seems appropriate to refer to *Les damnés de la terre* in my analysis of Haddad's description of the territories.

“le gendarme et le soldat, par leur présence, leurs interventions directes et fréquentes, maintiennent le contact avec le colonisé et lui conseillent, à coups de crosse ou de napalm, de ne pas bouger. On le voit, l’intermédiaire du pouvoir utilise un langage de pure violence.”⁴⁶ It is through violence that the Manichaeism of the colonial world is maintained, Fanon posits.

As an Israeli soldier, Haddad’s protagonist’s duty was to protect the Israeli self from the Arab other through force. Haddad underscores this Israeli desire for protection through his emphasis on the physical structures that separate Israelis and Palestinians and his repetition of words such as *acier*, *barbelé*, *béton*, *barrière*, *barrage*, *bloc*, and *ferraille* (i.e. 48, 53, 59, 60, 72, 80, 101). The pervasive nature of these rigid structures is evident in Cham’s observations from a lookout point at the army base; he considers,

la clôture métallique hérissée d’instruments d’alarme et de projecteurs qui court indéfiniment sur ces plateaux, entre une route bitumée et une bande sableuse que bornent un fossé déjà nappé d’ombre et des pointes de barbelés. Plus loin, dans son prolongement, à proximité de Jérusalem, du côté de Kalkiliya et de Tulkarem, on avait aligné de hauts boucliers de béton sur des kilomètres [...]. (8)

While Haddad constantly evokes the apparent sturdiness of structures such as metallic fences and concrete shields, the author also underscores the fragility of the region of Israel-Palestine, one in which violence perpetrated by either Tsahal (the Israeli army) or Palestinian terrorists can erupt at any moment.

Whereas Cham’s duty was to clearly delineate and protect the boundaries of the Israeli self, as Nessim the protagonist transforms into a potent symbol of threat to the security and unity of the self. The protagonist’s post-coma reincarnation represents both an external and internal threat to Israel’s unity. As an eventual terrorist, Nessim embodies an external threat; as an Arab Jew—the memories of which return during his

⁴⁶ Franz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1966) 31.

incarnation as Nessim—the protagonist symbolizes an internal threat. Embodying a double hazard, the protagonist represents, in psychoanalytical terms, the return of the repressed others (the Palestinian and the Arab Jew) that have been projected out of the self. Explaining the phenomenon of the self’s repression of the other, Julia Kristeva writes that the self, “projette hors de lui ce qu’il éprouve en en lui-même comme dangereux ou déplaisant en soi, pour en faire un *double étranger*, inquiétant, démoniaque” (271). The protagonist’s metamorphosis from Cham to Nessim reveals the Israeli self’s confrontations with its others, as well as the others’ confrontations with the self. As Nessim, the protagonist’s encounters with Israelis (self) provoke feelings of detachment, while his interactions with Palestinians (other) inspire feelings of familiarity. As evidence of these opposing reactions, we can contrast the protagonist’s statement about the Israeli passengers on this bus—“Ces gens-là [...] il les observe sans passion, comme des phénomènes d’un autre monde” (140)—with his comments about Falastín: “Qui d’autre sur terre avait pour lui ce caractère de familiarité exclusive et de proximité ? Il ne connaissait qu’elle vraiment” (110).

Until the novel’s conclusion, the protagonist remains unaware of the self-other binary; he does not realize that he has become a “stranger to himself.”⁴⁷ As a result, he is unable to integrate his plural identity into a united whole. By contrast, there are several moments in which Falastín appears to recognize the protagonist’s plurality. Struck by both the strangeness and the familiarity of the protagonist, in these moments, Falastín exhibits an experience with the uncanny strangeness that, according to Kristeva, results

⁴⁷ In using this expression, I am adapting the title of Kristeva’s book, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. Defining her notion of alterity, Kristeva writes, “Inquiétante, l’étrangeté est en nous: nous sommes nos propres étrangers – nous sommes divisés” (268).

from an encounter between self and other.⁴⁸ One example occurs when Falastín suddenly realizes that the protagonist has been following her as she walks through the occupied territory of Hebron: “C’est bien son frère qu’elle précédait [...] Sous le soleil, ses traits accentués creusent la mémoire. Elle pense à son père, aux proches d’autrefois.

L’héraldique d’un visage dessine un sceau profond, une griffe d’intimité étrange. Un long frisson la traverse alors ; l’évaluation imminente du proche et du lointain a sur elle l’effet de la foudre” (*Palestine* 50). Observing Nessim brings to Falastín’s mind memories of intimacy—of her brother, her father, and other deceased family members. The reader notes the repetition of the word “proche,” which refers both to closeness in terms of bloodline (“proches” signifying relatives), and to geographical proximity (“proche” meaning near). At the same time, Falastín experiences this intimacy as strange (“étrange”); the protagonist simultaneously heralds that which is far away (“lointain”) and that which is nearby. Falastín’s visceral reaction to this uncanny strangeness—the shudder that travels through her whole body—signals the shock that results from these conflicting sentiments.

The uncanny nature of Falastín’s feelings about Nessim is epitomized in her oscillation between qualifying him as a stranger and qualifying him as her brother and/or her lover. Even in admissions of her love for him, this alternation is evident. For example, within the same paragraph Falastín equates the protagonist with her brother and classifies him as “un inconnu.” On the one hand, Falastín recognizes that the protagonist has replaced her brother in both body and spirit: “il était devenu corps et âme le fier

⁴⁸ Though Sigmund Freud does not write of the relation between the uncanny and the foreigner, Kristeva adopts the use of his term to this context. Freud writes that the “uncanny” expresses that which “derives from what was once familiar and then repressed.” Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McIlintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 153.

Nessim, son grand frère tant aimé” (122). On the other hand, despite her love for him, Nessim remains a stranger. She admits “avec une crânerie désespérée qu’elle chérissait un inconnu.” Our attention is drawn to these comments about Nessim’s strangeness since they seem to contradict passages in which Falastín details her exhaustive knowledge of the protagonist. The lovers’ night alone in a hotel room provides an occasion for Falastín to ponder this intimacy: “Falastín s’inclina sur lui jusqu’à frôler sa nuque. Longtemps, elle respira son odeur en songeant aux jours et aux nuits passés à le soigner dans le grenier de sa mère. Elle connaissait tout de lui, sa chaleur, le moindre pli de sa peau, le goût de sa sueur et même ses rêves quand le délire rameute les chiens errants de la mémoire” (104). Falastín’s knowledge of the protagonist transcends the physical. Her familiarity with his innermost thoughts gives the impression that she knows him as well as she knows herself. In recognizing the uncanny in the protagonist—in her awareness of his multiple identities—Falastín, in effect, accomplishes what the protagonist does not: the acknowledgement of the other within the self. Falastín seems to understand, that as a Palestinian, the Israeli is part of her identity.

Haddad’s depiction of the romantic relations between Falastín and Nessim is another way in which he emphasizes the coming together of the familiar and the strange. While their amorous connection speaks to their intimacy, the strangeness is highlighted by the incestuous nature of their relationship. Falastín calls attention to this aspect of their relationship when she questions their mutual attraction. “Tu es mon frère et je t’embrasse [...]. N’es-tu pas mon frère?” (105). While Haddad’s development of the incest theme is mostly subtle (and ambiguous since the characters never consummate their love), the theme gains importance when considered in the context of *Palestine*’s

intertextual relationship with Sophocles' *Antigone* and the biblical story of Ham, both of which subtly feature incest. In Sophocles's play *Antigone* is the offspring of her father, Oedipus, and his mother, Jocasta. In Genesis 9:20-25, Ham's punishment for seeing his father naked is widely interpreted as chastisement for having sexual relations with his father.⁴⁹ In addition to the theme of incest, Haddad establishes intertextual links with *Antigone* through several shared plot elements: the headstrong heroines, the deaths of the father and brother in both works, and the suicides at the end. *Palestine's* link to the Bible is set up by Cham's name, an alternative spelling of "Ham." Through his depiction of an incestuous relationship between Falastín and Nessim, Haddad comments on the perverted relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. Though the two can be considered as brethren, during the last sixty years, their interaction has mostly been defined by violence.

While it is tempting to read the love affair between Nessim and Falastín as an entirely positive element of the novel and as a sign of the author's hope for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, the incestuous aspect of their relationship renders such readings unstable. Likewise, while we may want to interpret the protagonist's embrace of the other as optimistic, Nessim's rejection of his Israeli self counteracts this positive reading. This denial of otherness within the self has disastrous consequences for the protagonist; when he is forced to acknowledge his multifaceted identity during his encounter with Sabrina, this realization is more than he can bear. The end of the novel finds the protagonist (who, though he is carrying Cham's passport, still identifies as Nessim) in Jerusalem where he is supposed to carry out a terrorist mission. Suddenly, a

⁴⁹ See W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 70.

voice cries out to him, “Cham ! Cham !” (152). The voice belongs to Sabrina, an Israeli woman whom, as his former self, the protagonist “aurait pu aimer” (9). This moment results in an undoing of the reversal between self and other, but, catastrophically for the protagonist, it does not cancel out his shifted alliances. In one swift moment, the protagonist’s pre-amnesia assigned identity returns to him. At the same time, the protagonist becomes aware of the repression and oppression this self enacts on the other. The protagonist cannot tolerate the weight of this knowledge, even if, as Haddad intimates, he really has known this all along: “Il ne veut pas croire ce qu’il sait depuis toujours” (153). Because the protagonist feels incapable of incorporating his multiple identities into a single whole, he decides to blow himself to smithereens.

One interpretation of the protagonist’s suicide is that it represents Haddad’s explosion of the myth of Israeli unity. As much as they try to repress the others within their society whom they deem offensive or dangerous, *Palestine* suggests, Israeli Jews of Ashkenazi origin have not succeeded in eliminating these elements of society. The novel implies that the Palestinian quest to entirely differentiate their history from that of their Israeli neighbors is similarly destined to fail, given the two population’s overlapping cultures, languages, and religions. *Palestine*’s mission is to underscore the urgency of the recognition and welcoming of otherness located within the Israeli and Palestinian Selves. The novel does not advocate trading one identity—and its accompanying prejudices and hatreds—in for another, but rather urges us to learn to live with and live between multiple identities. I liken the experience of reading *Palestine* to reaping the benefits of psychoanalysis, which, as Kristeva explains, allows us to:

C’est de dénouer le transfert – dynamique majeure de l’altérité, de l’amour/haine pour l’autre, de l’étrangeté constitutive de notre psychisme – qu’à partir de

l'autre, je me réconcilie avec ma propre altérité-étrangeté, et que j'en joue et j'en vis. La psychanalyse s'éprouve alors comme un voyage dans l'étrangeté de l'autre et de soi-même, vers une éthique du respect pour l'inconciliable. Comment pourrait-on tolérer un étranger si l'on ne se sait pas étranger à soi-même. (269)

Kristeva's language here mirrors that of Slimane Benaïssa in the dramaturge's discussion of the necessity for playing the other in theater. (See my first chapter for more on this theme.) In *Palestine*, though Haddad's protagonist certainly experiences a voyage into the strangeness of the other and of himself, in the end, he is unable to merge his two irreconcilable halves. We imagine that Haddad hopes that the same will not be true of his readers.

Conclusion

Despite its harrowingly tragic denouement, *Palestine* takes an ambiguous stance on the roles of remembering and forgetting in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Whereas Haddad's novel reveals some of the potential salutary effects of amnesia in a long-standing conflict such as this—identification with the other, eradication of prejudice and hatred—it also underscores the importance of the recovery of repressed memories, memories that can unearth similarities to one's others. In this way, *Palestine* opposes a competitive model of memory, in which one group's memories are pit directly against another's, with no room for overlap or intersections.⁵⁰ Rather, Haddad's novel advocates a model like Michael Rothberg's model of multidirectional memory. Rothberg writes, "Our relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted

⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Chaumont and Guillaume Erner investigate these competitive models of memory. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance*. (Paris: La Découverte, [1997] 2002) and Erner *Victimes*.

consequences that bind us to those who we consider other” (*Multidirectional Memory* 5). In teasing out the shared memories between Israelis and Palestinians, Haddad highlights the unexpectedly porous nature of the boundaries between self and other that exist in the region.

While all individual memories are subject to influence by collective memories,⁵¹ Haddad underscores the individual’s agency in deciding which memories to call upon when constructing one’s worldview. His portrayal of Falastín’s family—all pacifists despite the father’s assassination and their undesirable living conditions in the Occupied Territories—is significant. Thus Layla, Falastín’s aunt, is readily able to recall not only the Jews as perpetrators of violence—“[les] guerres [...], [l]es visages écrasés sous les bombes” (32)—but also the Jews as victims of violence:

Dans cette ville, autrefois [...] il y eut des massacres de Juifs, de pauvres gens, des verriers, des maroquinières qui vivaient là au fil des générations et depuis les siècles des siècles [...]. Il y eut [...] [des] victimes du pogrom, des habitants authentiques, des rabbins descendants de rabbins installés à Hébron depuis les temps les plus reculés [...]. (74)

Whereas many Israelis and Palestinians focus on memories which support the victimization of their own group, leading to what Haddad—through the voice of Layla—qualifies as “une histoire bloquée” (75). Revisiting Rothberg, we can contrast the character Layla’s “multidirectional” use of memory—which allows her to draw connections between the histories of Jews and Palestinians and to empathize with the other—with the character of the Iraqi Jew’s “competitive” use of memory, which encourages him to compare the events of Gush Etzion, Deir Yassin, and Kfar Etzion in order to arrive at the conclusion, “Nous avons subi les pires carnages depuis des

⁵¹ See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Alexander, *Cultural Trauma* 22.

millénaires, et les fils et les petits-fils de nos exterminateurs nous font maintenant la leçon !” (138). In a context where memories are socially constructed to incite hatred and in a novel that focuses so much on chance and randomness, the agency characters like Layla demonstrate in remembering contradictory histories is striking.

A stance such as Layla’s, however, requires not just a “multidirectional” use of memory, but also a certain amount of forgetting. In order to move past the horror of the traumatic events she has witnessed, in order to empathize with the other, Layla must employ “un oubli relatif.” An “oubli relatif” is a concept proposed by Esther Benbassa that I discuss in my first chapter. Though Benbassa is speaking specifically of the Jews when she proposes “un oubli relatif” as a means of avoiding a Judaism “défini par tout ce qui lui avait enlevé sa vitalité et non par le futur qu’elles étaient susceptibles de bâtir en prenant leurs distances avec le passé,” this model of forgetting is applicable to other groups as well (“Traître” 31). In fact, while a pacifist such as Layla might need to be more deliberate in her remembering and forgetting, the two phenomena are inextricably related. All remembering also entails forgetting.⁵² In this way, Haddad’s novel is not merely allegorical, symbolic, and fantastical. In that all of our memories are selective, we all succumb to a certain amount of amnesia.

Realizations about the necessary selectiveness of memory, as well as theories of alternative models of memory such as Rothberg’s, lead us to wonder to what extent we can control the effects of memory and if we can encourage memory to act in certain ways in the interest of peaceful outcomes. When considering the Israel-Palestine conflict, intellectuals have arrived at a variety of conclusions concerning the role that memory

⁵² See for example Paul Ricoeur who writes, “Certain facts...lend credit to the paradoxical idea that forgetting can be so closely tied to memory that it can be considered one of the conditions for it” (Memory, history, forgetting 426).

should play. In order to demonstrate this wide range of attitudes, we can compare the opinions stated by Jewish attorney Patrick Klugman and Palestinian historian Farouk Mardam-Bey in the debate entitled “Juifs et Arabes: comment, après les accords de Genève, dialoguer aujourd’hui en France sur le conflit israélo-palestinien?”⁵³ While Klugman advocated for a covering over of the past in order to facilitate peace in the present, Mardam-Bey countered by underscoring the importance of Israeli and Palestinians’ mutual recognition of the wrongs done to the other in the past. Klugman states, “Ne partons pas de 1948, puisque 1948 nous ramène à la Shoah, et que la Shoah nous ramène à ce qui l’a précédée. Genève veut dire qu’il faut faire la paix tout de suite, qu’il faut partir du présent et non pas du passé, que cela demande des renoncements terribles aux uns et aux autres.”⁵⁴ Then, later in the debate, Klugman—who seems to be defending himself against assertions that he’s advocating a negation of history—adds, “Je ne demanderai pas à l’Autre d’abdiquer sa vision de l’Histoire. Je crois seulement qu’il ne faut pas partir de l’Histoire. La Shoah, la *Nakba* sont deux histoires inconciliables...Tâchons donc de partir du présent pour le déminer, avant de chercher à nous mettre d’accord sur un passé qui, de toute façon, ne nous rassemble pas” (Benbassa, Juifs et musulmans 101 and 111). Countering Klugman’s point of view, Mardam-Bey affirms the importance of coming to terms with history, stating:

Et pour que cette paix aboutisse à une véritable réconciliation, je pense [...] qu’il est absolument nécessaire que les Israéliens reconnaissent le tort qu’ils ont fait aux Palestiniens. Parallèlement, d’un même mouvement, il est nécessaire que les

⁵³ The debate took place on May 13, 2004 at the Arab World Institute in Paris and was moderated by Esther Benbassa and Djénane Kareh Tager. Excerpts were published in Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, eds. Juifs et Musulmans. Patrick Klugman is also the ex-president of the UEJF (Union des Étudiants juifs de France) and is very involved with antiracist work in France, notably with the group SOS Racisme. Farouk Mardam-Bey is a historian and the ex-director of the journal La Revue d’études palestiniennes.

⁵⁴ Klugman is referring here to the Geneva Accords of 2003, designed by independent Palestinian and Israel negotiators.

Palestiniens, et les Arabes en général, les musulmans en général prennent conscience de ce qu'a été la Shoah pour les juifs, qu'ils prennent réellement la mesure de ce que cela signifie aujourd'hui pour des Israéliens, qu'ils connaissent l'angoisse de l'Israélien et qu'ils agissent en conséquence. (Benbassa, Juifs et musulmans 109).

How does Haddad's *Palestine* figure into and elucidate debates about the role of the past in the presently stalled peace process? Haddad's novel strives to locate a middle ground between Klugman and Mardam-Bey's points of view. Neither repression of the past nor an unnatural focus on the past represents the way forward. Without denying contradictory histories, *Palestine* suggests, Israelis and Palestinians must encourage the recollection of memories that dismantle the artificial barriers between the two communities.

CHAPTER III

LOCATING THE PRODUCTIVE WITHIN THE UNTHINKABLE: EDMOND EL MALEH'S ZIONIST/ NAZI COMPARISONS

At first glance, the following passage from Edmond Amran El Maleh's *Mille ans, un jour* could slip easily into Hubert Haddad's *Palestine*. El Maleh's Moroccan Jewish protagonist Nessim finds himself in the marketplace of Jerusalem's Arab quarter, where his attention is drawn to an elderly Palestinian man: "Il est palestinien, arabe, l'homme de cette terre sans l'artifice d'un mythe. Il est le paria, Nessim le regarde, le reconnaît, l'approprie à son cœur [...], la distance abolie, l'hallucination crève, Nessim n'a pas besoin de faire un effort pour reconnaître les siens, sur ce marché ils sont venus se chercher [...]" (179). In addition to the identical names of their protagonists, El Maleh and Haddad's novels both highlight the common Arab ancestry that unites Palestinians and Israeli Jews of North African and Middle Eastern origin. The expressions "reconnaître les siens" and "ils sont venus se chercher" in this passage bring to mind similar language in Haddad's novel; we recall, for example, *Palestine*'s protagonist's quest for "un signe de reconnaissance" while wandering the Palestinian H1 territory in Hebron (95). But if Haddad's novel calls upon the historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds between Arab Jews and Palestinians in order to dismantle barriers between Israelis and Palestinians, the Franco-Moroccan and Jewish El Maleh underscores these connections so as to indict political Zionism for what the author portrays as Zionist victimization of both groups. Though Zionists do not escape blame in *Palestine* for their

mistreatment of Arab Jews and Palestinians, Haddad's emphasis is on deconstructing the Israeli-Palestinian binary. El Maleh's commentary on Jewish-Muslim relations is perhaps more complex. In the Moroccan context, El Maleh—like Haddad—works to unite Jews and Muslims, exposing numerous similarities and robust friendships among characters. Yet, in the context of Israel-Palestine, El Maleh links Moroccan Jews¹ and Palestinians by revealing their subalternate positions in order to wage an attack against a monolithic narrative of Zionism.

It is important to note that, even in *Mille ans*' clear vilification of Zionists, the novelist makes few direct references to the movement.² Even while condemning the actions of a character who recruits Moroccan Jews to immigrate to Israel, the author refers to him not as a Zionist, but rather as “l'Agent de l'Aliyah” (119). Though the target of El Maleh's condemnation is not always explicit, I reveal how *Mille ans* aims to debunk “the myth of Zionism”—whose goals the novel names as “de vous élever à son image, à sa totale soumission en détruisant toutes les valeurs de la Diaspora”—by unveiling the physical and psychological destruction the novel accuses political Zionism of engendering (180). I specify the sub-category of political Zionism here—which I define as the movement interested in securing and sustaining the Jewish homeland through political means—to differentiate between El Maleh's intended target and other strains of Zionism that have existed throughout history, such as religious Zionism,

¹ Whereas in my analysis of *Palestine*, “Arab Jew” is the most appropriate category to designate the population to which Haddad is referring, given the author's intentionally ambiguous character sketch. In *Mille ans*, however, most of El Maleh's Jewish characters are specifically designated as hailing from North African. In this chapter, therefore, I have found the categories of “North African Jews,” “Maghrebi Jews,” or “Mizrahim” to be most appropriate.

² One does find direct references to Zionism on pages 118, 175, 180, and 181.

spiritual Zionism, or labor Zionism.³ It is also important to observe that *Mille ans* refrains from a blanket condemnation of all Israelis. Israelis make relatively few appearances in the novel, and those that are portrayed are often identified more in the context of their North African background than by their Israeli citizenship. I qualify as “Zionist,” rather than “Israeli,” all other characters with whom Nessim comes into contact in the nightmarish section of the novel in which he travels to Israel.

The monolithic Zionist narrative with which *Mille ans* takes issue—one that takes for granted the Jews’ right to the territory of Israel/ Palestine, delegitimizes diasporic expressions of Judaism, and obscures the historical Palestinian presence on the land—is not the only discourse challenged in El Maleh’s oeuvre. El Maleh’s novels also attempt to recover the pluralistic history of Moroccan Jewry that has been obscured both by French colonial and post-independence narratives of Morocco. The author deconstructs these three teleological narratives by presenting an alternative, non-linear view of history, made up of the memories of a host of diverse voices that emanate from different locations and eras. In layering these memories, the author communicates the multiplicity of the Moroccan Jewish experience. In *Mille ans*, *un jour*, and to a lesser degree in *Le retour d’Abou El Haki*,⁴ El Maleh’s rendering of Moroccan Jewish history—which highlights Muslim-Jewish exchange—serves not just to recover lost memories of the past, but also to condemn the lack of interreligious understanding in Israel-Palestine at the time the novel was written (and which, tragically, continues today). Through juxtaposition of the

³ For a comprehensive description of the movement, see Abraham J. Edelheit and Hershel Edelheit, *History of Zionism: A Handbook and Dictionary* (Boulder: West View Press, 2000). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴ Edmond Amran El Maleh, *Le retour d’Abou el Haki* (Grenoble: La Pensée sauvage, 1990). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

Moroccan and Israeli-Palestinian contexts, these texts alternately laud Muslim-Jewish coexistence in pre-1948 Morocco and lament the violence perpetrated by Israelis against Palestinians, as well as the symbolic violence suffered by North African Jews, first during their mass exodus from their homeland and then as a result of the prejudice they faced in Israel.

Both *Mille ans* and *Le retour* introduce a third set of traumatic memories—those of the *Shoah*—as a reference point for the traumatic experiences of Moroccan Jews and Palestinians. Given the texts’ vilification of Zionists as the perpetrators of the violence against Moroccan Jews and Palestinians, the haunting memories of the *Shoah* serve to create startling comparisons between Zionists and Nazis. El Maleh is certainly not the first to accuse Zionists of displaying Nazi-like behavior; in the context of Israel-Palestine, this damaging label has been flung back and forth by both sides. But such an allegation—one that many, especially Jews, would consider unthinkable—is more jarring when levied by a Jew. Also shocking are the historical inaccuracies of these associations that overlook the critical differences between, for example, the departure of Moroccan Jews from their homeland and the deportation of European Jews to concentration camps, or the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Chatila⁵ and the European Jewish genocide. Likening the suffering of both Moroccan Jews and Palestinians to that of *Shoah* victims reveals a blurring of the vastly different outcomes of these events. Moreover, overwriting the suffering of the latter group and highlighting that of the former

⁵ Following the 1982 assassination of Lebanese president Bashir Gemayel—leading member of Phalange, a right-wing political party mostly supported by Maronite Christians—Israeli forces facilitated the entry of about 200 Phalangist forces (Christians) into the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps. Though the goal was to target Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) members, Smith reports that approximately 800 people were killed; most, if not all, of them were uninvolved in PLO activities (Smith, *Palestine* 382-83). Bregman puts the number of Palestinians massacred between 600 and 700 and Berry and Philo note that the Lebanese authorities cite figures as high as 2,000 (Bregman, *Israel's Wars* 115 and Berry and Philo, *Israel and Palestine* 78).

contributes to a competitive atmosphere in which groups must contend for public recognition of suffering.⁶ Further, this competitive dynamic serves to fortify the divisions between Ashkenazi and Maghrebi Jews,⁷ as well as those between Ashkenazi Jews and Arabs.

In her insightful study of *Mille ans*, Ronnie Scharfman treats the triadic relationship of the three central traumas: the Moroccan Jewish exodus, the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Chatila, and the genocide of European Jewry during the *Shoah*.⁸ Scharfman refers to the Moroccan and Palestinian traumas as “ethnocides,” and though she is careful to note that the first “is only metaphorically an ethnocide” (139-40), her lack of a clear definition of the word “ethnocide” muddies her argument. The Oxford English dictionary defines ethnocide as the “deliberate and systematic destruction of the culture of an ethnic group, especially within a larger community”; ethnocide is thus not linked to the actual extermination of human life.⁹ Scharfman’s use of the word “ethnocide” indicates an acceptance on her part of El Maleh’s historical account of the Moroccan Jewish exodus, one that implies a calculated Zionist effort to destroy Moroccan Jewish culture, overlooking other interpretations of history. For example, El Maleh does not consider the opinion that Zionists were providing a desired escape route for Moroccan Jews who legitimately felt their lives to be in danger. (I explore the

⁶ My argument here is informed by Chaumont, *La concurrence* and Erner, *Victimes*.

⁷ Ashkenazi Jews are descendants of Jews from Western and Central Europe. Many Maghrebi Jews can be classified as Sephardic—Jews from the Iberian Peninsula who were expelled in 1492, and who settled, for the most part, in North Africa and the Middle East. Others are descendants of indigenous communities or converts. The disproportionate amount of power held by Ashkenazi Jews in Israel is due to their foundation role in political Zionism and the fact that their arrival pre-dated that of Arab Jews (Debrauwere-Miller, “France” 19-20).

⁸ Ronnie Scharfman, “The Other’s Other: The Moroccan Jewish Trajectory of Edmond Amran El Maleh,” *Yale French Studies* 82 (1993): 133-145. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁹ “Ethnocide.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online.

historical implications of El Maleh’s commentary on Zionist activity in Morocco in more depth later in this chapter.) Scharfman is correct in noting how, through simile and metaphor, El Maleh powerfully depicts the Moroccan Jewish exodus as an experience that *resembles* a death. The critic disregards, however, the slippage between ethnocide, massacre, and genocide that occurs in *Mille ans*, and thus does not attend to the dangers of linking the historically disparate traumas of the Moroccan Jews, the Palestinians, and the European Jews. In this chapter I build on Scharfman’s observations of *Mille ans* through careful attention to the historical differences between the events compared by El Maleh in the novel and the implications of flattening these distinctions. In the interest of clearly defining my terms, I will also provide the following definitions of key words in this chapter. I defer again to the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines “genocide” as “the deliberate and systemic extermination of an ethnic or national group”¹⁰ and “massacre” as “the indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people [...]”¹¹

In her study of El Maleh in *The Star, the Cross, and the Crescent*—published after I had completed a draft of this chapter—Carine Bourget makes note of the Zionist/Nazi comparisons. Bourget notes the comparisons that El Maleh’s Israeli soldiers characters fighting in the Lebanon War make between their own destructive actions and those of Nazis. The critic also draws a parallel between the criticism of Zionism apparent in *Mille ans* and El Maleh’s corresponding views that he expresses in an article written in response to the Lebanon War, “Le Visage d’une negation”—a text that I also treat in this chapter. Bourget, however, does not offer an in-depth analysis of these shocking, yet productive, associations.

¹⁰ “Genocide.” [The Oxford English Dictionary](#). 2nd ed. 1989. Online.

¹¹ “Massacre.” Def. 1 a. [The Oxford English Dictionary](#). 2nd ed. 1989. Online.

Despite the moral questionability of the Zionist/ Nazi comparison, these connections do serve a productive purpose. *Mille ans* and *Le retour* align Moroccan Jews and Palestinians as common victims of Zionists, destabilizing a Zionist narrative that arranges Muslims and Jews in immutable opposition, both in North Africa and in the Middle East. Moreover, by removing the *Shoah*¹² memory from its historical context, the novels contest a teleological Zionist narrative, demonstrating not only that racially inspired violence still occurs in the wake of the *Shoah*, but also that Jews can be the perpetrators of this violence.

The majority of memories recounted by El Maleh's characters emanate from Morocco. It is not surprising, then, that most criticism dealing with memory in El Maleh's works has focused on the Moroccan context, identifying how, through form and content, the author subverts official versions of history, both French colonial and post-independence Moroccan.¹³ In *Mille ans*, however, Israel's war with Lebanon, and specifically the 1982 massacres of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Chatila (carried out by Christian Phalangist troops but facilitated by Israeli forces)—serve as anchors of the text, points of reference to which the author continually returns. In fact, much of the plot is driven by the protagonist Nessim's quest to find Hamad—a Palestinian boy, burned and maimed during the war—whose photograph Nessim sees in a newspaper. Rather than concentrating on his destabilization of the Moroccan narrative, I shift the focus to El

¹² I use the term "Shoah" in order to stress the Jewish specificity of Nazi genocide. I am aware, however, that El Maleh is vehemently opposed to the use of this term, which he interprets as an attempt to elevate the Jewish suffering at the hands of Nazis above other examples of genocide. He states in an interview with Redonnet that "Shoah" is a "terme qui m'horripile et contre lequel je m'élève, la Shoa, la Shoa, et l'holocauste à un moindre degré." Marie Redonnet and Edmond Amran El Maleh, *Entretiens avec Edmond Amran El Maleh* (Grenoble: La Pensée sauvage, 2005), 88.

¹³ See Pietrobelli; Ronnie Scharfman, "Recipes for Resistance: The Textualization of Minority Identity in Edmond El Maleh's *Mille ans, un jour*," *Paragraph: The Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 18 (1995): 90-98; Mary B. Vogl, "It Was and It Was Not So: Edmond Amran El Maleh Remembers Morocco," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 6.2 (2003): 71-85.

Maleh's reckoning with another official history—that of Zionists—and investigate the comparisons established between Zionists and Nazis, which, despite their troubling nature, have been largely under-examined by critics.¹⁴

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I trace the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons as they are developed chronologically in *Mille ans* (with occasional references to *Le retour*) and analyze the inherent historical inaccuracies. In the next section, I investigate the productive alignment of Moroccan Jews and Palestinians that occurs in *Mille ans* as a result of these associations. Finally, I examine *Mille ans*' deconstruction of the Zionist narrative of Tel Aviv and the redemption the city claims to embody vis-à-vis the Jewish diaspora, the Palestinians, and the *Shoah*. This chapter demonstrates that El Maleh's Zionist/ Nazi comparisons are both destructive and constructive. While we should remain critical of the competition created between certain groups of victims, there is something to be learned from the cohesion created between Moroccan Jews and Palestinians in *Mille ans*. Likewise, while we can condemn the historical distortion El Maleh's texts engage in, they encourage a productive questioning of official histories.

Comparing departure to deportation, exodus to extermination

The first implicit comparison between Zionists and Nazis occurs in *Mille ans* during a description of the departure of the Jewish community from the Moroccan town of Asfi. Through the voice of Madame Jeanne, a French expatriate, El Maleh establishes

¹⁴ The two exceptions of which I am aware are Bourget's [The Star](#) and Ronnie Scharfman, "The Other's Other."

an indirect association between the mass exodus of Moroccan Jews and the deportation of European Jews to Nazi concentration camps:

je pense à ces pauvres Juifs, [...] du jour au lendemain ils ont disparu les pauvres, [...] les cars sont venus le matin, [...] on les a embarqués ces femmes avec leur foulard sur la tête, enveloppées d'un châle, pleurant, ces vieux en djellaba qu'on aidait à monter dans les cars, pas de bagages, [...] puis toute la population qui regardait ça sans comprendre, [...] comme ça du jour au lendemain comme si jamais ils n'avaient existé... (128)

Madame Jeanne's description shares several important features with the images of Nazi deportation of European Jews familiar to readers: large-scale roundups of entire Jewish communities, use of mass transportation to deport the Jews, the non-Jewish passive onlookers, and the near-complete obliteration of Jewish life "comme si jamais ils n'avaient existé." Just as in many formerly Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, only "traces"—a word repeated throughout *Mille ans*—of a Jewish existence remain in Asfi after this mass exodus.

While the inclusion of accessories such as the *foulard* and the *djellaba* lends a North African specificity to this scene, the link created in the novel between the departure of Moroccan Jews and the deportation of European Jews is undeniable. Scharfman cautions against reading El Maleh's links between the mass *exodus* of Moroccan Jewry to the mass *extermination* of European Jewry as a desire to "equate" the two events (Scharfman, "The Other's Other" 144-45); after all, El Maleh is a Jew who was alive during the *Shoah*. Is it not possible, however, to view a diminishment of the suffering of European Jews in the figurative link El Maleh creates between the Moroccan Jewish exodus and the European Jewish genocide? The superimposition of the suffering of Moroccan Jewry onto that of European Jewry obfuscates the immense differences between the outcomes of the two events—the annihilation of six million as opposed to

the exile of 240,000 Moroccan Jews (Scharfman, “The Other’s Other” 136). Figuring the Moroccan Jewish exodus as an ethnocide serves to align Moroccan Jews’ suffering with that of Palestinians in the Lebanon War, and these alliances are bolstered throughout the novel both by depicting the two groups as common victims and by revealing past instances of Muslim-Jewish coexistence. But whereas the alignment of these two “ethnocides” creates an association between Moroccan Jews and Palestinians, the superimposition of exodus onto ethnocide creates a competition between North African and European Jews. This competition for the recognition of suffering—which follows the competitive model of memory outlined by Chaumont and Erner, discussed in chapter one—contributes to the antagonistic relationship created between the two groups of Jews highlighted throughout *Mille ans* and which I discuss below.

Drawing a parallel between the Moroccan Jewish exodus and the European Jewish genocide—both of which *Mille ans* treats as examples of victimization of Jews—the text also links the perceived perpetrators of what it portrays as similar instances of persecution. Whereas the indefinite subject pronoun *on* employed in the above passage might seem to remove culpability from any one actor for causing the Jewish mass exodus, other passages of *Mille ans* place blame squarely on the Zionist emissaries who, in the novel, propagate fear amongst the Jewish population and organize their departure from Morocco. One such emissary, M. Emile, “l’agent de l’Aliya,” provokes Nessim’s rancor. The protagonist refers to M. Emile as one of “ces taupes au travail souterrain, qui pratiquaient la tactique de la terre brûlée, lançaient les brûlots de la panique” (119). The dynamic and violent role Nessim assigns to M. Emile—we note the use of the active

verbs “pratiquaient” and “lançaient”—stands in stark contrast to the passive voice cited above that is used to portray the Moroccan Jews.

In the description of the Moroccan Jewish departure found in *Le retour* (El Maleh’s 1990 novel), the indefinite pronoun *on* is again employed, but the link created between the treatment of Moroccan and European Jews is no less obvious. As the narrator Aïssa recalls, “ces pauvres gens arrachés à eux-mêmes, contraints de tout abandonner, embarqués dans des camions, acheminés nuitamment et dans la clandestinité, au péril de leur vie, vers des points, des ports d’embarquements” (*Le retour* 222). The repeated passive voice here—“arrachés,” “contraints,” “embarqués,” “acheminés”—depicts the Jews as powerless over their destiny, while the adverbial phrases “nuitamment,” and “dans la clandestinité,” hint at a devious motive on the part of those organizing the departure. These aspects, combined with the suggestion of the Jews’ potential loss of life—“au péril de leur vie”—all serve to bring to mind the Nazi roundups of Jews that occurred in European cities and towns throughout the *Shoah*. While, on the one hand, this historical paralleling communicates the profound pain experienced by Moroccan Jews as they left their homeland, on the other, it indicates a blurring of the crucial differences between the outcomes of these events.

Though the accusations regarding the Zionists’ role in the Jewish exodus are clear and pointed in both *Mille ans* and *Le retour*, the novels’ depictions of Zionists are vague and exaggerated. In *Mille ans*, for example, Nessim likens the work of the Zionist emissaries of Morocco to slave dealers, calling them “négrriers recruteurs” (119).¹⁵ These

¹⁵ While I point to Nessim’s comparison of Zionist emissaries to slave dealers as an example of the *Mille ans*’ hyperbolic description of Zionism, it is important to note that some Moroccan Jews do hold such opinions. For example, one of the Moroccan Jewish immigrants to Israel interviewed in the documentary *Routes of Exile* (which also features an interview with Edmond El Maleh) accuses Israeli prime minister

characters exist only as sketches, and their actions are always related through the eyes of Moroccan characters; in addition to Nessim's account of M. Emile, we read the description of another Zionist emissary, M. Victor, from the point of view of Yeshuaa—a Moroccan Jew from Amizmiz (153-54). In the nightmarish section of *Mille ans* that brings Nessim to Israel, the protagonist comes into contact with a host of ghostly Zionist characters that underscore the most negative aspects of political Zionism: its racially motivated prejudice against North African Jews and Palestinians, its militarism, its torture of prisoners (166-71). These one-sided depictions of Zionism that overemphasize its harmful features exist in contrast to El Maleh's polyphonic account of Moroccan Jewry. While the author weaves together the stories of many different—and sometimes contradictory—characters in order to craft a pluralistic depiction of Moroccan Jewry, his portrayal of Zionism is surprisingly narrow.

In the Moroccan context, *Mille ans* depicts the Jews as victims of political Zionism's campaign of propaganda organized to incite them to make *aliya*; once they arrive in Israel, they are shamed and ostracized by their Ashkenazi coreligionists, due to a restricted definition of Judaism that considers diasporic expressions of Judaism to be inauthentic. In a passage I will explore in depth shortly, M. Victor—one of the Zionist emissaries in Morocco—condemns Moroccan Jews as idolatrous (154). Beyond the moral questionability of linking the physical deaths of *Shoah* victims and the symbolic deaths of Moroccan Jews, as well as painting the Zionists as figurative executioners of these Jews, historical inaccuracies further destabilize these connections. It is true that some historians fault the Zionists for what these scholars consider to be the Zionist use of

David Ben-Gurion of planning to bring “slaves from North Africa” to live on Israel's borders and protect Israelis in the interior. (Displaying his ignorance of the history of Zionism, the man accuses Theodor Herzl—one of the founders of Zionism, who died in 1904—of the same crime.)

propaganda and exaggeration of antisemitic sentiment in Morocco.¹⁶ But the Moroccan Jewish exodus was not experienced as a forced departure for all. While the popularity of the Zionist movement in Morocco undoubtedly influenced Jews' decisions to immigrate to Israel, the combined effects of a variety of historical circumstances—including the Moroccan economic crisis of 1947-1949, the spread of Arab nationalism amongst Moroccan Muslims, increased antisemitic violence (such as the pogroms of Oudja and Djéradad in June, 1948), and the country's independence from France in 1956—were all probable factors as well (Laskier, *North African Jewry* 85-113). Even the nighttime departures of Moroccan Jews, evoked by El Maleh in *Le retour*, have historical explanations that disprove claims about the nefarious motives of Zionists. According to historian Michael Laskier, the Zionist organizations were forced to manage emigration efforts “illegally” and “discreetly” in order to avoid opposition of the French, who still controlled Morocco at this time (87, 132). Thus, it may be more accurate to view the Jews' departures as voluntary actions taken to ensure their own security, rather than a deportation carried out “au péril de leur vie.”

Through the character Yeshuaa's account of the Moroccan Jewish exodus, *Mille ans* does treat briefly the antisemitic violence that occurred during the Vichy period and thus acknowledges this violence as a motivation for Jews to consider *aliya* (150). The novel rightly characterizes the French as the perpetrators of this violence, thus establishing the French as a party bearing secondary responsibility for the exodus. As Laskier points out, while “French and other anti-Semitic elements seized upon the Palestine problem and the Arab Revolt of 1936-39 to portray international Jewry,

¹⁶ Moroccan historian Simon Levy, for example, attributes the Jewish exodus primarily to Zionist propaganda; he also accuses Zionists of using “the specter of antisemitism” to scare the Jews into leaving. Qtd. in Rosow.

including the Jews of North Africa, in a negative way to the Muslims,” it is essential to note that “the European anti-Jewish propaganda did not gain support among the Muslim masses” (56-57, 71). Laskier does acknowledge, however, that this antisemitic propaganda “did influence segments of the embryonic North African nationalist movements” (57), and it is this latter point that *Mille ans* obscures.

Instead, *Mille ans* emphasizes the benevolence toward Jews of Mohammed V, Morocco’s Muslim leader.¹⁷ News of Mohammed V’s official protection of Moroccan Jewry attenuates Yeshuaa’s fears of the spread of French anti-Semitism—“La nouvelle vint de Marrakech, le vent chassait les nuages noirs qui obscurcissaient le ciel: Sidna, Mohammed V, venait de s’opposer aux mesures préparées contre les Juifs et les prenait directement sous sa protection”—though, in the novel, even Mohammed V’s metaphorical power to clear the skies of clouds is insufficient to convince the Jews of Amizmiz to stay (150). In *Mille ans*’ repeated celebration of Mohammed V as an advocate for the Jews, this historical figure comes to represent the sentiments of all Moroccan Muslims toward Jews and overgeneralizes these amicable feelings. By depicting the Zionist propaganda measures and the French antisemitic acts as the primary factors behind Moroccan Jews’ desire to emigrate, *Mille ans* downplays Muslim involvement in antisemitic violence in the post-Vichy period and the connection between this violence and the rise of Arab nationalism in North Africa. In addition to obscuring the hostile environment for non-Muslims that developed in North Africa in conjunction with Arab nationalism, the novel’s nostalgic rendering of history also glosses over the inferior status of Jews, as *dhimmis*, throughout their existence in Morocco.

¹⁷ Mohammed V was Morocco’s sultan from 1927 to 1953 and then ruled as Morocco’s first king, after independence, from 1957-1961.

Albert Memmi, the renowned Franco-Tunisian Jewish author, provides an alternative account of Jewish life in the Maghreb. Memmi emphasizes the prejudice faced by Jews in Arab lands and, what he portrays as, their constant state of fear. Whereas El Maleh figures Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Morocco as predating European colonial influence, Memmi notes that North African Jews perceived their safety to be at risk before the colonial period (*Juifs et arabes* 13, 50). (See chapter two for more analysis of Albert Memmi's depiction of the oppression of Jews in Muslim lands.)

In her recent monograph, Carine Bourget draws an interesting parallel between Memmi and El Maleh's political positions vis-à-vis the conflict and their popularity as writers, pointing out "Memmi's renown and El Maleh's obscurity" (*The Star* 44). While Bourget is right to pose the question of how the authors' views on the conflict have effected their literary reception, we must not lose sight of other factors that play into this equation. To name just a few aspects that contribute to Memmi's relative fame, the Franco-Tunisian Memmi has been publishing since the 1950s, has penned novels as well as theoretical texts, and has been significantly more prolific than El Maleh. El Maleh, by contrast, published his first novel in 1980 and has written primarily fiction. Moreover, the challenging qualities of El Maleh's novels—which, as already mentioned feature meandering plot lines, multiple narrators, and a blurring of temporal and spatial distinctions—may account for his smaller readership.

Whereas the historically limited rights given to non-Muslims in North Africa escapes El Maleh's criticism, the restricted definition of Judaism at the heart of Zionism and Israel's ethnocentrism come under fierce attack in *Mille ans*. The novel not only underscores the shock of the Amizmiz Jewish community when M. Victor proclaims,

“ici vous n’êtes pas des Juifs, vous êtes des idolâtres, là-bas seulement vous retrouverez la pureté de la foi de nos aïeux,” but also deconstructs Zionism’s claims to purity and fidelity to God’s words (154). In its uneven treatment of Morocco and Israel, *Mille ans* seems to deny the fact that Israel has provided a homeland for Jews for the last six decades, while the majority of Moroccan Jews have deemed Morocco uninhabitable. In 2000, only six thousand Jews were living in Morocco.¹⁸

While the links between the Moroccan Jewish exodus and the European Jewish extermination are subtle in *Mille ans*, the connections between Nazis and the Israeli army’s actions during the Lebanon War, specifically at Sabra and Chatila, are quite explicit. *Mille ans* does not feature any direct witnesses of the massacres, but Nessim reads a first-hand account of their aftermath in letters from Ari, a former Asfi neighbor and current Israeli soldier who had made *aliya* years ago. These letters reveal the trauma experienced by Ari and his fellow soldiers when they learn of the atrocities committed against the Palestinians. As Ari describes:

des copains se sont mis à débloquer, délirer, nous tremblions de fièvre, les médecins disent que ça va passer il faut des soins, le repos, un de mes meilleurs amis est devenu fou [...], il hurlait dans la nuit : il voyait du sang partout, des hommes masqués de cagoules noires égorger des enfants, entrer en transe, ivres d’orgie au milieu des cris des suppliciés, alors on l’a ligoté et jeté dans un hélicoptère pour l’emmener dans un hôpital, c’est lui qui quelques jours auparavant disait regarde-nous, nous sommes les nazis aux cheveux crépus, à l’œil noir [...]. (120-21)

The shocking likening of the curly-haired and black-eyed Israeli soldiers to Nazis is only enhanced by another detail that Ari adds in his letter: the soldier who made this comment is the son of two *Shoah* victims. The presentation of a second-generation *Shoah* survivor who compares his own actions to those of his parents’ executioners—“nous sommes les

¹⁸ Michael Menachem Laskier and Eliezer Bashan, "Morocco," *The Jews of the Middle East*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon, et al. 503.

Nazis [...]”—is indicative of *Mille ans*’s indictment of political Zionism, an institution that it portrays as perpetuating the Nazi crimes against which it purports to be ever-vigilant. The novel suggests that in its attempts to guard against the possibility of another Jewish genocide, political Zionism has given itself license to perpetrate racially motivated violence against Palestinians.

While *Mille ans* uses broad strokes to underscore the irony of Zionism’s similarities to Nazism, *Le retour* makes specific connections between the tactics used by the Israeli army in Lebanon against the Palestinians and those used by the Nazis against the Jews. In the following passage, a refrain celebrating the end of World War II (“la guerre est finie!”) is interjected between descriptions of the Israeli destruction of Beirut. What at first appears to be a juxtaposition of the two wars—one declared “finished,” the other ongoing—is, in fact, a comparison:

la guerre est finie, ici, l’autre moitié, [...] l’autre monde : ces ruines, ces immeubles éventrés, parfaite technologie de la destruction, la pointe de l’actualité, amas de cadavres, de chair et de sang, [...] la guerre est finie, quelle est cette rétrospective absurde insensée, ces gens chassés de leur terre, ces camps d’une autre mort, ces villages rasés, des maisons dynamitées, ces prisonniers à genoux, les yeux bandés, la torture, la déportation, Beyrouth, Gaza, les territoires occupés, l’Intifada, [...] ce gamin d’enfance émouvante, regardez bien la photo, ne peut rentrer chez lui, un para lui interdit brutalement l’entrée de sa maison, [...] comptez, multipliez par cent, par mille, l’enfant a pris une pierre, il l’a lancée contre l’occupant, figure de l’innocence, qui donc a tenté de l’empêcher de vivre, qui a répété le massacre ? (*Le retour*, 85-86)

In its focus on features common to both wars—the use of technological advances to destroy human life, as well as torture, and deportation—this passage intimates that the Second World War is, in fact, not truly “finished.” Several of the words employed point to a tragic repetition of history: “rétrospective,” “répété,” “ces camps d’une *autre* mort” (emphasis mine). The author’s use of the word “death” here is again metaphorical. The

original death camps to which he refers are those built by the Nazis and used to exterminate their victims. The “camps of an *other* death” indicate the refugee camps that sheltered the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who lost their homes when they either fled or were expelled as a result of Israeli expansion into Palestinian territory from 1948 on.

In focusing on the Lebanon War’s repetition of history, El Maleh counters claims about the uniqueness of the *Shoah*, and asserts that the horrors of the Nazi genocide can be repeated in a different context. Though uniqueness debates have waxed and waned since the event itself, the publication dates of both *Mille ans* and *Le retour* fall in between two periods in which uniqueness claims were widely articulated—the late 1970s through the early 1980s and the 1990s.¹⁹ The definition of uniqueness varies between scholars, but its defenders generally hold that the *Shoah* represents a unique moment in history that resembled no previous case of genocide, *and*, they maintain, one that will never be re-enacted. (See my first chapter for analysis of the history of these debates—including the formative role played by the Eichmann trial of 1961—as well as discussion of how these debates continue today.) By pointing to the Lebanon War as a repetition of Nazi atrocities, El Maleh is penning against this current. More significantly, *Mille ans* condemns Zionism for carrying out atrocities against the Palestinians while maintaining

¹⁹ Rosenfeld cites Emil Fackenheim, Alice and Roy Eckart, Yehuda Bauer, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Saul Friedländer as the leading thinkers that argued in favor of uniqueness claims in the late 1970s and early 1980s and highlights Deborah Lipstadt, Daniel Goldhagen, Steven Katz as key actors in the reassertion of uniqueness claims during the 1990s. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship,” *Holocaust and Gender Studies* 13.1 (1999): 35-37. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) To name just one example, Saul Friedländer, writing in support of the uniqueness of the Shoah, maintains, “If the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis could be convincingly compared to other phenomena belonging to the framework of National Socialism itself, or to a category of contemporary political behavior encompassing Nazism, or to some type of murderous outburst known in other periods of history, then our quest for understanding the Holocaust would be greatly facilitated. But in my view, this is not the case.” Saul Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1977).

the ultimate victim status of Jews in the wake of the *Shoah*. Ari's letters reveal the disillusion he experiences with regards to this inherent contradiction in the worldview of political Zionism. Referring to his adopted country of Israel, Ari writes:

nous sommes un Etat, une nation, nous sortons [...] des cendres de l'ombre honteuse, [...] nous avons effacé l'infamie des ghettos, de l'enfer, de l'holocauste nous voici au ciel de la résurrection, nous faisons fleurir le désert, nous apportons au monde la fleur de la justice de la parole divine, de la pureté du cœur, Paix en Galilée ! [...] et puis c'est le choc, l'entrée à Beyrouth, les convulsions, le dessillement au bord de l'agonie mais qui peut, qui ose voir clair dans cette nuit de la cécité. (*Mille ans* 119-20)

It is Ari's involvement in the Lebanon War in particular—referred to here by its ironically pacifist campaign name “Operation Peace for Galilee”²⁰—that awakens his conscience to the idea that, through their military operations in Lebanon, the Israelis are persecuting Palestinians in a way that resembles the persecution European Jews suffered throughout the history of anti-Semitism. This realization forces Ari to question what he names as the founding principles of Zionism: “justice,” “purity,” and “peace.”

While El Maleh engages in the uniqueness debates of the 1980s and 1990s through his emphasis on the repetition of Nazi-like violence, his descriptions of both the Moroccan Jewish exodus and the Lebanon War as unthinkable, inexpressible, and innumerable hark back to earlier expressions of the uniqueness of the *Shoah*. In the decades immediately following World War II, the Jewish genocide was often regarded as inexplicable and inexpressible and silence was frequently deemed the most appropriate response by survivors and scholars alike.²¹ Similarly, El Maleh underscores the inherent impossibilities in describing the devastation that occurred in Beirut and the pain suffered

²⁰ See Kirsten E. Schulze, *Israel's Covert Diplomacy in Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). The Galilee region is located just south of Israel's border with Lebanon.

²¹ On scholars' silence, see Rosenfeld 30. On survivors' silence, see Nadine Fresco, "La Diaspora des cendres," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 24 (1981): 205-220.

by Moroccan Jews during the exodus. In *Le retour*, the narrator highlights Agar's need to express through silence the violence she witnessed during the Lebanon War: "elle parlait des Palestiniens, elle venait de Beyrouth, elle savait se taire, venir au plus près de ce qui ne pouvait plus se dire en mots ordinaires, déjà marqués, oblitérés, usés, aliénés, porteurs d'enflure, de trahison et de refus de voir, au-delà de ce qu'il était possible de maîtriser, de penser" (*Le retour* 211). Language, because of its banal functions, is incapable of describing the horror that exists outside of the realm of human imagination. The Moroccan Jewish exodus similarly defies the capacities of language: "Aïssa se tut, paraissant épuisé [...] cette tragédie dans son immensité vouait au néant les chances de toute parole" (*Le retour* 222). In highlighting the silences of his characters Agar and Aïssa as they attempt to narrate their experiences of the Lebanon War and of the Moroccan Jewish exodus—Agar "savait se taire," Aïssa "se tut"—El Maleh simultaneously marks the horror of these events and the ways in which the horror defies language. In so doing, the author counters claims that the *Shoah* is uniquely inexpressible.

On the one hand, the paralleling of the Palestinian refugee camps and Nazi death camps constitutes a powerful denunciation of the Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians that has occurred over time. On the other, *Mille ans'* analogy between the persecution of Jews during the *Shoah* and that of Palestinians during the Lebanon War is, again, replete with historical imprecision. The novel disregards the role Palestinians played in the conflict, depicting them as passive victims rather than as actors partially responsible for the ongoing cycle of violence. For example, *Mille ans* makes no mention of the PLO-designed terrorist attacks launched from southern Lebanon that incited the Israeli

incursion into Lebanon.²² (It is important to note here that, until the late 1980s, the PLO was widely regarded by Israel and the West as a terrorist organization. One significant sign of a shift in its reputation was the U.S. agreement to open talks with the PLO in 1988.)²³

El Maleh's focus on the massacres at Sabra and Chatila as emblematic events of the Lebanon War both bolsters and undermines his criticism of Israel. That the 800 to 2,000 Palestinians killed in these refugee camps were civilians, not members of the PLO, obviously paints Israel in a negative light. On the other hand, in falsely depicting the Israelis as executioners and mentioning the Phalangists only once (120), *Mille ans* downplays the fact that it was the latter group (who, again, are Christians), not Israeli troops that carried out the massacres.²⁴ If El Maleh's primary goal had been historical accuracy, he might have pointed, for example, to Israel's bombardment of West Beirut in June of 1982 as an instance of Israeli aggression against Palestinians (and, catastrophically, many innocent bystanders).²⁵

Within the confines of his novels, El Maleh creates some distance between himself and the shocking content of the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons by crafting specific contexts in which his characters generate these associations. It might be argued, for example, that as a French woman, Madame Jeanne—who seems to confuse the departure of Moroccan Jewry with the deportation of European Jews—can only interpret this

²² PLO violence notwithstanding, some historians hold that Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon was a long time coming, and that the foremost goal was to clear the area of non-Maronite Lebanese civilians so as to facilitate Israeli military action there (Smith 359).

²³ Smith 406.

²⁴ In emphasizing the role of the Phalangists, I do not intend to minimize Israeli culpability or suggest that Israelis did not have the power to stop the massacre from occurring. Though the Israeli military initially claimed innocence, an Israeli commission of inquiry later found that the country's leaders should have been aware of the probable deadly outcome of facilitating Phalangist entry into the camps (Smith 382-83).

²⁵ Smith notes that Israel conducted "air strikes and indiscriminate bombardment of West Beirut and adjacent areas, with heavy loss of civilian life, not always Palestinian" (381).

Moroccan event through the lens of her European background. Though she considers herself to be more Moroccan than French, and though she clearly empathizes with Moroccan Jewry, her atavistic antisemitism—“Madame Jeanne tempérait son antisémitisme naturel par des élans de sympathie tendres et sincères”—problematizes the slippage between departure and deportation apparent in her discourse (*Mille ans* 128).

The context of the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons related by Ari is also significant. Ari and his fellow soldiers have suffered multiple traumas: first, departure from their Moroccan homeland; next, subjection to prejudice by Israeli Jews of Ashkenazi origins; and finally, involvement in a terribly destructive war. The physical and emotional symptoms of their post-traumatic suffering due to the Lebanon War are described by Ari in the letter quoted above: “des copains se sont mis à débloquer, délirer, nous tremblions de fièvre [...]” (*Mille ans* 120). These soldiers’ disillusion with Zionism, which they see as the culprit in all three traumas, is understandable. It also seems comprehensible that soldiers would express their guilt for their involvement in an inhumane war by comparing their own actions to those of Nazis.

In fact, Israeli director Ari Folman explores a similar theme in his 2008 autobiographical animated film *Waltz with Bashir*, which recounts the struggles of the director—a former soldier—to understand the cause of his lack of memories of his time fighting in the Lebanon War.²⁶ One scene in the movie features Folman’s conversation with a psychoanalyst who suggests a connection between the director’s repressed memories of his indirect involvement in the Sabra and Chatila massacre and his parents’ deaths at Auschwitz: “Your interest in the massacre developed long before it happened.

²⁶ *Waltz With Bashir*, dir. Ari Folman, Sony Pictures Classics, Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Les Films d'Ici, Razor Film Production GmbH, 2008.

Your interest in the massacre stems from another massacre. Your interest in those camps is actually about the ‘other’ camps.” The psychoanalyst’s paralleling of the Palestinian massacre and the Jewish genocide, even his formulation “‘other’ camps” to refer to the Palestinian refugee camps, is remarkably similar to associations established in El Maleh’s novels. For *Waltz*’s viewers, Folman’s reaction to this diagnosis is difficult to decipher; nonetheless, this scene demonstrates that while El Maleh’s Zionist/ Nazi comparisons may strike us as unfounded, some Israelis make the same parallels, whether consciously or unconsciously.²⁷ As Hillel Halkin writes in his review of the movie, “it is perfectly natural for Israelis to think of the Holocaust in certain situations, because they, unlike other peoples, still live in the Holocaust’s shadow.”²⁸ Portraying the Zionist/ Nazi comparison as emanating from the “perfectly natural” context of his characters dissociates, to some degree, El Maleh from this shocking content.

If in his fictional works, El Maleh expresses his criticism of Zionists through the opinions of his characters, in several of his periodical articles, the author asserts his own opinion that Zionists have repeated the crimes of the Nazis. For example, in “Le Visage d’une négation,” an article penned in response to the Lebanon War, the author declares it unacceptable that in the wake of the *Shoah*, “renaisse l’ordre de l’horreur, de l’extermination scientifiquement conduite telle qu’on la voit se déployer au Liban.”²⁹ In

²⁷ In Benaïssa’s *L’avenir oublié*, Yahou—the Orthodox Jewish uncle—comments that the Zionist/Nazi comparison is frequently made by diasporic, rather than Israeli, Jews. Chastising his brother, Isac, Yahou gripes, “Tu parles comme les absents de la diaspora. Et, comme eux, culpabilisés par leur absence, tu vas nous expliquer que nous sommes les nouveaux Nazis... et les Arabes les nouveaux Juifs” (19).

²⁸ While Helman calls these associations “perfectly natural,” he nonetheless categorizes them as “vilely anti-Semitic” and criticizes Folman for the way in which he constructs the Israeli-Nazi comparison, writing that it was “flagrantly irresponsible of him to have introduced them into *Waltz With Bashir* in the way he does.” Hillel Halkin, “The ‘Waltz with Bashir’ Two-Step,” March 2009, *Commentary*, 6 February 2010 <commentarymagazine.com>.

²⁹ Edmond Amran El Maleh, “Le Visage d’une négation,” *Revue d’études palestiniennes* 5 (1982), 23. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

these non-fiction pieces, El Maleh bases his Zionist/ Nazi comparisons on what he sees as the desire to exterminate and the racially motivated language common to both groups. In articles such as “Négation,” El Maleh faces his critics head-on, condemning their efforts to reserve words such as “genocide” and “extermination” for the *Shoah* when what he views as similar events have taken place, and accusing them of participating in a “querelle de mots d’une ampleur sans précédent” (“Négation” 20). In his fictional works, by contrast, the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons, as expressed by his characters, are subtler. Consequently, these narrative shadings are, perhaps, more manipulative. But can we allow El Maleh creative license to muddy historical distinctions in order to pierce the hermetic skins within which so many Israeli Jews have sheathed themselves?

Creating kinship through shared expressions of trauma

If we look beyond the historical inaccuracies of the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons, we can see how El Maleh’s novels successfully call upon the legacy of Nazi antisemitism to concurrently articulate expressions of both Moroccan Jewish and Palestinian trauma. My reading of this constructive use of the *Shoah* memory is based, in part, on Michael Rothberg’s notion of “multidirectional memory.” Rothberg privileges an interactive model of memory with the potential to create cohesion between groups, as well as innovations in justice. Rather than insisting on the incomparability of the *Shoah*, Rothberg holds that “the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor or analogy for other events and histories has emerged precisely because the Holocaust is widely thought of as a unique and uniquely terrible form of political violence” (11). Read along these lines, we can consider how recognition in El Maleh’s works of the commonalities of seemingly

disparate instances of racially motivated violence is a productive use of memory, rather than merely a defamation of the memory of the *Shoah* and an unfounded comparison between Zionists and Nazis.

While there is little historical proof to justify claims that Zionists “tricked” Moroccan Jewry into leaving their homeland, there is ample evidence to back up El Maleh’s denunciation of the psychological violence perpetrated against North African Jews upon their arrival in Israel by the Israeli government.³⁰ (Again, this is a government dominated by Jews of Ashkenazi origin, despite the fact that, at a certain point in Israel’s history, Ashkenazis represented a numerical minority.³¹) El Maleh explores this discrimination in *Mille ans* in passages in which he imagines Zionist reactions to newly arrived Maghrebi Jews, such as the character Sarah. A disembodied Zionist voice pronounces this judgment: “C’était pour lui, comme pour les autres vieux pionniers, une barbare qui ignorait la langue, une immigrée, une Juive arabe, mais en fait elle n’était en rien juive dans ces pays d’idolâtrie, en rien de ce peuple juif dont eux et eux seuls étaient les représentants” (*Mille ans* 181). Words such as “bâtard” and “vermine” in other passages (170) combine with the slurs in this quotation—“barbare” and “pays d’idolâtrie”—to portray a Zionist worldview that discriminates against Jews of Arab lands based on their ethnicity, which is sometimes qualified as a racial difference. For example, another ghostly Zionist voice declares to Nessim, “Nous ne sommes pas du

³⁰ See Shohat, “Sephardim”; Oren Yiftachel, “‘Ethnocracy’ and Its Discontents: Minorities, Protests, and the Israeli Polity,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (2000): 725-756; and Khazzoom, “Chain of Orientalism.”

³¹ According to Benbassa, North African Jews made up 63 percent of Israel’s population between 1954 and 1957. Esther Benbassa, *Être juif après Gaza* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009). (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) According to the documentary *Routes of Exile*, in 1982, Jews from Arab countries constituted more than 60 percent of the Israeli population. Subsequent references to Benbassa’s text will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

même sang, de la même race.” Though in the novel these insults are pronounced by voices belonging to monstrous and obviously exaggerated characters, El Maleh points to the racist component of the Zionist construction of the Arab other that exists in reality and aligns it with the racially based hatred of the Nazis.

The value in passages such as these is not only in unveiling the racism suffered by North African Jews, but also in the alignment of these Jews and Palestinians as common victims of this racism, and the ways in which this realization creates a connection between the two communities. And while El Maleh’s portrayal of the power dynamics in Israel-Palestine underemphasizes Mizrahi Jews’ superior position vis-à-vis Palestinians, its criticism of “race”-based hierarchy is productive.³² Evidence of *Mille ans*’ textual rapprochement of Arab Jews and Palestinians is found in the passage I discussed in the introduction to this chapter and which I will cite again here. Speaking of a Palestinian man Nessim sees in the market of the Old City of Jerusalem, the narrator remarks, “Il est palestinien, arabe, l’homme de cette terre sans l’artifice d’un mythe. Il est le paria, Nessim le regarde, le reconnaît, l’approprié à son cœur [...], la distance abolie, l’hallucination crève, Nessim n’a pas besoin de faire un effort pour reconnaître les siens, sur ce marché ils sont venus se chercher [...]” (179). In the carefully crafted space of the novel, Nessim, as a representative of North African Jewry, realizes that his kinship is to the Palestinian people, not to the Israelis of Ashkenazi origin. Just as the fictional Nessim comes together in the Jerusalem marketplace with his Palestinian brother, El Maleh presents his novel as a space where the two populations can metaphorically unite.

The recognition of the shared Arab ancestry of Moroccan Jews and Palestinians by characters such as Ari—an Israeli soldier originally from Morocco—sets the stage for

³² See my discussion of the hierarchical nature of power relations in chapter two.

a denunciation of Israel's invasion of Lebanon as violence perpetrated by brother against brother. Quoting Ari, Nessim relates the observations of one of Ari's friends, a fellow soldier of Moroccan descent:

ce copain qui lui dit : regarde, nous sommes des Arabes, regarde notre gueule [...] regarde cet immeuble avec balcon, terrasse, ça ne te dit rien, et cette fille cette belle jeune femme qui est venue nous parler, elle était descendue de sa voiture [...] nous avons failli tirer sur elle, elle a crié en arabe alors on est allé voir [...] elle nous a parlé en arabe dans cette nuit noire, pourquoi on était là, pourquoi cette guerre [...] pourquoi toutes ces saloperies qu'on nous faisait faire [...]. (120)

As is apparent in this passage, the novel does not confine the possibility for exchange between North African Jewish and Arab Muslims to pre-Independence Morocco.

Maghrebi Jewish and Palestinian characters can still discern their kinship based on similar physical characteristics, common architectural tropes, and the lingua franca of Arabic. On the other hand, *Mille ans* portrays the barriers created by Zionists between Jews and Arabs as nearly rendering this exchange impossible. Blinded by their Zionist indoctrination ("cette nuit noire"), Ari and his fellow soldiers almost shoot this innocent Arab bystander. In the novel, El Maleh's multidirectional use of the *Shoah* memory aims to counteract this indoctrination. While the Zionist/ Nazi comparisons might not create new visions of justice as Rothberg predicts, they undeniably reveal where past and current injustices are at work.

Exploding the Zionist narrative of Tel Aviv

Comparisons between Zionists and Nazis are not the only way El Maleh's oeuvre works to challenge the Zionist narrative. *Mille ans* also contests the way in which political Zionism deploys the *Shoah* memory by exposing the violence this use of memory wreaks on both Palestinians and Jewish-Muslim relations. The stage on which

this deconstruction occurs is Tel Aviv, known as the “first Hebrew city.” In its conception as a new and secular site—one that was entirely constructed by Jews—Tel Aviv epitomizes many of the Zionist ideals.³³ Nessim visits the coastal city in the final section of the novel. Seated in a café, the protagonist simultaneously observes the demonstrations protesting the Lebanon War³⁴ and acts as a one-man audience to a broadly sketched character who promotes the Zionist narrative of the city. It is a Parisian man—referred to simply as a “gauchiste sionisé” (a “lefty turned Zionist”)—who, in his monologue of praise for Tel Aviv, declares that the city is:

la première ville entièrement créée par des mains juives depuis deux mille ans [...], Tel-Aviv ‘la colline du printemps’ mais le printemps sur les ruines, écoutez cette voix³⁵ entonner le cantique des bâtisseurs à défailir d’émotion, les haloutsim de Sharon et de l’Emek, les inventeurs des kibboutz, plus imaginatifs que Dieu : ‘Donner un sens là où il n’y a rien, créer la vie dans le désert, le chaos, donner un sens à l’absurde, inventer un sens là où règne le chaos, Auschwitz et Tel-Aviv, peut-on aller plus loin...’ (175)

³³ David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, praised the fact that “Tel-Aviv [was] being built entirely by Jews.” David Ben-Gurion, *Mi'ma'amad le'am* (Tel Aviv: Iyanot, 1994), 85, qtd. in Eyal Chowers, “The End of Building: Zionism and the Politics of the Concrete,” *The Review of Politics* 64.4 (2002), 613. Subsequent references to Chowers will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

³⁴ It was specifically the Sabra and Chatila massacres that prompted the largest demonstration in Israel’s history, bringing 400,000 protestors to the streets of Tel Aviv. This popular anti-war pressure eventually led to the removal from office of Ariel Sharon, the person most responsible for the war (Bregman, *Israel's Wars* 116 and Berry and Philo, *Israel and Palestine* 79).

³⁵ As evidenced by the single quotation marks, the “lefty turned Zionist” is citing another speaker here. He refers to this absent speaker as a “great Franco-Jewish thinker,” but does not name him (El Maleh *Mille ans*, 175). This may be an ironic reference to Edmond Fleg, one of the most significant French Jewish writers and thinkers of the early 20th-century, who wrote about Tel Aviv in a 1932 essay entitled “La Ville juive.” Though Fleg is struck by Tel Aviv’s modernity, he seems troubled by its lack of history. “Tourné vers l’avenir, cette ville sans histoire fut bâtie par de petits bourgeois sur des dunes sans légende. Et, quand je lui cherchais un passé qui eût plus de vingt ans, je ne trouvais que du sable.” Edmond Fleg, *Ma Palestine* (Paris: Éditions Rieder, 1932), 147. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.) What concerns Fleg even more, however, is the self-ghettoization Tel Aviv Jews have engaged in. He writes, “en vain je me répétais que la cité compte maintenant plus de dix hôpitaux et cliniques, plus de 90 jardins d’enfants et maisons scolaires, qu’elle est la seule au monde à posséder une municipalité juive, une police juive, une population juive entièrement, depuis le maire jusqu’au dernier balayeur des rues, mon imagination demeurerait sans mouvement, mon cœur sans réponse. Une ville, pour être juive devait-elle offusquer le regard à ce point? Fallait-il nécessairement qu’elle était cette Europe sans grâce au milieu du paysage palestinien?” (Fleg *Ma Palestine*, 148). If El Maleh is indeed paraphrasing Fleg through the words of the “lefty turned Zionist,” then he does so sarcastically since Fleg obviously critiques Zionism’s ethnocentrism and lack of engagement with its Palestinian neighbors that recreates, in a way, the Jewish ghettos of Europe.

In this passage, the “lefty turned Zionist” builds on the literal meaning of “Tel Aviv”—“the hill of spring”—and suggests that the city’s name can also signify “le printemps sur les ruines,” intimating that the city’s builders created *spring* out of *ruins*. This odd word choice reveals the speaker’s Zionist reading of the city’s history. *Ruins* is far from a direct translation of the Hebrew *tel*, which means “hill,” and—unlike many other Israeli cities—Tel Aviv was not founded on a biblical site, nor built on top of the remnants of an Arab village.³⁶ The speaker considers Tel Aviv to represent the rebirth (“spring”) of the Jewish people, which has triumphed over three different contexts of destruction (“ruins”): the decimation of European Jewry during the *Shoah*, the “desert” that existed in Palestine prior to the Jewish presence, and the inauthentic Judaism of the diaspora. Referring to the members of the *halut* and *kibbutz* movements,³⁷ the speaker declares their powers superior to God’s; they are “plus imaginatifs que Dieu.” Their preeminence stems from their success in achieving what God could not: “Donner un sens là où il n’y a rien, créer

³⁶ However, the popular claim that Tel Aviv was founded upon “barren sand dunes” has been widely contested. It has been shown that some of the original land on which Tel Aviv was constructed belonged to Palestinians. Furthermore, as Tel Aviv expanded it annexed six surrounding Palestinian villages. Mark LeVine, “Fateful Triangles: Modernity and its Antinomies in a Mediterranean Port City,” Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City, ed. Alev Cinar and Thomas Bender (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 136. (Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.)

In September of 2009, opposition to the Zionist obfuscation of this aspect of Tel Aviv’s history made the news when a number of filmmakers and artists openly opposed the celebration of the city implicit in the decision of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) to focus on Tel Aviv. In their open letter to the TIFF entitled “The Toronto Declaration: No Celebration of Occupation,” the writers opposed the TIFF’s lack of acknowledgement of “the suffering of thousands of former residents and descendants of the Tel Aviv/ Jaffa area who currently live in refugee camps in the Occupied Territories or who have been dispersed to other countries.” “The Toronto Declaration: No Celebration of Occupation,” 2 September 2009, 9 September 2009 <<http://torontodeclaration.blogspot.com>>.

³⁷ The word *haloutsim*, literally “pioneers,” refers to the young Zionists who immigrated before the creation of the State of Israel. Most joined agricultural settlements with the express purpose of developing the land for Israel’s future (Edelheit and Edelheit). The mission of the *haloutsim* was similar to that of the *kibbutz*—both were collective communities who performed agricultural work. In the Sharon district—located to the north of Tel Aviv—thousands of hectares of citrus groves were planted in the 1920s. Henry Near, The Kibbutz Movement: A History (Volume I) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 133-34.

la vie dans le désert, le chaos, donner un sens à l'absurde, inventer un sens là où règne le chaos, Auschwitz et Tel-Aviv [...].” In attributing to these Jewish pioneers the capability of creating meaning out of the void and chaos of Auschwitz, the “lefty turned Zionist” imagines that the creation of the Jewish State—and specifically that of the “first Hebrew city”—gives meaning to the inexplicable horror of the *Shoah*. The speaker implicitly references here the “redemption” or “rebirth” narrative, which represents the creation of the State of Israel as a renaissance of the Jewish people after centuries of persecution in Europe and near genocide during the *Shoah*. Yet such an account of history disregards the Palestinian presence, one that pre-dated most Jewish immigration to Palestine and continued after the creation of Israel. Palestinian scholars Ahmad Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod observe that, “Israel’s creation was represented, and sometimes conceived, as an act of restitution that resolved [the death-rebirth dialectic], bringing good out of evil. The Palestinians were excluded from the unfolding of this history” (Sa’di and Abu-Lughod, *Nakba* 4). Because acknowledgement of the pre-1948 presence of Palestinians muddies the rebirth narrative, Zionists often obfuscated Palestinian history, or even denied that a Palestinian national consciousness existed. See my analysis of Palestinian author Elias Sanbar, who challenges the exclusion of Palestinians from the Israeli narrative, in the fourth chapter of this study.

The expression “créer la vie dans le désert” refers to Zionist assertions that prior to their arrival, Palestine was nothing but a barren landscape. As Aharon David Gordon—a significant thinker who came to Israel during the second wave of immigration in the early 20th century—writes of Zionism, “For such a great project—the revival of a

dead land, for example—the essential thing is the beginning, the birth into life.”³⁸ David Ben-Gurion expresses a similar sentiment when he declares, “We must rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, we must make fertile the barren lands.”³⁹ In addition to denying the considerable Palestinian population that pre-dated the Zionists, such views also shroud the Palestinians’ modern capabilities. Returning to the words of Israel’s first Prime Minister, Ben-Gurion says the following of Israel’s Arab neighbors: “Our Arab encirclement is one: even after decisive victory we shall remain neighbors of the Arab nations, we shall live in a backward environment of poverty and disease, illiteracy and exploitation, where persist cheap labor and low standards, a feudal society and the habits of serfdom” (267). Ben-Gurion’s message is clear. Lest the “sloth of [Israel’s] Arab periphery [...] be a drag upon [its] forward-looking system,” the mission of the Jewish State is to embody a model of economic and educational success, to develop a first-rate medical system, and be a bastion of democracy in the Middle East (268).

As Jewish literary scholar Barbara Mann demonstrates, the city of Jaffa—Tel Aviv’s Arab neighbor—was emblematic of Palestinian sophistication, and Tel Aviv’s ethos developed, in part, in reaction against this.⁴⁰ Mark LeVine—modern Middle Eastern history scholar—goes further than Mann, claiming that the Zionist leadership consciously strove to “create and enforce separation between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, between

³⁸ Aharon David Gordon, "Paths of Redemption," Sepher A.D. Gordon: mishnato v-deyario, ed. Yehuda Iges (Tel Aviv: h-oyed h-zioni, 1943), qtd. in Chowers, “The End of Building” 615.

³⁹ David Ben-Gurion, Rebirth and Destiny in Israel, ed. Mordekhai Nurock, trans. Mordekhai Nurock (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁴⁰ Barbara Mann, "Tel Aviv's Rothschild: When a Boulevard Becomes a Monument," Jewish Social Studies 7.2 (2001): 1-38. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

Jews and Palestinian Arabs.”⁴¹ El Maleh does not make direct reference to this specific episode of Tel Aviv history; in setting a section of his story there, however, the author links the forced separation between Jews and Palestinians that occurred in Tel Aviv with the division that took place between Moroccan Jews and Muslims in the 1940s and 1950s.

Extrapolating further, *ruins* may also signify the Jewish diaspora and the Zionist claim that Jewish life outside of Israel is insignificant. (Though the Jewish diaspora is not specifically referenced in the quotation above, other *Mille ans* passages, including some cited earlier, warrant this reading.) *Mille ans*’ challenge of Zionism’s dismissal of the Jewish diaspora, in addition to its focus on Tel Aviv as representative of the Zionist movement, and, most notably, its comparisons between Zionists and Nazis links El Maleh’s text to Patrick Modiano’s 1968 novel *La Place de l’Étoile*.⁴² Several common plot and stylistic features strengthen this intertextual relationship: protagonists that wander from place to place and embark on a nightmarish trip to Israel, characters that are amalgams of several people, and a blurring of temporal and geographic distinctions. Though Modiano’s origins are European, as opposed to El Maleh’s North African background, the Judaism of both authors heightens the shocking nature of their comparisons between Zionists and Nazis. One stylistic feature that distinguishes Modiano’s text from El Maleh’s, however, is the former author’s use of black humor. This device, combined with Modiano’s extreme exaggeration of Zionist stereotypes leads

⁴¹ Mark LeVine, "Fateful Triangles" 124.

⁴² Patrick Modiano, *La Place de l’Étoile* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1968). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

the reader to wonder if the author is simultaneously critiquing Zionism and those that compare Zionists to Nazis.⁴³

In *La Place*, Modiano portrays all Jewish characters that attempt to distance themselves from their European Jewish pasts as members of the SS,⁴⁴ but he highlights in particular Israelis' violent opposition to anything reminiscent of the culture of the Ashkenazi diaspora.⁴⁵ In a lengthy monologue, the Israeli general Tobie Cohen declares the following to Modiano's protagonist Raphaël Schlemilovitch:

vous vous trouvez maintenant dans un pays jeune, vigoureux, dynamique. De Tel-Aviv à la mer Morte, de Haïfa à Eilat, l'inquiétude, la fièvre, les larmes, la POISSE juives n'intéressent plus personne. [...] Nous ne voulons plus entendre parler de l'esprit critique juif, de l'intelligence juive, du scepticisme juif, des contorsions juives, de l'humiliation, du malheur juif... [...] Nous laissons tout cela aux jeunes esthètes européens de votre espèce ! Nous sommes de types énergiques, des mâchoires carrées, des pionniers et pas du tout des chanteuses yiddish, à la Proust, à la Kafka, à la Chaplin ! Je vous signale que nous avons fait récemment un autodafé sur la grand-place de Tel-Aviv : les ouvrages de Proust, Kafka et consorts, les reproductions de Soutine, Modigliani et autres invertébrés, ont été brûlés par notre jeunesse, des gars et des filles qui n'ont rien à envier aux Hitlerjugend : blonds, l'œil bleu, large d'épaules, la démarche assurée, aimant l'action et la bagarre ! (*La Place* 184-86).

In a similar vein to *Mille ans*, *La Place*'s highly exaggerated depiction of Zionists portrays Israel's militarism and its opposition to European Jewish culture as

⁴³ Seminar French 372, Vanderbilt University, Prof. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller (Spring 2007).

⁴⁴ As Avni writes, "young Jews who opt for 'forgetting' their Jewish past in order to iron out their conflicts are consistently dressed in Nazi uniforms." Ora Avni, "Patrick Modiano: A French Jew?," Yale French Studies: Discourses of Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century France 85 (1994), 237.

⁴⁵ Such a criticism might appear to contradict earlier statements in this chapter about the dominance of Ashkenazi Jews in Israel and their rejection of the Sephardim. In fact, Zionism had a complicated relationship to its European roots. On the one hand, Zionists strove to create a "New Jew," aggressive, connected to the land, self-reliant—the opposite of the stereotypically passive, bookish, or lazy Jew of the European *shtetl*. On the other, Zionists sought to align themselves with Western powers, in opposition to the "backward" native cultures of the Middle East. Helman comments on these two contradictory aims in Tel Aviv's creation, noting that "Tel Aviv was supposed to be, and was often described as, a piece of Europe in the midst of the Levant," but also that "Zionism was not just a geographic transfer of the Jewish people but also an attempt to achieve a cultural renaissance. 'The New Jew' was intended to be more Hebrew than Jewish, more akin to his biblical ancestors in the ancient land than to his immediate ancestors in the East European *shtetl*." Anat Helman, "European Jews in the Levant Heat: Climate and Culture in 1920s and 1930s Tel Aviv," Journal of Israeli History 22.1 (2003): 71-90.

characteristics reminiscent of Nazism. While Modiano's large-scale book burning in Tel Aviv's main square is entirely invented (as opposed to El Maleh's references to real events such as the Lebanon War), *Mille ans* contests the violence produced by Zionism's narrative of newness. Both works offer a similar criticism of the Zionist reinvention of Judaism, and the resulting narrowed definition; *La Place* laments the Zionist rejection of Ashkenazi culture and *Mille ans* bemoans its denial of Sephardic culture. But whereas Zionism, and to a lesser degree French colonialism, are the primary target of *Mille ans*' criticism, no group is spared Modiano's biting irony in *La Place*.

Mille ans' criticism of Zionism also reaches farther than that of *La Place*. The novel contests the Zionist telling of the foundation of Tel Aviv, as voiced by the "lefty turned Zionist," which places the city's roots in opposition to the diaspora, the *Shoah*, and the Palestinians. This deconstruction is not only a result of the hollow and hyperbolic nature of the "lefty turned Zionist"'s words, but is also achieved by juxtaposing this monologue to the concurrent demonstration against the Lebanon War. The author marks the demonstrators' challenge of the Zionist narrative with the following sentence, which cuts off the "lefty turned Zionist": "Une formidable explosion venait de se produire dans le noyau de la parole Auschwitz, Tel-Aviv, Beyrouth !" (*Mille ans* 175). While the implication of this sentence is vague, several sentences later El Maleh elucidates what caused this explosion. The mass of people that Nessim has been observing in the streets of Tel Aviv—stationary up to this point—has just begun to move, and the sound of feet striking the ground in unison drowns out the voice of the "lefty turned Zionist." The narrator explains that Nessim "pouvait continuer mais [il] ne l'écoutait plus, personne ne pouvait lui prêter une oreille attentive, l'immobilité rompue,

la crête de la violence venait d'exploser, la parole disloquée, broyée sous les milliers de pieds en mouvement, recouverte par la clameur immense d'une seule voix" (175). The clamor of the demonstrators' pounding feet not only drowns out the Zionist narrative as recounted by the "gauchiste sionisé," but also relates a different story, or set of stories. These alternative accounts unearth what has been silenced by the Zionists—that which has been covered over by the *hills* of Tel Aviv: both the metaphorical obfuscation of the multiple identities and cultures encompassed in Judaism and the physical shrouding of the pre-Zionist Palestinian presence. This passage reveals the tragic irony of a Zionism that claims to have imbued the *Shoah* with meaning in light of the reality of the violence Israelis have perpetrated against the Palestinians—both the symbolic violence of obfuscating the Palestinians presence that pre-dates that of political Zionists, as well as the physical violence such as that carried out in Lebanon (though, again, Israelis were not directly responsible for the Sabra and Chatila massacres). The passage implicitly suggests that rather than constructing a flourishing metropolis on top of *ruins*, the Zionists have wrought destruction. In its insistence on aggressive self-protection at the expense of others, Zionism remains far from the ideals of "la justice de la parole divine, [...] la pureté du cœur" it claims to embody (119). "Le sionisme meurt d'avoir gagné," *Mille ans*' narrator laments (181).

Conclusion

One of the most significant contributions of El Maleh's oeuvre is found in its "explosion" or "dislocation" of *la parole*, which can be interpreted as official, monolithic versions of history. Through various techniques, including the polyphony of voices

presented, the layering of memories, and the use of metafiction, the author deftly demonstrates throughout his oeuvre that history always omits stories, or alternative truths. By uncovering the histories obscured by the dominant Zionist narrative, El Maleh contests the teleology of the prevailing Zionist telling of history. Ironically, it is in layering of disparate events that *Mille ans* problematizes a causal and linear view of history. In exploding *la parole* that binds together “Auschwitz, Tel-Aviv, Beyrouth”—cities that metonymically represent the *Shoah*, the foundation of the State of Israel, and the Lebanon War, respectively—the novel contests the notion that Israel redeems, or gives meaning to, the horrendous losses suffered by Jews during the *Shoah*, and denies the legitimacy of Israeli aggression in Lebanon based on a moral high ground that political Zionism claims in the wake of the *Shoah*. The linear nature of the “Auschwitz, Tel-Aviv, Beyrouth” view of history posits Zionism as the only logical, or possible, outcome of Jewish history.⁴⁶ This narrative downplays the role of individual decisions in determining the outcome of history, but also disregards the shaping of history that occurs in the narrativization process.

Through his frequent use of metafiction, El Maleh continually reminds his readers of the writer’s role in the construction of a narrative. *Mille ans* contains numerous references to “le texte,” “le récit,” or “la littérature”; for example: “le texte s’ouvre,” “qui peut savoir avec certitude, le récit court, décrit ses méandres contourne les points d’arrêt, les répères,” “le texte lui donnera corps et présence,” “La littérature a pris fin” (178, 139,

⁴⁶ Khalidi articulates this point convincingly: “In recent decades, the resounding success of the Zionist political project, and the resultant successful grafting of modern political Zionism onto Jewish history, with the former coming to be considered the logical and inevitable outcome of the latter, has legitimized the resulting synthesis of the two, such that there is a perceived continuity, a seamless transition, between ancient, medieval, and early modern Jewish history on the one hand, and the history of modern Zionism and Israel on the other” (*Palestinian Identity* 147).

176). Like a painter who employs visible brush technique, El Maleh highlights the author's role in producing a text. History, like literature, is molded and tweaked, but whereas writers of history might attempt to subdue their subjectivity, El Maleh's use of metafiction highlights his.

One way in which El Maleh defies teleology is through the removal of the *Shoah* from its historical context. Though the historical erroneousness and moral dubiousness of the comparisons between Zionists and Nazis are undeniable, these constructed connections nonetheless make useful points. The author reveals not only that racially inspired violence can reoccur in the post-*Shoah* world, but also that Jews can be responsible for this violence. El Maleh's novels remind us that rather than a straightforward march toward progress, history is marked by repetition and setbacks.

Another criticism of Zionism apparent in *Mille ans*' treatment of Tel Aviv is that in its constant push for modernity—as represented in the city's ambition to express itself as new and secular—the movement destroys expressions of pluralism that do not fit into a singularly defined Zionist identity.⁴⁷ The author draws parallels between the erection of modern structures made of concrete and steel that characterize the city of Tel Aviv, the disregard for alternative Jewish traditions marked by exchange with Muslims, and the outright violence Zionists have used to maintain the ethnocentrism of Israel. While wandering the streets of the city, Nessim is discouraged by the frequent sight of the “bulldozers [qui] sont en marche, [qui] détruisent la vieille ville, les vieux quartiers, le martèlement de la violence, la modernité, l'absolu de béton et d'acier” (182). In highlighting the physical violence needed to create the fixed and imposing structure of

⁴⁷ Mann writes of the “overwhelmingly secular march of modernity that Tel Aviv is meant to embody” and highlights the city's emphasis on newness and cleanliness (26, 3).

Tel Aviv, El Maleh points out the metaphorical violence of Zionism's embrace of modernity and the resulting refusal of pluralistic expressions of Judaism of the past. Writing on the Zionists' figurative use of the metaphor of building, political scientist Eyal Chowers argues, "the case of Zionism epitomizes the use of this metaphor in modernity, since in this national movement everything had to be invented and 'built' (land, people, culture, language, social and political institutions, economy, and more)" (602). As Chowers points out, however, Zionists did not conceive of the land as "already inhabited by an indigenous population with its own attachments to the environment" (616). Through its depiction of Zionism's embrace of modernity, as represented in the city of Tel Aviv, El Maleh's novel condemns the movement's disregard for—or purposeful "forgetting" of—alternative histories. Modernity does not necessarily equal advancement, *Mille ans* maintains. Even the victims of history's greatest tragedies do not automatically internalize the moral lessons. *Mille ans*' condemnation of this forgetting, achieved in part through the parallels established between obfuscation of alternative histories and violence, is similar to *Palestine*'s exploration of the dangers of repressing memories.

The relentless and reckless advances of the bulldozers evoked in the quotation above are also emblematic of the Zionists' teleological view of history that El Maleh "explodes" in *Mille ans*. But, El Maleh's "explosion" of *la parole* does more than merely deconstruct official history; this technique also resurrects lost histories. In bringing to the fore the obscured memories of Muslim-Jewish exchange in Morocco as well as the traumatic memories of Moroccan Jews and Palestinians, *Mille ans* restores alliances between Jews and Muslims that have been overshadowed by the Zionist narrative. In so

doing, we might argue, *Mille ans* subscribes to Michael Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional" memory, which describes how alliances may be formed between "enemy" peoples through common recognition of shared histories (313). Both *L'avenir oublié* and *Palestine* also point to the similarities in the histories of Israelis and Palestinians (and/or Mizrahim and Arab Muslims) in order to fortify or restore ties between the two groups. While neither Benaïssa's nor Haddad's works attempt to "solve" the conflict, both—particularly *L'avenir*—offer some hope regarding the possibility of peace in the future. Given *Mille ans*' concurrent critique of modernity and nostalgic yearning for a past that is no longer possible, however, we might wonder where the novel leaves us regarding the future. On the one hand, *Mille ans* creates potential possibilities for Muslim-Jewish coexistence in the future by exposing alternatives to the Zionist telling of the past. On the other, *Mille ans*' virulent rejection of Zionism makes it difficult to imagine that such coexistence could be recreated in the Middle East, outside of the fictional space of the novel.

CHAPTER IV

AN ALTERNATE MODE OF DECONSTRUCTION: ELIAS SANBAR'S ARTICULATION OF PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IN *LE BIEN DES ABSENTS*

Le Bien des absents, the memoir of Christian Palestinian author Elias Sanbar—in contrast to the works I treat in chapters one, two, and three—does not feature a literary rapprochement between Jews and Muslims or between Palestinians and Israelis. If *L'avenir oublié*, *Palestine*, and *Mille ans, un jour* all work, through their investigations of memory, to break down the binary that separate these communities, Sanbar practices another form of deconstruction of historical narrative. In articulating a Palestinian presence through the resurrection of memories, the author challenges an Israeli identity predicated on a Palestinian absence—a narrative that, Sanbar suggests, has purposefully “forgotten” the history of a people.

The theme of memory is particularly important to Sanbar, both on a personal level and in his larger project of testifying to the Palestinian experience in the twentieth century. The author identifies as a Palestinian and yet has lived his entire life outside his homeland. After leaving Palestine when he was 15 months old during the first Arab-Israeli War of 1948, Sanbar grew up in Lebanon, before moving to France, where he currently resides. His emphasis on the recording of memories as a means of forging a relationship to his homeland is typical of a diasporic experience. As sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier writes, “Memory, rather than territory, is the principle ground of identity formation in diaspora cultures, where ‘territory’ is decentered and exploded into multiple

settings.”¹ Having left Palestine at such a young age, however, Sanbar bears witness to a specific type of diasporic experience, that of someone whose foundational memories must be appropriated from others. *Le bien* is replete with Sanbar’s recounting of stories told to him by older family members, and yet the author focuses on their inadequacy, referring to his “learned memories” of his homeland as a “trou noir” (25). In my first chapter, I establish the difference between what I term “lived memory” and “learned memory”; the first category refers to memories based on personal experiences, while the second refers to memories one learns from others, such as those passed down from one generation to the next. It is as if Sanbar’s deep interest in recording history, as evidenced in his work as a historiographer and the various documentary projects he alludes to in *Le Bien*, is an attempt to compensate for his lack of personal memories.²

On a societal level, Sanbar’s emphasis on memory is also indicative of its importance in the articulation of the Palestinian narrative, which is at odds with and often eclipsed by the dominant Israeli narrative. In their edited volume, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, political scientist Ahmad Sa’di and anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod express a Palestinian perspective on this issue: “[...] the most distinctive feature of the Palestinian social memory is its production under constant threat of erasure and in the shadow of a narrative and political force that silences it” (13). If Sanbar’s use of the leitmotif of absence points to what he depicts as an Israeli effacement of Palestinians, then his recording of memories is one way to combat this absence. Sanbar’s

¹ Anne-Marie Fortier, "Diaspora," *Cultural Geography. A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. David Atkinson (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 184, qtd. in Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser and Yolande Jansen, *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts, and Politics* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007).

² Though my research indicates that neither project was ever realized, Sanbar refers to his collaboration with Jean-Luc Godard on a film entitled “Jusqu’à la victoire” and on his desire to make a documentary on Palestinian resistance fighter, Abou Ali (*Le Bien* 42 and 102).

condemnation of an Israeli desire to obscure Palestinian history aligns his text with Haddad's investigation of amnesia in *Palestine*. But whereas Haddad explores the selective remembering and forgetting that both actors in the conflict engage in, Sanbar's treatment of the issue is more partisan.

While *Le Bien* documents the effects on Palestinians of repressive Israeli actions and evokes strong anti-Israeli sentiment,³ Sanbar's memoirs feature few interactions between the two populations.⁴ For the most part, the Israelis depicted remain nameless and faceless—an abstract, though overwhelming, power. “Un jour en avril,” for example—the first of nine autobiographical vignettes—testifies to the destructive effects of the Israeli advances on Palestinian soil, but refers to the Palestinian foes only in the abstract. As such, one of the effects of *Le bien* is to humanize the Palestinians; Sanbar achieves this, in part, by dehumanizing, or simply removing from the picture, the Israelis. Literary scholar Carlos Alvarado-Larroucau highlights Sanbar's abstract, or “anonymous,” references to Israelis. The critic, however, mistakenly interprets Sanbar's father's observation that “Ils ne prennent plus les lettres” to be an example of such a reference (*Le Bien* 11).⁵ In fact, the “ils” of this sentence refers to the British who, during the Mandate period, controlled services such as mail collection in Palestine.⁶ Yet

³ For example, Sanbar quotes his father referring to the Jews as those who “ont volé notre pays” and reports that he himself felt “déchiré” at the prospect of having to negotiate with Israelis during the peace process (18 and 41).

⁴ Exceptions include the author's description of his encounter with Israeli New Historian Tom Segev, whom he depicts as being not entirely sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, and his interactions with his Franco-Israeli friend, Simone (83-85, 77-79).

⁵ Carlos Alvarado-Larroucau, *Écritures palestiniennes francophones: Quête d'identité en espace néocolonial* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009) 54. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

⁶ The true referent of “ils” becomes clear in the following sentence: “Le pays était occupé depuis trente ans par les Britanniques qui, dans la foulée de leur politique de destruction cynique et annoncée, n'y avaient pas moins répandu le goût du thé et l'usage des services postaux modernes” (*Le Bien* 11.) The British Mandate of Palestine and the Transjordan region—whose goal it was to administer part of the recently dissolved Ottoman Empire—lasted from 1917 to 1948 (Smith, *Palestine* 111-18).

Alvarado-Larroucau is correct in pointing out the lack of direct references to Israelis in this vignette. Even when speaking of Palestinian-Israeli combat, Sanbar avoids mentioning the Palestinians' opponent. For example, when evoking the newspaper vendors' cries announcing the news, the author employs the passive voice to describe the Israeli capture of Haifa: "Haïfa est tombée cette nuit, Haïfa est tombée cette nuit" (*Le Bien* 11).

"Un jour en avril" recounts the departure of Sanbar's father and sister, the last family members to leave their native Palestine. Sanbar's substitution of inanimate forces for Israelis exposes both the vulnerability and the incredulity of his father and sister as they were faced with the reality of what they experience as a forced departure. In the following story, "Les Tailleurs de Pierre," Sanbar's explanation for this hastened departure serves to offset, to some extent, his father's innocence and passivity. The author's father decided to leave Haifa when he learned that the Haganah—a Jewish paramilitary defense force formed in the Mandate years—was pursuing him to punish him for participating in the Palestinian armed struggle (24-25). In "Un jour," however, Sanbar highlights the defenselessness of his family members in the face of the overwhelmingly insidious powers of "le vide" and "l'absence"—phenomena, the vignette implies, brought about by Israeli seizure of Palestinian lands:

Mais le vide qui ravage leur ville s'est mué en une force insidieuse qui dans un tourbillon aussi violent que silencieux les happe comme des milliers d'autres vers un ailleurs inconnu.

Il lui reste l'après-midi pour une dernière visite de cette demeure qui déjà lui échappe pour rejoindre un territoire étranger et s'installer dans sa mémoire. Elle sait qu'attachée à ses pas, l'absence frappera chacune des pièces traversées. (13)

Sanbar showcases the lack of human agency by emphasizing the metaphorical force of the inanimate phenomena, "le vide" and "l'absence," while employing words, which,

ironically, normally imply deficiency and dearth of power. We note that almost all of the action verbs in the passage are attributed to these abstract forces—which, again, are indirect references to Israeli expulsion of Palestinians—rather than to Sanbar’s family members. While Alvarado-Larroucau diagnoses Sanbar’s abstraction as being the result of the difficulty the author has “à parler de l’autre et à le définir,” I maintain that Sanbar is testifying to the confusion and powerlessness his family members felt in the moments preceding their departure (Alvarado-Larroucau 54).

The passage reveals a tension between staying and leaving through its contrast between the characters’ longing to remain in their house and the inevitability of their imminent departure. While several words indicate the notion of staying or settling—“reste,” “demeure,” “rejoindre,” “territoire,” “s’installer”—they are all qualified by adverbs or adjectives that reveal the reality of departure. For example, “l’après-midi,” modifies the verb *rester*, indicating that Sanbar’s father and sister have only one afternoon left in their house. Similarly, the characters’ looming exodus is mirrored in the phrase “qui déjà lui échappe,” which qualifies the noun “demeure.” Parallel to the tension between staying and leaving is that between presence and absence, and it is this latter duality—and its relation to remembering and forgetting—that will constitute the bulk of my inquiry in this chapter. As is apparent in this passage, even as Sanbar describes his family members’ final moments in their home, he conjures up and underscores the *absence* that is already *present*; their forced exodus to an “unknown elsewhere” already casts a shadow over their current reality. The absence/presence duality holds a double significance in “Un jour.” First, Sanbar evokes this duality to signal the physical, legal, and rhetorical absence that he claims Israelis have imposed on

Palestinians. Second, this duality marks Sanbar's particular relationship to memories of his homeland—memories that simultaneously occupy a central place in the author's identity and evade him. The memories that Sanbar has either learned from his family members, invented, or a combination of the two, are both conspicuously present and noticeably absent in the author's psyche.

Sanbar also evokes the curious relationship between absence and presence in the title of his work, *Le bien des absents*, which provokes the uninitiated reader to wonder to whom or what “le bien” (the property) and “les absents” (the absentees) refer, as well as why the property has remained behind while the owners have left (Alvaradou-Larroucau, 34). Readers familiar with Sanbar's biography and his articulation of absence as a defining characteristic of the Palestinian condition throughout his oeuvre will more easily discern the meaning of Sanbar's title, which refers to the Palestinian narrative of 1948: the expulsion of Palestinians from their land and the fate of their (generally) confiscated property. The absence/presence duality is also apparent in Sanbar's *Palestine, le pays à venir*,⁷ a work that features autobiographical vignettes but privileges a less personal narrative in favor of a more historical one. To varying degrees, all of the works I examine in this dissertation seek to tell stories that challenge a dominant historical narrative, to re-present histories that have been obscured, forgotten, or made *absent*. What distinguishes Sanbar's voice from those of Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh is both his choice of genre and his perspective, which he marries through the form of autobiographical vignettes. While El Maleh's oeuvre comes closest to Sanbar's in terms of autobiographical inspiration, Sanbar is alone in employing a first-person narration.

⁷ Elias Sanbar, *Palestine, le pays à venir* (Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 1996). Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

The unique voice that Sanbar offers is that of both insider and outsider—one whose relationship to Palestine is marked by both presence and absence—as opposed to my other subjects, whose outsiders’ perspectives are all defined by their combined North African and French roots. Despite having lived outside of the boundaries of Palestine since he was a baby, Sanbar considers himself a Palestinian. As editor of the *Revue des Etudes palestiniennes*, author of several historical books on Palestine, and participant in the Madrid talks (held prior to the 1993 Oslo Israeli-Palestinian Accord), Sanbar has dedicated his life’s work to promoting Palestinian scholarship and representing Palestine in peace negotiations with Israel.⁸ As a Palestinian historian, diplomat, and memoirist, Sanbar is the most directly involved in the conflict of the four authors I discuss. In that Sanbar does not challenge the Israeli-Palestinian binary, *Le Bien des absents* functions as a counterexample to my three other primary texts. Whereas Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh’s texts labor to emphasize Israeli and Palestinian (or Jewish and Muslim) commonalities, Sanbar’s text seems to be the result of an effort to undo the overlapping nature of the two communities’ histories. I contend that Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh’s perspectives are influenced by nostalgia for the Jewish-Muslim coexistence of North Africa, whereas, for the Palestinian author Sanbar, the divisions between Jews and Arabs may be too ossified to deconstruct.

As demonstrated in my analysis of “Un jour en avril,” the author’s references to Israelis are often vague. When they are directly referenced, the portrait painted of Israelis

⁸ Sanbar participated, as a Palestinian representative, in the negotiations that preceded that Oslo Peace Accord of 1993. In *Le Bien*, he mentions participating in talks in both Jordan and Washington, D.C. (52-53, 70). In addition to founding the now defunct *Revue des études palestiniennes*, Sanbar’s publications include: *Palestine 1948, l’expulsion* (Washington: Institut des études palestiniennes, 1984); *Les Palestiniens dans le siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); *La Palestine comme métaphore : entretiens* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1997); *Figures du Palestinien : identité des origines, identité de devenir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); plus several he has co-authored with Farouk Mardem-Bey, including, *Jérusalem : le sacré et le politique* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2000) and *Le Droit au retour : le problème des réfugiés palestiniens* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2002).

is almost exclusively negative, reinforcing the stereotype of Israeli as occupier and oppressor. In dehumanizing Israelis, in refraining from depicting any fully developed characters, Sanbar imposes a virtual textual absence on Israelis, flipping the usual power dynamic between Israelis and Palestinians. Sanbar's depiction of Israelis is not as exaggerated or monstrous as that of El Maleh, yet the truth claims inherent in Sanbar's choice of the genre of memoir leave the author less leeway for poetic license. While the communication of the Palestinian narrative is certainly a noble goal, in excluding Israelis' humanity and their two-dimensionality from his story, the author commits the same rhetorical offense as his adversaries.⁹ Textual effacement, of course, is not comparable to some of the dire consequences of the Israeli imposition of absence on Palestinians. However, this willingness to shroud an Israeli presence suggests a mentality that has proved menacing to Israeli-Palestinian relations. The author's treatment of these relations runs the risk of establishing a dialectical relationship between the two populations in which the presence of one depends on the absence of the other.

In this chapter, I investigate Sanbar's affirmation of a Palestinian identity as one that is marked by a duality between absence and presence. Even as Sanbar articulates a Palestinian presence, the author notes the absence—of homeland, of countrymen, of memories—that constitutes a central feature of this identity, and particularly that of diasporic and second-generation Palestinians. Both *Le Bien des absents* and *Palestine, le pays à venir* underscore how for Sanbar's generation—those who grew up in the wake of the *Nakba*—the homeland is concurrently eternally present and conspicuously absent in their memories. Indeed, for all Palestinians—even those who retain memories of time

⁹ Sanbar's praise, in *Le pays*, of the work of the New Historians is one exception to this observation (22 and 129).

spent in Palestine before the *Nakba*—the homeland is both a defining characteristic of their identity, and, in a way, non-existent. For how is one to define what constitutes Palestine? Since 1948, Israelis have unrecognizably transformed the landscape. The *Nakba* dispersed the Palestinians throughout the Arab world; those that remain in the region they once called “Palestine” are now classified either as residents of the Occupied Territories or Arab Israelis.¹⁰ Palestinians do not enjoy sovereignty, and until 1993 the Israelis did not recognize their chosen political representative.¹¹ Nevertheless, however amorphous and altered Palestine may be, it continues to constitute a “chez nous” for its people, albeit a “chez-nous disparu” (Sanbar, *Le Bien* 15). I treat the central place that the homeland continues to play in the identity formation of diasporic Palestinians in the first section of this chapter. Next, I investigate Sanbar’s depiction of the specificity of his generation’s “learned” memories of the homeland and consider the author’s portrayal of these memories as lacking. In the third section, I explore Sanbar’s exploration of and challenge to the Israeli government’s efforts to legally and rhetorically imposed absence on Palestinians. In my conclusion, I reflect on Sanbar’s treatment of, as well as the author’s danger of falling into, a dialectical relationship between the two groups. Finally, I offer comparative remarks evaluating the depiction of Israeli/Palestinian relations in the four principal works explored in this dissertation, noting the ways in which Sanbar’s

¹⁰ The Occupied Territories refers to the land in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem that Israel annexed during the 1967 War. In August of 2005—four years after Sanbar’s publication of *Le Bien*—Israel withdrew from Gaza, though it still retains control over entry and exit points for both goods and people. The West Bank remains an Occupied Territory (Smith, *Palestine* 531). Israelis refer to those Palestinians that remained in Israel after 1948 as “Arab Israelis.”

¹¹ Mutual recognition between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Liberation Organization occurred in 1993. Sanbar glosses over the fact that Israel’s recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people took place at the same time as PLO recognition of “the right of the State of Israel to exist in peace and security” (Smith 451-53).

depiction differs from the North African specificity that characterizes the work of Slimane Benaïssa, Hubert Haddad, and Edmond Amran El Maleh.

The Omnipresent memory of “un chez-nous disparu”

During the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, the majority of Arabs living in the recently founded State of Israel either fled or were expelled from their homes. At the war's conclusion, only 133,000 of the 860,000 initial residents remained in their former homeland (Smith 207).¹² Over half of the exiled population went into refugee camps in what had been designated Arab Palestine by the 1947 United Nations partition plan.¹³ Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank following the 1967 War created a schism amongst Palestinians. Though the relationship to their homeland had been dramatically altered for all, an important distinction now existed between the external refugees (those exiled in other countries) and internal refugees (a group that includes those within the Occupied Territories and Arab Israelis).¹⁴ Sanbar's *Le bien* and *Le pays* testify both to the universal nature of the Palestinian experience—the way in which Palestine persists as a homeland for all—and to the specificity of the author's personal lived experience, that of an “external refugee” and of a Palestinian who has no lived memories of pre-*Nakba* Palestine.

¹² According to Caplan, between 650,000 and 750,000 Palestinians were expelled, displaced, or chose to flee (*Israel-Palestine* 113).

¹³ This resolution ended the British Mandate period in Palestine and divided the land into a Jewish and Arab state, based on land ownership at the time. But the Arab delegations declared the decision invalid, citing unequal and unfair distribution of land. As a result of the wars that ensued, Israel greatly increased its territorial hold (Morris, 1948 65 and Smith 194-207).

¹⁴ Edward Said describes the divide amongst Palestinians in this way, “There were those Palestinians who were manifestly in exile, and those living a secluded internal exile within Israel. The former tended to see themselves in terms of Arab politics, or to try to become assimilated to their new places of residence; the latter were cut off from the Arab world, as they tried to shape their lives as much as they could within the small space provided them by Israel's domination” (*The Question* 117). Though not entirely apparent in this quotation, this is the text in which Said is the most critical of Israelis, accusing them, for example, of creating an apartheid state (119). Said's later writings are more moderate.

Even when Sanbar and other Palestinian characters in the memoir have little hope of ever returning to live in their homeland, Palestine continues to constitute their “chez nous” and remains a central reference point for them. Thus the author remarks, “Pour survivre, ne pas perdre notre nord, nous devons toujours nous diriger vers ‘chez nous’” (*Le Bien* 113). The expression “chez nous,” however, is often qualified in some manner, either typographically with single quotation marks as we see in the above quotation, or lexically with a modifier, such as in the phrase “un chez-nous disparu” (*Le Bien* 15). Palestine will always constitute home for the Palestinians, regardless of its dramatic alteration, *Le Bien* maintains. The homeland serves as an internal compass for these refugee characters—allowing them to locate themselves in the world, to “ne pas perdre [leur] nord”—despite the fact that they may never reside there again. The concept of Palestine as home is simultaneously a central guiding feature in the lives of the Palestinians depicted and also an entity that only exists in their memories.

In the penultimate story of *Le Bien*, “C’est donc toi qui envoies tous ces gens,” Sanbar returns to Haifa for the first time since the *Nakba* to visit his family home, which, though still standing, is now inhabited by others. The author’s attention is drawn to all the objects that are missing from the image of the family home he retains in his memory; he notes the absence of “les portraits de [ses] grands-parents” and of “les deux grands fauteuils velours vert” (138). Nevertheless, the structure continues to exist both in the author’s mind and in his stories as “chez nous.” The Sanbar family house serves in this story as a metaphor for all of Palestine; the house’s appearance has changed, its original residents have left, but the basic structure is intact.

Similarly, Sanbar emphasizes the unchanged quality of the physical territory that persists in the Palestinian imagination as Palestine, despite the people's loss of legal ownership of this land. Abu-Lughod and Sa'di write of the "extraordinary charge" of the "places of the pre-Nakba past and the land of Palestine itself" (13). Yet, as Sanbar's texts assert, though the landlords have changed, no human force can wipe away the sentiment of Palestine. The author declares, "[L'expulsion] n'est pas celle de la disparition d'une terre, mais du déplacement d'un peuple" (*Le pays* 18). The conviction that emotional attachment to the motherland trumps any legal or military action that Israelis can take against the Palestinians is illustrated in Sanbar's reference in *Le pays* to an Arab-Israeli character from a Michel Khleifi documentary entitled *La Mémoire fertile*.¹⁵ The author celebrates this character who refuses to sell her land, despite financial pressure from Israeli authorities. When her son questions her decision, asking "Quand vas-tu décider à [...] vendre [ta terre] ? [...] Quand comprendras-tu que la Palestine est partie ?," she responds, "Je ne vendrai pas. Ce sont les hommes qui partent. La terre, elle, reste à sa place" (*Le pays* 17). Sanbar supports this Khleifi character's assertion of the immutable nature of Palestine's essence, regardless of its people's whereabouts.

One way in which Sanbar underscores the irony of the absence/ presence duality is through his emphasis on the tangible reminders of Palestinian ownership of territory to which they no longer have access. In the vignette "Les tailleurs de pierre"—part of the *Le Bien* collection—the author recounts how, through the intervention of the bishop of Galilee, the Sanbars recover a cupboard they had left behind in Haifa. In the story, the Sanbars ("les absents") regain one item of their lost property ("[leur] bien"), though both the family and the homely cupboard are far removed from their proper location. For

¹⁵ *De vruchtbare herinnering/ La mémoire fertile*, dir. Michel Khleifi, Marisa films, 1981.

Sanbar's father, however, perhaps more important than regaining this piece of furniture is the recovery of the papers that had been hidden inside one of the cupboard drawers before the Sanbars' departure. When the cupboard is delivered to the Sanbars' new home-in-exile in Beirut, the author describes his father's haste—magnified by the jammed lock of the cupboard drawer—to learn of the fate of these papers:

Mon père redescendit [l'escalier] à toute vitesse et revint haletant, suivi d'un menuisier qui, d'un coup de tournevis, brisa la serrure. Le tiroir céda. Son contenu était encore là. Entier: le titre de propriété de notre maison, nos actes de naissance, les passeports rouges avec la mention *British Mandate for Palestine*, le laissez-passer de mon père pour la zone franche du port où il travaillait [...].
Notre vie disparue venait de nous rattraper. (*Le Bien* 21)

Whether fictionalized or not, the fact that Sanbar's account of this episode—which occurred when he was a young boy—takes the form of a detailed list reveals the significance the Sanbars attached to their renewed possession of these papers. These papers not only substantiate their right to land that has been confiscated, but also articulate a pre-*Nakba* Palestinian identity that has been obfuscated by Israelis. The Sanbars' attitude regarding this physical proof of their ownership is typical of that of many Palestinians. As Abu-Lughod and Sa'di observe, many Palestinians “preserve, after more than half a century, the deeds to the land they owned and the keys to the houses they left behind” (13). Literary critic Lynn D. Rogers echoes this observation, noting that, “Today, one can visit any refugee camp and Palestinians will proudly bring out their keys to their lost homes.”¹⁶ In reality, however, few of the original Palestinian houses still exist. That Palestinian refugees cling to objects such as deeds and keys in the

¹⁶ Lynn D. Rogers, "Stark Narratives of Memory: Souha Béchara's *Résistante* and Elias Sanbar's *Le Bien des absents*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 72 (2005) 97. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

absence of actual houses emphasizes their unfailing emotional attachment to the land and the sense of lack they carry with them in their new places of residence.

Absence of memory, absence as memory

If one characteristic of the generation of Sanbar's parents is their preservation of physical proof of houses that exist only in memory, then one of the defining features of Sanbar's generation is the lack of lived memories of Palestine. In my analysis of Benaïssa's *L'avenir oublié*, I use the terms "lived" and "learned memory" to distinguish between the relationships to the *Shoah* of first- versus second-generation survivors. We can mark a similar divide in the relationship to memory in the case of the Palestinians, albeit in a very different context. For Sanbar's generation, their young age at the time of the *Nakba* renders their relationship to the homeland distinct from that of their parents. Their memories must be based on others' stories, rather than on their own personal experiences. As previously cited in chapter one, Marianne Hirsch refers to this particular second-generation memory of traumatic experiences as "postmemory," a form that distinguishes itself "because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (*Family Frames* 22). Sanbar's focus on memory, and particularly on the inadequacies of learned memory, supports Hirsch's point that postmemory is often "obsessive and relentless." In another iteration of postmemory, Hirsch uses geographical terms to describe the phenomenon, likening postmemory to a "diasporic experience," and noting that it is a "condition of exile from the space of identity" (243). Using Hirsch's theory as a framework, we might observe that Sanbar is both physically and metaphorically exiled from the site of his

identity. He is simultaneously barred from resuming residence in his homeland and figuratively distanced from memories of the place.

It is important to note here Palestinian scholars' complex relationship to theorists such as Hirsch, whose work deals in large part with the memory of the *Shoah*. As Sa'di and Abu-Lughod attest:

Studies of memory and history are indebted to the abundant and complex literature on the Holocaust and German history [...]. Any study of Palestinian memory finds itself in an awkward relationship to this literature because the focus on Jewish memory offers insights applicable—and rightly taken up—more widely, yet implies a sort of exceptionalism: the eloquent testimony to unspeakable horror, the minute examination of trauma, the variety of commemoration, and the justifiable accusations of world indifference implicitly block acknowledgement of Jews as anything but victims. (24)

While Sa'di and Abu-Lughod's point is well taken, their assessment ignores the work of scholars (such as Esther Benbassa, whom I cite extensively throughout this dissertation) who deal precisely with the negative consequences of the Jewish exceptionalism that some Jews interpret as a legacy of the *Shoah*. Because of the striking similarities between the experiences of those who grew up in the wakes of the *Shoah* and *Nakba*, I cite some of the same theorists to analyze the memories of the two groups.

Sanbar illustrates his generation's particular relationship to memories of their homeland with his recurrent use of the expression "un trou noir," as in "Je ne garde aucune image de ma ville natale. Mon exil a commencé par un trou noir" (*Le Bien* 25). There is both a literal and metaphorical significance to the black hole image. As Sanbar recounts in "L'été de 1954," just after his departure from Palestine when he was only fifteen months old, he developed a bizarre malady. His eyelids swelled, rendering him (temporarily) nearly blind. Though he was likely too young at the time to remember his exile, the author knows that, for him, this period was literally marked by an inability to

see (25). Metaphorically, the black hole can be read as symbolizing the absence/presence duality that characterizes the relationship held by Palestinians of Sanbar's generation to the homeland, even as the image might, at first glance, merely seem to suggest a gaping absence. On the one hand, black holes are forceful presences; they are regions that play a significant role in the development of the universe. On the other hand, black holes generate absence; they are voids that threaten to absorb all that approach them. Sanbar's use of the black hole metaphor indicates both the central role Palestine has played in his identity formation and the overpowering lack of lived memories he possesses of the place. It is as if no matter how much Sanbar learns or memorizes about pre-*Nakba* Palestine, his lack of memories will always dominate, resulting in a feeling of inadequacy.

The expression "trou noir" occurs in *Le pays* as well, though here it evokes a sentiment of communal, rather than personal, lack:

Pour ma génération, à la différence de celles de nos aînés, la Palestine dont nous avons été expulsés ressemblait à un 'trou noir'. Nous étions trop jeunes pour conserver des images de nos premiers souvenirs. En réalité nous n'avions ni souvenirs ni images. Les récits innombrables, les descriptions détaillées que ressassaient nos parents, les photographies, les documents, les connaissances acquises ensuite par l'étude et l'engagement politique, n'ont jamais suffi à pallier l'absence de la moindre perception physique de cette terre que nous transportions sur nos épaules, à défaut d'avoir pu la sauver. (*Le pays* 18)

In this passage, the futility of attempting to conquer the void of memories is evident. The overwhelming power of absence counters all the anecdotal and archival evidence about the Palestine of the past that the members of Sanbar's generation have gathered. (In Sanbar's case, the symbolic power of the black hole is particularly remarkable considering his constant engagement with and frequent publication on Palestine.) The absence of personal memories trumps any efforts to compensate for this lack.

Sanbar's focus on the theme of absence and on the image of the black hole is reminiscent of the language used by many who write of the experience of second-generation *Shoah* survivors. Nadine Fresco—a historian and second generation *Shoah* survivor who conducted a series of interviews with others in her situation—uses the expression of “absent memory” to describe these people's experiences with the *Shoah* memory.¹⁷ Henri Raczymow, a postwar French Jewish author conceives of his memory as “une mémoire trouée” and explains that in his writing, he attempts to “restore a non-memory, which by definition cannot be filled in or recovered.”¹⁸ Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller demonstrates how the Egyptian Jewish Edmond Jabès's writing testifies to a *Shoah* memory characterized by lack through the author's use of “une narration éclatée, fragmentée par l'oubli et les trous de sa propre défaillance.”¹⁹ Though the traumatic experiences of the *Shoah* and the *Nakba* are incomparable in essence, the second generations of both traumas are similarly barred access to their parents' memories. This generation's lack of access to the trauma memory may be due to different reasons, however. *Shoah* survivors are often unable or unwilling to pass on their memories because of language's incapability of describing the magnitude of the horror they experienced, or because the memory is too painful to be retold or relived. Sanbar's memoirs indicate a different challenge for transmission of the *Nakba* memory. It is not for lack of testimony that the Palestinian author judges his memory to be lacking, but rather because he did not personally experience the trauma. While Sanbar does not

¹⁷ Nadine Fresco, "Remembering the Unknown," *Internation Review of Psycho-Analysis* 11 (1984): 417-427, qtd. in Hirsch *Postmemory* 243.

¹⁸ Henri Raczymow, "Memory Shot Through with Holes," *Yale French Studies* (1994) p. 114, qtd. in Hirsch *Postmemory*, 244. Hirsch, on the other hand, who is also a child of Shoah survivors, does not qualify her memory as “empty.” “On the contrary,” she writes, “many Jews have acquired or built an identity as Jews precisely through the shared traumatic memory and postmemory of the Shoah” (Hirsch *Postmemory*, 244).

¹⁹ Debrauwere-Miller, *Jabès* 233.

explore the cross-cultural similarities (or the distinctions) between Israeli and Palestinian second-generation trauma survivors, as I indicate in my first chapter, these links constitute one of the many bonds between the Israeli and Palestinian youths in Benaïssa's *L'avenir oublié*. In contrast to their mothers who embody their people's painful pasts, the characters Joseph and Antoine-Nasser maintain enough temporal distance from the trauma to enable them to envision a future not defined by an antagonistic relationship to the other.

While Sanbar's experience with the *Nakba* memory does not serve to form an alliance between the author and Israelis with similar relationships to traumatic memories, the author does consider his relationship with absence to be quintessentially Palestinian. Many of his father's stories of Palestine emphasize lack and absence; others underscore the unfaltering physical presence that Palestine holds in their memories. On the one hand, Sanbar's family members constantly tell stories such as the account of the family's departure from Palestine, which refers to the strikingly few belongings the family retains after the *Nakba* and implicitly references all that they were forced to leave behind: "Quand nous sommes partis, nous ne possédions plus que les habits dont nous étions vêtus" (Sanbar, *Le Bien* 131). In fact, according to the author, all accounts of Palestine feature lack: "Ainsi commençaient les récits du pays perdu. Tristes monologues qui s'ouvraient et se refermaient sur l'absence. Contes sans dénouement, évoluant dans un temps immobile, portés par la voix du père conscient de la tristesse de l'enfant, mais incapable de conter une autre histoire." Absence has been a central feature of the Palestinian narrative since the *Nakba*, and as long as the Palestinians are forced to remain in exile—Sanbar predicts—it will remain so.

Yet, stories that reveal the continued existence of pre-1948 Palestine in both generations' memories counter such stories of lack and absence. In “‘C’est donc toi qui envoies tous ces gens’”—part of the *Le Bien* collection—the author recalls his father’s detailed directions to the family house in Haifa. “Lorsque l’on remonte de Jaffa au sud, vers notre ville au nord [...] tu longeras Salama sur la droite ...dans ce village repose l’un des compagnons du Prophète et le village est reconnaissable par la coupole du sanctuaire... Il est entouré de champs de blé et d’avoine, de bananiers et d’orangers... [...] Après Salama, tu passeras par Massoudiyé, puis Jarisha, alors tu longeras Jammasin et...” (*Le Bien* 132). That Sanbar has maintained these directions, along with village names, indicates the significant place they have held in his memory. Describing his first taxi ride in Haifa, the author notes, “ayant passé mes années à faire raconter leurs souvenirs aux miens, à traquer dans les livres les moindres recoins de cette terre interdite, je localisai instantanément notre position” (*Le Bien* 127-28). As the author explains in *Figures du Palestinien*—a historical text—learning the minute details of the homeland his generation never knew is a coping mechanism. “Aspirant à dresser en permanence l’inventaire, des milliers de voix transmettent l’Histoire mais aussi *les histoires* du pays et des lieux. Et, l’une après l’autre, des générations d’enfants nés au loin, privés de leur nom, apprennent dans leurs moindres détails les sentiers, les bâtisses, les champs, les arbres, les rochers, la flore et la faune de leur terre interdite.”²⁰ Memorizing these details, Sanbar suggests, is an attempt to recover a land and an identity of which diasporic Palestinians have been deprived.

²⁰ Elias Sanbar, *Figures du Palestinien* 248. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically, either in the body of the text or in the footnotes.

According to *Le Bien*, it is not only through stories from his father that Sanbar comes to consider absence as a feature that unites Palestinians. The author gained additional access to Palestinian stories through a weekly radio program entitled *Salamun wa Tahiyya* or “Peace and Greetings,”²¹ which came into being soon after the *Nakba*. Sanbar explains that with the aid of mobile recording studios that made rounds between the various Palestinian villages and the Palestinian refugee camps, inhabitants could send messages to their loved ones over the air waves. Despite their absence from their homes and their families, these characters manage to make their presence known:

Enfant, j’ai écouté ces émissions. Et cette multitude de voix, de tons, de timbres anonymes, qui emplissaient l’air, qui circulaient malgré les séparations et les déplacements forcés, me disaient, dans l’accent que je n’osais plus employer hors de chez moi,²² langue secrète dont j’enrangeais les mots avec une rage d’affamé, que ces absents étaient les miens. (*Le Bien* 123)

Sanbar emphasizes the power of these collective disembodied voices to overcome barriers that physical bodies cannot. Through the phrase “cette multitude de voix, de tons, de timbres anonymes,” the author underscores the Palestinians’ strength in numbers. In attributing to these voices forceful verbs such as “emplissaient” and “circulaient,” Sanbar grants the Palestinians agency, even in the face of “les séparations et les déplacements forcés.” Countering the potent presence Sanbar grants these voices, however, the author simultaneously indicates the absence of the people behind the voices. Though the voices blend into a collective over the airwaves, the reader is conscious of the dispersed nature of the speakers. While the radio gives the voices the illusion of emanating from a common location, their provenance—unless specifically specified by the speaker—is impossible to detect. Likewise, the reception of the messages by the

²¹ Sanbar’s French translation of the title of the radio program is “Salut et salutations.”

²² In the same story, Sanbar explains that when his Lebanese classmates made fun of his Palestinian accent in Arabic, the author conditioned himself to speak like the locals (*Le Bien* 122).

intended audience is impossible to guarantee. Like the invisibility of the black hole, the airwaves—the technology that connects the voices—is invisible and intangible. This passage indicates that for Palestinian refugees who are no longer bound by a physical connection to their homeland, it is their stories and memories that unite them.

As Sanbar describes, hearing these radio programs plays a role in helping the author determine what it means to be Palestinian and the centrality of absence in this identity. The memoirist uses a possessive adjective (“les miens”) to describe these distant and anonymous voices and contrasts the feelings of kinship these voices evoke in him with the detachment he feels from the Lebanese children that surround him. These voices—“les miens”—and the stories they embody fill in for, to some degree, the land—“le bien”—to which the author no longer has access. While “le bien” has not been returned to “les absents,” the author locates “les [s]iens” on the airwaves of *Salamun wa Tahiyya*.

Absence legally and rhetorically imposed

In his efforts to articulate a Palestinian narrative, Sanbar takes on a legal, as well as a rhetorical battle. Israel’s “Absentees’ Property Law,” passed in 1950, provides the inspiration for the title of Sanbar’s collection of vignettes, *Le Bien des absents*. This law permitted the seizure of much Arab Israeli property by qualifying as “absentee” any Arab Israeli who had left his or her house on or after November 29, 1947, the date of the United Nations partition resolution. Arab Israelis who had left their homes though not the country—and even those who had since returned to their houses—were often still considered “absentee.”²³ Even for those Palestinians who did not depart during the

²³ According to Sanbar, the 1950 law gives the following definition for “Absentee”: “Toute personne de nationalité palestinienne ou libanaise, égyptienne, syrienne, saoudienne, transjordanienne, qui, entre le 29

Nakba,²⁴ a series of Israeli legal actions imposed a *de jure* absence upon tens of thousands of them, according to historian Charles D. Smith (230).²⁵ While the absentee property was initially assigned to Israel's new immigrants, Israelis subsequently rented some of this land to other Arab Israelis who could not return to their original homes, either because the Israelis prohibited them from doing so or because their homes had been destroyed (Sanbar, *Figures* 230-31 and Smith 229-30).

As Sanbar recounts in his story "C'est donc toi qui envoies tous ces gens," such was the fate of the Sanbar family home. Because the author's family had fled to Lebanon, their property was declared absentee and rented to another Palestinian/ Arab Israeli family who had stayed behind. The vignette "C'est donc toi" relates Sanbar's encounter with one of the current residents and the ironic consequences of the 1950 law on her and her family.²⁶ The elderly woman, who remains nameless, allows Sanbar to visit the house, but apologizes for the state of the house, which she explains, the current residents do not have the right to repair:

nous habitons la maison depuis quelques années. Nous payons d'ailleurs le loyer à la 'Direction israélienne des biens des absents.' [...] Le toit fuit, mais nous n'avons pas le droit de le réparer, tu comprends, 'ils' disent qu'ils doivent préserver vos demeures, pour qu'à votre retour vous les retrouviez exactement telles que vous les avez laissées, vous devriez d'ailleurs 'les' en remercier. (*Le Bien* 137)

novembre 1947 et la date, quand elle sera annoncée, de la proclamation de la fin de l'état d'urgence, détient une propriété située sur le territoire désormais israélien et qui se trouve dans l'un des pays aux nationalités énumérées plus haut ou dans toute autre partie de la Palestine non incluse dans le territoire israélien : tout Palestinien aussi qui, présent sur le territoire désormais israélien, ne se trouvait néanmoins pas à son domicile durant la période précitée" (*Figures* 228). Sanbar does not cite his source here—a problematic and puzzling decision for a historian—and I have thus far been unable to find a definition in another text.

²⁴ Approximately 112,000 people, according to Sanbar (*Les Palestiniens dans le siècle*, 61). Smith estimates that there were 170,000 Arab Israelis in 1950 (*Palestine* 229).

²⁵ Smith notes that approximately one percent of these Arab Israelis were able to reclaim their land and that some eventually received monetary compensation. See Sanbar *Figures* pgs 226-29 for a discussion of these Israeli legal measures taken against Palestinians.

²⁶ Benaïssa also addresses the unjust irony of Israeli property laws on Palestinians in *L'avenir oublié*. Abou-Daoud says to Brahim, "Imagine-tu, Brahim, que des Arabes israéliens sont aujourd'hui locataires de leurs propres biens usurpés par les Juifs ?! Est-ce que tu t'imagines ?" (34).

Sanbar indicates here that it is not only illegal for his family to return to their house, it is also illegal for the current residents to make any improvements to the structure (though I have not found any historical sources to support this). The woman in “C’est toi” reveals the Catch 22 in which she finds herself; she is not only forced to pay rent to an Israeli authority, but also required to be complicit in a system that bans the return of the original owners. Moreover, the idea that prohibiting repairs to the house would maintain its initial appearance for the original owners is nonsensical; the Sanbars have been absent for decades and the house has necessarily deteriorated over time. It is in this passage that the political commentary inherent within Sanbar’s use of the presence/absence duality becomes apparent. By including the elderly woman’s assessment of the situation, Sanbar intimates that, despite the presence of the current residents of the former Sanbar house, the Israeli government uses the Sanbars’ absence as an excuse to ignore, or “forget,” the basic needs of the former group.

“C’est donc toi” recounts both Sanbar’s successes and his failures in recovering his family’s and his people’s memory. The author concludes the vignette with a poignant image that illustrates this ambiguity through emphasis on the absence/ presence duality. In the author’s brief visit to the house, he is barred entry to one specific room because, as the elderly woman explains, her son keeps his valuables there under lock and key. One year later, Sanbar receives a letter in the mail containing photos taken by one of his readers, who, following the information given in Sanbar’s *Le Pays à venir*, had located and photographed the author’s former house. The reader had met the inhabitant of the locked room—Tony, a junk dealer—and captured some of his possessions on film. Bizarrely, the photographs showed that the contents of the room included a portrait of a

man with the inscription, “Elias Sanbar, né et mort à Haïfa, 1878-1932.” In the vignette, Sanbar is unable to determine the identity of this mysterious man; none of his relatives have heard of the other Elias. Nevertheless, both the prominent display of his name in his house and his inability to view this image first-hand give the author pause.

The importance of this hidden presence seems to override his disappointment at his relatives’ lack of knowledge about the deceased Sanbar: “Les vieux de la famille encore vivants ne se souvenaient pas de l’homme et les jeunes n’avaient jamais entendu parler de lui [...] Mais je sais que, le jour où je suis entré dans ma maison, mon nom s’y trouvait. Dans une chambre fermée à clé” (140). On an individual level, the existence of this portrait (whether fictional or not) confirms Sanbar’s rightful claim to the family home and family name, as evidenced in his use of the two possessive adjectives in this sentence: “*ma* maison” and “*mon* nom.” The Sanbar name and their emotional connection to their family home represent “possessions” that no legal or rhetorical measures on the part of the Israelis can take away. On a symbolic level, the author’s affirmation of his name is synonymous with an affirmation of his Palestinian identity and a recovery of Palestinian memory, while his statement of possession of his home contests Israeli dispossession of the Palestinian homeland. Lynn D. Rogers interprets the ignorance about the deceased Sanbar as proof that the photograph is erroneously labeled and writes that this passage “calls into question the fallibility of photography and the written word used to establish reality” (99). While I concur with Rogers that, overall, Sanbar’s memoirs challenge “the historical methodology of establishing one-dimensional truth,” her treatment of this specific passage misplaces its significance. More significant than the lack of evidence of the existence of another Elias Sanbar, this passage further

underscores the centrality of the absence/ presence duality in Palestinian identity. Within the space of the story “C’est donc toi,” the photograph represents proof of the Sanbars’ existence in pre-*Nakba* Palestine, as well as the impasse the author faces in his attempts to repossess the history of his people. In *Figures*, Sanbar poetically likens the *Nakba* to a loss of the Palestinian name: “À l’automne 1949, la terre de Palestine est noyée. Recouverte par une autre [...], elle a perdu son nom” (*Figures* 213). Sanbar’s oeuvre in general, and his story “C’est donc toi” in particular, work to reclaim this lost name.

Just as this passage underscores the simultaneous presence and absence of Palestinians, Sanbar establishes another binary indicative of the predicament of Palestinians, that of being concurrently locked in and locked out. In “C’est donc toi,” while Sanbar name was locked inside the room, the author himself was locked out. Similarly, the elderly woman finds herself trapped inside a dilapidated house and inside an unjust Israeli system that demands her complicity in keeping other Palestinians from returning. In contrast, the Sanbars are prohibited from returning to their home.

This metaphor of the lock is again significant on both an individual level for the author, as well as on a societal level for Palestinians. On a personal level, Sanbar seems to relate to Mahmoud Darwish’s²⁷ comments regarding the way in which the conflict has imprisoned his life. Sanbar closes his piece entitled “Une absence imposée” in *Le Pays* with Darwish’s words on the repercussions Zionism has had on his life: “‘Il a enfermé ma vie, l’a rendue prisonnière, enchaînée à une seule question, condamnée à un seul sujet : ce conflit’” (*Le Pays* 28). That Sanbar chooses to conclude his story with Darwish’s words suggests that the author feels similarly imprisoned by the conflict and by his eternal quest

²⁷ Darwish was the most famous Palestinian poet and a personal friend of Sanbar’s. He was considered one of the symbolic leaders of the Palestinian liberation movement (Sa’di and Abu-Lughod, 7).

for his roots, his identity, and his homeland. At the same time that Sanbar is “locked into” endless struggle due to the conflict, he is also “locked out”—prohibited not only from resuming residency in Palestine, but also denied access to lived memories of his homeland.

Interpreted allegorically, the lock metaphor points to the divergent circumstances of the internal and external Palestinian refugees. Those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are “locked inside” the Occupied Territories, while those in exile are “locked out”—barred from resuming residence in their homeland. Albeit in a more concrete sense, Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi echoes Darwish’s use of the prison metaphor, in this case to describe the Palestinian experience in the Gaza Strip: “The 323 sq. km. of the Strip are their prison, surrounded on all sides by closely guarded barbed wire fences with only one exit, which most of them are not allowed to use, and beyond which lie their former lands, now part of Israel” (3). Sanbar’s depiction of the legal imposition of absence on Palestinians allows the author to explore the divisive effects of such legal measures on his people. These laws severely restrict Palestinians’ movement—either locking them in or out, or both—and, as demonstrated in the fate of the Sanbar family house, force Palestinians to be complicit in a system that discriminates against their own people. Further, Sanbar’s exploration of this theme provides an opportunity for him to affirm Palestinian rights and demonstrates the importance of articulating a Palestinian narrative that troubles the narrative laid out in the Israeli legal code.

Sanbar underscores the effects of the legal imposition of absence through stories such as “C’est donc toi,” as well as through the title of his work, *Le Bien des absents*, yet the author also highlights the symbolic absence imposed on Palestinians through the use

of Israeli rhetoric. Indeed, the consequences of these rhetorical measures, which deny the existence of Palestinians, may be just as far-reaching as the legal measures discussed above, since they serve to justify the displacement and permanent exile of Palestinians. Sanbar explores these rhetorical efforts in *Le pays*. In the chapter entitled, “Une absence imposée”—a piece that is more editorial than memoir—Sanbar summarizes the Israeli attitude toward Palestinians in this way: “‘Les Palestiniens n’existent pas’, diront les dirigeants d’Israël. Cette terrible sentence, si elle est au présent opère pourtant au futur et au passé. Les Palestiniens n’existent pas, personne ne peut prétendre qu’ils ont existé ou qu’ils existeront” (*Le pays* 19). Sanbar’s statement, which implies that all Israeli leaders deny the presence of Palestinians, is, of course, hyperbole. Denial was, however, one strategy practiced by some of Israel’s leaders and is perhaps most famously evidenced by Golda Meir’s 1969 interview with *The Times* of London, in which the then prime minister was quoted as saying “There was no such thing as Palestinians. [...] They did not exist.”²⁸ While certainly not emblematic of all Zionists, Meir’s polemical statement is representative of a current of thought amongst certain Zionists who hold that a collective Palestinian identity did not exist before the foundation of the State of Israel.

Some of the most common claims Zionists make in support of this argument include: one, that many of those who claimed Palestinian identity immigrated to the former Palestine from neighboring Arab states, attracted by the improved economy thanks to the Jewish presence, in the first half of the 20th-century; two, that Palestinians never had sovereignty over the land they call Palestine; three, that a Palestinian national

²⁸ [Sunday Times \(London\)](#) 15 June 1969, p. 12, qtd. in Khalidi, 147.

consciousness only developed in reaction to the Zionist presence.²⁹ While historical evidence supports these claims to a point, Palestinian history is not as flat as these Zionists would have it. Historians more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, such as the Palestinian Rashid Khalidi, note that the development of a Palestinian national consciousness is indeed a tricky issue and one that is complicated by the divergent powers that have controlled Palestine. Prior to the intervention of European colonial powers, allegiances of the residents of Palestine were determined as they were in the rest of the Arab world; that is to say, they were based on family, village, and religious connections (Smith 31).³⁰ Nevertheless, there is evidence dating as far back as the 17th century indicating that educated Palestinians had notions of living in an area called “Palestine” (Smith 31) as well as evidence that Palestine was conceived of as a roughly delineated sacred space in the 19th century by Muslims, Christians, and Jews (Khalidi, 29).

In his historical text, *Figures*, Sanbar explores the Israeli effacement of Palestinian presence that serves to deprive the latter group of their identity, their land, and their memories. Here, as in other passages, Sanbar figures all Israelis as one uniform group, failing to distinguish government policy from the attitudes of citizens and overlooking those who advocate on behalf of Palestinians. The first rhetorical technique

²⁹ One example, albeit a very exaggerated one, of such argumentation is found in Joan Peters’ *From Time Immemorial*. Peters’ primary goal is to counter Palestinian claims to have inhabited Palestine “from time immemorial,” but the author goes so far as to refer to Palestinians’ emotional attachment to their land as “mythology” and “myth.” Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). The polemical nature of Peters’ text sparked a scholarly battle that was fought in the pages of *The New York Times* and involved such luminaries as Barbara Tuchman, Saul Bellow, and Elie Wiesel (who wrote favorably of the book) and Norman Finkelstein and William Farrell (who denounced it and found Peters’ methods to be shoddy). Accusing Peters of plagiarism, in 1986, Israeli historian Yehoshua Porath deemed Peters’ scholarship worthless (Khalidi, 241).

³⁰ Bearing in mind Sanbar’s Christian heritage, however, it is interesting to note that, during the Ottoman Empire, evidence points to a stronger sense of Palestinian identity among Arab Christians than Muslims (Smith, 42).

of erasure of which Sanbar accuses Israelis is use of the category “Arab,” rather than “Palestinian.” The author posits that Israelis oppose the Palestine return “par tous les moyens, militaires et politiques, mais aussi par le langage. Usant à l’égard des Palestiniens du qualificatif tout à la fois concret et vague ‘Arabes’, ils dissocient les Palestiniens de leur nom” (*Figures* 220). Sanbar suggests that Israeli avoidance of the term “Palestinian” dissolves the specificity of the Palestinians and the claim to their homeland. Further, he implies that this rhetorical device implicitly supports the view that Palestinians—deemed no different than their Arab neighbors—should be absorbed into the Arab countries that surround Israel. One historical example that supports Sanbar’s claims here dates back to 1950 when, despite Arab leaders’ rejections, the Israeli government argued for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Arab lands, replacing them with Jewish immigrants to Israel from these same lands (Smith 231). Again, however, Sanbar holds the entire Israeli population responsible for the actions of the government and omits mention of any popular dissent.

Another rhetorical erasure explored by Sanbar is an official Israeli effort to remove Arab village names. The author laments the “Localités débaptisées, noms inventés de toutes pièces, ruines des villages arabes rasés cataloguées ‘ruines romaines’ [...]” (*Figures* 221). Again, such a move, Sanbar implies, not only effaces the Palestinian presence in Israel, but also counters their historical claims to a homeland. Sanbar likens this rhetorical device to a seizure of the memory of the land, writing “L’éradication des noms s’accompagna d’une expropriation de la mémoire des lieux” (*Figures* 224). Referring to the same phenomenon, Khalidi writes, “This process of naming is an attempt to privilege one dimension of a complex reality at the expense of

others, with the ultimate aim of blotting others out, or decisively subordinating them to Israeli domination” (15). For Sanbar, this imposition of absence underscores the need to record and reclaim Palestinian memories. Some Israelis have also taken notice of this need as well, though they go unmentioned by Sanbar. Zochrot, for example, is a left-wing Israeli organization that works to raise awareness of the *Nakba* in Jewish society and Israeli schools. One of the methods they employ is organizing trips—attended by Jews and Arabs—to sites of destroyed Arab villages where the group posts street signs in Arabic next to the existing signs in Hebrew.³¹

Nevertheless, the combined efforts of Palestinian scholars such as Sanbar and Khalidi and groups such as Zochrot have been thus far insufficient to drastically shift Israeli policy regarding the acknowledgement of a Palestinian presence either before 1948 or today. In the summer of 2009, Israeli Minister of Transport, Yisrael Katz, announced his decision to Hebraize the road signs in Israel. Citing problems posed to travelers who speak foreign languages, Katz proposed altering road signs so that destination names will retain only the Jewish version of the name. Transliterations in Arabic and English will accompany Hebrew names of cities and town, but alternative Palestinian names will be removed. The country’s capital, for example, will be listed in English (Jerusalem), in Hebrew (*Yerushalayim*), and in Arabic (*Ūrṣalīm*) but not with the Palestinian name of *al-Quds*.³² Katz’s announcement demonstrates that efforts by the Israeli government to obscure a Palestinian presence—to willing “forget” a history that

³¹ Eitan Bronstein, "The Nakba in Hebrew: Israeli-Jewish Awareness of the Palestinian Catastrophe and Internal Refugees," Nur Masalha, Catastrophe Remembered: Palestine, Israel and the Internal Refugees (London: Zen Books Ltd, 2005) 219-20.

³² "Row over 'standard' Hebrew signs," 13 July 2009, BBC News, 13 April 2010 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/8148089.stm>.

counters the official Zionist narrative—are ongoing even 62 years after the foundation of the State of Israel.

One of the ways in which Sanbar contests the legal and rhetorical absence imposed by the Israeli government is—as previously explored—through his recurrent figuring of Palestine as home. Palestine continues to function as “un chez nous” for the Palestinians evoked in Sanbar’s oeuvre, regardless of their whereabouts. Similarly, the author maintains his rightful possession of the family home in Haifa—we recall his use of the expressions “mon nom” and “ma maison”—even though, according to *Le Bien*, he is currently unable to resume residence there (140). He evokes the family home in four of *Le Bien*’s nine stories: “Un jour en avril,” “Les tailleurs de pierre,” “Un chant pour Ellis Island,” and “C’est donc toi qui envoies tous ces gens.” With his testimony, Sanbar mounts a powerful resistance to the willingness on the part of some Israelis to deny a Palestinian presence, past or future.

Conclusion

The story told in Elias Sanbar’s *Le Bien des absents* recounts the devastating consequences and ultimate failure of official Israeli attempts to erase Palestinian memories. These attempts at effacement have neither resulted in a diminished importance of homeland in the Palestinian psyche nor quelled the Palestinians’ desire to fight for their territory and sovereignty. Sanbar’s text not only challenges a monolithic Israeli narrative, but also—given its publication in French—contributes to the transmission of Palestinian history to the Western world.³³ While Sanbar’s

³³ Rogers notes that Sanbar’s text works to “deflat[e] the racist stereotype of a Middle East paralyzed in the past” (95-96).

communication of a Palestinian narrative is certainly praiseworthy, it is important to investigate the danger inherent in the author's challenge of Israeli identity.

As I noted in the beginning of this chapter, Sanbar's opening story, "Un jour en avril," is marked by a conspicuous absence of Israelis. In this story, Sanbar avoids referring to Israelis, figuring his family's departure as being the result of inanimate forces, "le vide" and "l'absence." While the author does directly reference Israelis at several points in the stories that follow, the allusions are almost exclusively negative. His texts feature no well-developed Israeli characters and virtually none who challenge Palestinian stereotypes about their foes. In *Le Bien* Sanbar figures Israelis as one homogenous mass, all of whom support the government's policies. While the author is successful in deconstructing an Israeli narrative predicated on Palestinian absence by articulating his people's presence, is Sanbar not guilty of a similar offense as that of which he accuses his adversaries? Sanbar's textual effacement of Israeli humanity does not, of course, carry real-life consequences such as forced exile or legal discrimination. This move does, however, point to a mentality that poses a threat to Israeli-Palestinian relations. Rather than creating a textual space in which Israeli and Palestinian narratives exist side-by-side, Sanbar's memoir excludes one side's history in favor of the other's. If multiple, and often oppositional, narratives cannot coexist in a textual space, it becomes nearly impossible to imagine Israelis and Palestinians coexisting in the contested geographical space of Israel-Palestine.

Sanbar notes the historical precedent for such a dialectical relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. In *Le pays à venir*, the memoirist describes the emergence of such a relationship in the years following the *Nakba*:

‘Vous n’existez pas’, avaient dit les Israéliens. Ce à quoi les Palestiniens avaient répondu: ‘Bientôt vous n’existerez plus.’ D’autres facteurs ont également contribué à renforcer ce déni réciproque d’existence. Il y avait une structure en miroir : ayant *totale*ment disparu, la Palestine ne pouvait réémerger que si le remplaçant disparaissait. La quête de présence exclusive—État des Juifs, c’est-à-dire des seuls Juifs—avait été si intimement associée par les sionistes à la rédemption de cette terre que seule une présence exclusive opposée pouvait apporter la rédemption, arabe cette fois, de cette même terre. En conséquence l’État des Palestiniens ne pouvait voir le jour que si l’État des Juifs cédait la place. Cet antagonisme absolu ne laissait aucune place à une quelconque idée de partage. (*Le pays* 220)

Sanbar reads this dialectic as an inevitable expression of the Palestinian liberation movement confronting a state that had been declared strictly Jewish. The hopeless picture painted here indicates that continued warfare between the two communities is unavoidable. However, Sanbar tempers this bleak view of Israeli-Palestinian relations with a discussion of how they have evolved and improved over the years:

Le rapport des réfugiés aux Israéliens et aux juifs en général a également évolué au fil des années. Né comme un riposte au postulat établi par les expulseurs (‘Vous ou nous’ ; ‘Votre absence, notre présence), il commence par en reprendre les termes en les inversant (‘La Palestine revivra, Israël disparaîtra’). [...] Mais, transitoire ou pas, modelé par la vie qui continue malgré tout, par l’évolution du conflit aussi, par les tourments rencontrés dans les pays d’accueil, le temps produira une prise de conscience du monde, sans cesse nourrie d’interrogations sur l’adversaire, mais aussi sur soi, ses dirigeants, ses alliés.

Une renaissance nationale en résulte et impose une approche plus complexe des questions, au premier rang desquelles celle d’une meilleure connaissance d’Israël. Motivée au départ par un désir de pure efficacité (mieux connaître pour mieux combattre), elle se double d’une quête de solution et creuse ainsi la première faille d’importance dans le mur originel du déni mutuel d’existence. [...] Une révolution lente commence ainsi dans l’esprit de ceux qui, considérant jusque-là leur revendication comme absolue, amorcent au début des années 1970 une évolution difficile, intimement violente, tournée contre soi et plus seulement contre l’occupant. (*Le pays* 253-54)

As an example of the progress made in the Palestinian mentality regarding Israelis, Sanbar cites the 1998 change in the Palestinian National Charter, which removed the

language expressing an intention to destroy Israel (*Le pays* 254).³⁴ Despite the changes in the official Palestinian position on Israel, however, calls for the demolition of the Jewish State are still frequent in both the Palestinian and larger Arab world. According to historian Robert S. Wistrich, “Le projet de détruire Israël demeure cependant une force essentielle motivant les perspectives politiques de nombreux Arabes. Le principe de base selon lequel Israël doit être rayé de la carte n’est pas seulement un axiome religieux intégriste, il est partagé par la plupart des nationalistes arabes et palestiniens, ainsi que par la majeure partie de la ‘rue arabe.’”³⁵ While the extent of such violent fervor may not be mirrored in Israeli society, according to Smith, more than half of Israelis support the idea of transferring Palestinians—both those in the territories and those inside Israel (known as Arab Israelis)—outside of the Jewish State (Smith 533, 541).

As evidenced in the quotation above, Sanbar’s historical account of the evolution of Palestinian attitudes in *Le pays* advocates the prospect of sharing the land of Israel/Palestine. The author’s support of this shift in mentality is apparent in his use of the expressions “prise de conscience,” “une approche plus complexe,” and “une meilleure connaissance,” which all have positive connotations. Yet the question remains of whether Sanbar’s more literary account of Israeli-Palestinian relations in *Le Bien* opens a textual space for “an idea of sharing”—“une quelconque idée de partage”—or forecloses such a possibility (*Le pays* 220). If a coexistence of narratives is not possible in a literary space, can we remain hopeful that it is possible in the real world?

While Sanbar’s focus on memory and attempts to destabilize narratives links *Le Bien des absents* to the works treated in chapters one through three, the absence of

³⁴ See also Smith 476.

³⁵ Wistrich, “L’antisémitisme” 21.

Jewish-Arab exchange set this text apart. Unlike the other authors, Sanbar does not utilize literature as a space to imagine interreligious harmony, nor does he nostalgically depict the cross-cultural exchange of the past. To what can we attribute the vast differences in perspective that distinguish Sanbar's *Le Bien des absents* from the works of Slimane Benaïssa, Hubert Haddad, and Edmond Amran El Maleh? I contend that Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh's personal experiences with Jewish-Muslim coexistence account, in part, for their points of view. For Sanbar, on the other hand, it seems that the Jewish-Arab binary has become too rigid for the author to envision a more harmonious relationship between the two groups. Though his lifelong exile from his homeland and his publication in French establish some distance between Sanbar and the conflict, it seems that he is too personally implicated in the history of animosity to create a literary space of exchange between Israelis and Palestinians. Through counterexample, Sanbar's oeuvre demonstrates the specificity that Maghrebi writers bring to Israel-Palestine and the significance of the artistic expression of this perspective regarding such an intractable political conflict.

CODA

ARTISTIC RESTAGINGS OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

I began the first chapter of this investigation by positing that Slimane Benaïssa's stage for *L'avenir oublié* functions both as a representation of and challenge to a dichotomous view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, the halved stage—which assigns the Palestinian characters to stage left and the Israelis to stage right—highlights the antagonism between the actors in the conflict, the unequal distribution of resources between them, as well as the oppositional narratives that define them. On the other, the dramaturge's emphasis on symmetry brings to the fore the comparable internal rifts and the traumatic memories that symbolically unite the two communities. It is in his portrayal of these Israeli and Palestinian parallels, as well as in his depiction of the cross-cultural collaboration—which, significantly, takes place center stage—that Benaïssa challenges the conventionally held binaries that define relations between Israelis and Palestinians. The playwright troubles the monolithic narratives that feed such binaries by creating a textual and scenic space in which a multiplicity of memories—on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides—are forced to contend with one another. A central question posed by Benaïssa's text is whether these conflicting histories will continue to function as an impasse to peace or if recognition of similar experiences can indicate a path to peace. In other words, can one remain faithful to one's past—by memorializing those that have

fallen at the hands of the other, for example—and simultaneously work towards a better future with improved relations with the other? *L'avenir* suggests that it is possible to obey both the duty to remember the past and the duty to “remember” the future if we interpret the latter in a constructive, rather than a restrictive way. Extracting universal lessons from history’s traumas, and adopting a “multidirectional memory”—to borrow Michael Rothberg’s term once again—may allow us to recognize similarities in our histories that cross ethnic, religious, or national barriers.

Through their explorations of remembering and forgetting, Hubert Haddad and Edmond Amran El Maleh’s texts also serve to challenge the Israeli-Palestinian binary. In Haddad’s portrayal of an amnesiac Israeli soldier who falls in love with one of his Palestinian caretakers, the author considers the potential salutary effects of forgetting one’s hatred of the other. Revealing the protagonist’s Arab heritage through the return of repressed memories, Haddad also uses the conceit of amnesia to comment on the proximity between Arab Jews and Palestinians, the ways in which both groups have been relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and the repression of both of these identities by an Israeli identity dominated by Ashkenazi influence. Haddad’s deconstruction of the binary in *Palestine* results both from his depiction of romantic love between the Israeli protagonist and his Palestinian caretaker, as well as in the author’s positioning of Arab Jews as a group that, in their “in-between” position, muddies the dichotomy. Though *Mille ans, un jour* is set primarily in Morocco, El Maleh, like Haddad, underscores the harmony that existed between Jews and Muslims in pre-independence Morocco in order to critique the discord that currently marks Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle East. Through his use of plurivocal narration, El Maleh

reveals the multiplicity of stories that characterize the pre-exodus Moroccan Jewish experience, thus challenging a Zionist mentality that considers the Jewish history of the diaspora, especially that of Arab countries, to be meaningless.

As I demonstrate in chapter four, though Elias Sanbar—like Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh—treats memory and forgetting as a central theme and participates in the deconstructive mode, the Palestinian author does not challenge the Israeli-Palestinian binary, but rather, reinforces it. In recording Palestinian memories of life before 1948, of the departure from their homeland, of struggles in their countries of adoption, and in their fight for independence, Sanbar interrogates an Israeli narrative that is predicated on the absence of Palestinians—a narrative facilitated by, what the author portrays as, a willed Israeli forgetting of Palestinian history. Yet, while Sanbar condemns this shrouding of Palestinian narrative—this purposeful forgetting of Palestinian memory—the author participates in a similar practice. In emphasizing the humanity of Palestinians through the recording of his personal memoirs, Sanbar seems to “forget” the human side of Israelis. *Le Bien des absents* features no well-developed Israeli characters; when the author does reference Israelis, they are, for the most part, portrayed as nameless, faceless, and despicable figures. In this way, Sanbar runs the risk of establishing a dialectical relationship between the two populations in which, even in the space of his autofictional text, the presence of one people (Palestinians) is dependent on the absence of the other (Israelis).

While Benaïssa is the sole author I treat who utilizes the genre of theater, in this coda, I consider the symbolic “restaging” of the conflict that takes place in all of the texts I analyze. Through my exploration of this restaging, I examine the role that art, and

specifically literature, can play in this conflict. Through references to several non-literary projects that challenge official narratives of the conflict, as well as an analysis of media coverage in the Middle East that propagates stereotypical depictions of the other, I use these last few pages to interrogate how art can contribute to this seemingly intractable political and religious clash.

As a means of approaching these questions, I would like to consider another artistic endeavor, also created by French artists but “staged” in Israel/ Palestine. In 2007, a photographer—J.R.—and an interviewer—Marco, who, not insignificantly is of Tunisian origin—carried out a project entitled “Face2Face.” Their project consisted of taking portraits of pairs of Israelis and Palestinians who have the same occupation; the artists photographed, for example, one Israeli and one Palestinian taxi driver. Positioning the camera extremely close to his subjects’ faces, JR instructed them to make grimaces, resulting in caricature-like images. Members of the “Face2Face” team then hung giant reproductions of the photos side by side in public spaces in both Israel and the Occupied Territories. Their mission was to bring to the fore the striking physical resemblances of the two communities and to combat the stereotypical images of the other propagated by the media. As the artists explain on the project’s website, “ces gens se ressemblent, ils parlent presque la même langue, comme des frères jumeaux élevés dans des familles différentes. [...] C'est évident, mais ils ne le voient pas. **Nous devons les mettre face à face. Ils réaliseront**” (original emphasis). In the trailer for “Face2Face,” also accessible via the website, Marco explains that the artists wanted to encourage viewers to look past their fixed view of the other: the Palestinian as terrorist and the Israeli as occupying

soldier. “In reality, it’s infinitely more complex,” he explained.¹ “Face2Face” thus has much in common with the deconstruction of the Israeli-Palestinian binary that I examine in my analyses of *L’avenir oublié*, *Palestine*, and *Mille ans, un jour*. JR and Marco’s project echoes the symmetry between the two populations emphasized by Benaïssa, the uncanny resemblances between Arab Jews and Palestinians explored by Haddad, and the proximity of Jewish and Muslim traditions underscored in *Mille ans*. Moreover, JR and Marco’s decision to hang the portraits of the historical “rivals” side-by-side parallels Benaïssa, Haddad, and El Maleh’s efforts to create textual spaces in which conflicting narratives are forced to coexist. Just as “Face2Face”’s emphasis on the similarities between the two groups compels viewers to confront their biases regarding the other, *L’avenir oublié*, *Palestine*, and *Mille ans, un jour* encourage readers to note where Israeli and Palestinian (or Jewish and Muslim) narratives overlap and where they diverge. In taking note of these overlaps, readers and viewers of these artistic projects may be inspired to reconsider the ethnic, linguistic, religious, or cultural differences from the other that are traditionally conceived of as barriers. By contrast, Sanbar’s *Le Bien des absents* promotes a reconsideration of the place of Palestinians in the Israeli narrative, but not that of Israelis in the Palestinian narrative.

One advantage that a project such as “Face2Face” affords is the ability to more easily and immediately measure public reaction. Visitors to the project’s website can view footage of “Face2Face”’s spectators both via the trailer produced by the artists and the short documentary feature produced by ARTE—the Franco-German television channel dedicated to cultural programming. In this footage, most spectators react to the

¹ [Face2Face](http://www.face2faceproject.com), 16 April 2010 <www.face2faceproject.com>.

project with incredulity and laughter. Marco describes his interactions with Israelis and Palestinians on the street. He shows spectators versions of the portraits reproduced in a book and asks them to identify who is the Israeli and who is the Palestinian; they are often unable to do so. Marco analyzes this transformative moment:

À ce moment-là, on rentre dans le jeu, et là, normalement la personne oublie qu'il [sic] n'était pas d'accord ou même pourquoi il n'était pas d'accord et commence à jouer [...]. On rentre dans le jeu et, à ce moment-là, on commence à rigoler et du coup on est dans un autre climat. [...] Et il est avec nous, il est dans le projet, il est de notre côté. Ça devient un de nos associés.

Here Marco attributes part of the project's success to its humorous nature. The documentary explores the question of humor through a conversation captured between Jack Brudar—a Christian Palestinian, as well as one of the subjects photographed—and two passengers in a car. “Comment on peut rire avec quelque chose de triste comme le mur? Je ne comprends pas,” the driver comments, referring to the security wall. Brudar responds, “Oui, c’est ridicule; ces visages sont ridicules. Mais le mur aussi est ridicule. [...] Le mur ne résout pas nos problèmes; il en crée d’autres.” Suddenly understanding the connections between the exaggerated nature of the portraits, the uncanny resemblances between Israelis and Palestinians, and the irony of the security wall that separates them, the driver exclaims, “Oui, c’est vrai. Là on commence à voir une certaine logique. [...] Maintenant je comprends mieux. Il suffisait qu’on discute en peu.”² The conversation ends with laughter and a handshake.

But if this viewer seems convinced of the project's merit and its mode of expression, one Palestinian spectator derides its jesting nature. Taking issue with “Face2Face”'s posting of photos on a section of the controversial security wall in Bethlehem, this man comments, “Les photos, ça va. Elles sont belles. Mais bon, si vous

² This conversation takes place in English but is dubbed in France.

mettez des photos amusantes sur le mur, les visiteurs, les touristes, qui viennent ici, ce qu'il vont voir c'est les photos et pas le mur." This can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees reaction raises several questions related to the project's goals and its effectiveness. For if "Face2Face" succeeds in revealing the artificiality of the barriers between Israelis and Palestinians through its use of humor, does it simultaneously obscure the severity of both the motivation behind the security wall—Palestinian suicide bombers from Gaza entering Israel—and its negative consequences—the dearth of basic supplies, the lack of access to medical facilities experienced by Palestinians?

"Face2Face"'s humor functions in a similar way to that in *L'avenir oublié*; both stress the absurdity of a conflict that opposes two populations with so many parallels. Humor disarms the readers and spectators in these two situations and encourages a confrontation with one's prejudices. Because the "performance" of both artistic works occurs in public spaces—either in the theater or in the street—humor may facilitate discussion amongst viewers. This is perhaps what Marco means when he asserts that humor leads spectators of "Face2Face" to become "associates" of the project. Marco suggests that in laughing at the distorted and exaggerated images, spectators are also laughing at themselves—at their own inability to tell Israelis and Palestinians apart and at their own preconceived notions. In a similar fashion, the humorous quality of some of *L'avenir*'s moments stems from the audience's knowledge of the identical roots of the three Abrahamic faiths and the irony of the current animosity between Jews and Muslims. One example occurs during the following exchange between the Jewish Joseph and the half-Muslim, half-Christian Antoine-Nasser:

Antoine-Nasser: T'as pas été cure, toi, dans une autre vie ?

Joseph: Et toi, tu n'as pas été juif ?

Antoine-Nasser: Dans une autre vie, on a tous été juifs, c'est sûr. (Benaïssa 46)

The humor inherent in both *L'avenir* and “Face2Face” that provokes a reconsideration of biases may be a quality that is particular to the way in which art can contribute to conversations about grave political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Although the Bethlehem man cited above is correct, perhaps the reverse is also true and that we should look more closely at the “trees.” Whereas this man is concerned that the humorous and aesthetically pleasing qualities of the photos in “Face2Face” will detract from viewers’ perceptions of the severity of the security wall’s consequences, it may be that highlighting the “sameness” of Israelis and Palestinians underscores their shared humanity. It is important to expose people to these artistic endeavors, which should run as side streets to the main information arteries of media reports and historical accounts. These artistic takes may encourage spectators to view the other as having valid concerns related to security, health, and freedom.

If we were to measure the project’s achievement based on the statistics given in the documentary, it would appear that the endeavor was quite successful. Out of the 46 Israelis and Palestinians JR and Marco asked to serve as subjects for the portraits, 41 accepted—including religious leaders from the three monotheistic religions. The photos were hung in Hebron, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, Haifa, and, according to the documentary, elicited mostly positive responses from spectators. But do these statistics account for real change? How long do viewers of the project become the artists’ “associates”? In terms of progress on the political front, responses to these questions seem bleak. Violent clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian terrorists continue.³ Little progress in the peace process has been made of late and was recently slowed

³ See, for example, “Israeli Troops Kill 2 Militants in Gaza,” [The New York Times](#) 13 April 2010.

further when Israel announced plans to build 1,600 new housing units in the Palestinian neighborhood of East Jerusalem in March of 2010.⁴ Perhaps the most tragic example of the stalled peace process is the Gaza War of 2009, when Israel carried out a destructive and deadly invasion of the territory in an attempt to halt the Palestinian rocket fire that had plagued the country for years.⁵

In her recent monograph, *Être juif après Gaza*, Esther Benbassa questions how Jews—especially secular Jews, who, in the absence of a religious identity, often form a strong emotional connection to Israel—can continue to support the Jewish State in the wake of this morally questionable military offensive. Criticizing both Israelis’ and diasporic Jews’ unwillingness to interrogate the ethical implications of Israel’s policies, the Jewish historian and theoretician points to what she considers to be the exceptionally partisan coverage of the war by the Israeli media. Describing the television reports, Benbassa writes, “Les images diffusées en boucle par les chaînes de télévision ne ciblaient que la région touchée par les frappes du Hamas et ses habitants. En arrière-plan, on pouvait distinguer un tank, de la fumée, comme si les Gazaouis relevaient de l’abstraction. Toute la compassion allait aux Israéliens visés par ces tirs. De l’autre côté, il n’y avait pas d’êtres humains.”⁶ Benbassa’s emphasis on the staggering number of Palestinian casualties and the war crimes of which Israel is accused fortify her criticism of Israel’s disregard for Palestinians’ humanity (*Être juif* 52-60). Yet evidence of similar

⁴ Isabel Kershner, "Israel Confirms New Building in East Jerusalem," *The New York Times* 24 March 2010.

⁵ The war took 1,400 Palestinian lives and 13 Israeli lives. Reuters, "Israel Strikes in Gaza After Deadly Rocket," *The New York Times* 19 March 2010.

⁶ Esther Benbassa, *Être juif* 67. In a footnote, Benbassa notes just one exception to her observation about the Israeli media’s disinclination to acknowledge the humanity of the Palestinian victims of violence: the broadcast of a telephone interview with a Palestinian gynecologist who was screaming in agony over the deaths of his daughters and niece as the result of Israeli fire into his house.

partiality in coverage of the war by Palestinian and Arab media is easy to find.⁷ In general, the Arab media is certainly no less guilty of biased depictions of the other than their Israeli counterparts. Particularly troubling is the preponderance of “anti-Semitic films, books and documentaries” on television networks and bookshelves in the Arab world, as noted, for example, by Debrauwere-Miller in “France and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” (11). Sadly, a large percentage of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East are blind to the common humanity that binds them to the other.

Can the arts play a role in humanizing the other? Do the arts have the capacity to remind the actors in the Israel-Palestine conflict of the possibility of imagining a different future? While art may appear powerless in the face of the far-reaching devastation of Gaza in the winter of 2009 or as a means of combating the sway of Islamist discourse in the Arab world, some artists remain hopeful that small-scale changes facilitated by art will someday have a wider impact. One example recently caught my attention. On May 3, 2010, National Public Radio correspondent Lara Pellegrinelli interviewed the early-music expert Jordi Savall about the concerts entitled *Jerusalem: City of Heavenly and Earthly Peace* that the Spanish musician was performing at the time at Lincoln Center in New York City. The music presented represents the three Abrahamic faiths and the musicians hailed from 14 countries throughout the Middle East and Europe. According to Pellegrinelli, Savall’s project was “inspired by the notion that music can transcend politics.” Paraphrasing the musician, Pellegrinelli noted, “If people can be together for two hours, making music together and realizing peace in a small place like a concert hall [...], we should be able to achieve this in a big place. All we have to do is allow people

⁷ See, for example, Yoav Stern’s reporting on glorification of suicide bombing in, “ Hamas’ take on the Gaza war? Watch it on YouTube,” [Haaretz](#) 13 January 2009.

to be human together away from strife.”⁸ In a similar fashion to Benaïssa’s cross-cultural casting in *L’avenir oublié*, Savall’s concerts create an opportunity for people of different faiths to collaborate through art.

The literary works analyzed in this study function in a less overtly political fashion than a project such as “Face2Face” and, other than the stage production of *L’avenir*, these texts do not offer the possibility of convening large groups of spectators to observe or participate in a common artistic endeavor. Nevertheless, I contend that literature offers something unique to a conflict such as the one that has plagued the Middle East over the last half-century. Whereas the thrust of “Face2Face”’s force lasted only as long as the portraits hung in the streets of Israel-Palestine, and whereas the experience in a concert hall lasts only until the final note is played, literary works theoretically have an infinite life span. Readers may return to texts time and time again. Literature provides the possibility of re-narrating the history of the Middle East, rescuing lost histories, and communicating to the reading public accounts that challenge the stereotypes propagated by media coverage. Moreover, in a conflict that centers around oppositional narratives, literature provides a space in which these divergent accounts of history may be placed in dialogue with one another and renegotiated, perhaps in less conflictual terms. Unlike other forms of communication, such as media coverage or historical accounts, artistic and literary renderings of the conflict have the liberty to relate narratives in a non-linear fashion. As fiction writers, Benaïssa, Haddad, El Maleh, and, to a lesser degree, Sanbar expose their readers to a diverse host of characters voicing a variety of experiences and opinions. In this way, art, in general, and literature, in

⁸ Lara Pellegrinelli, "Jordi Savall: Tracing Jerusalem's History in Music," 3 May 2010, [NPR Music](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126390261), 4 May 2010 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126390261>>.

particular, allow us to imagine answers to the final question posed by Benaïssa in *L'avenir oublié*: “Comment se dire autrement?” (46-47).

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