

TOWSON UNIVERSITY  
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DISLOCATING CULTURE, RELOCATING IDENTITY:  
LITERARY FORMATIONS OF THE MULTIPLIED SELF IN THE WORKS OF  
ROBERTO BOLAÑO, BEN OKRI, AND SUHEIR HAMMAD

by

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A Thesis

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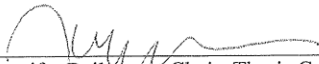
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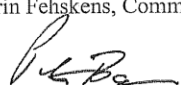
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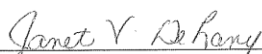
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## DEDICATION

To my mother and my father,  
for refusing to be intimidated by borders,  
and for teaching me to do the same.

And to Danny,  
for showing me how to do, and be, better.

Whenever I searched for myself I found  
the others. Whenever I searched for the others I found  
only my stranger self in them,  
so am I the one, the multitude?

—Mahmoud Darwish, “Mural”

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Last but never least, to my habibi Danny, for whom words are inadequate to describe the immensity of my love and gratitude. And yet it is words to which I must resort here in order to thank you for keeping life beautiful, for making our space the best place to be, and for making everywhere home.

## ABSTRACT

### Dislocating Culture, Relocating Identity:

Literary Formations of the Multiplied Self in the Works of Roberto Bolaño, Ben Okri,  
and Suheir Hammad

Soraya Abuelhiga

In this thesis I examine identity within the current context of globalization as both an individual and a collective construction using the works of three cross-cultural and transnational authors. By analyzing the roles of language, nationality, and ethnicity in both complementing and complicating notions of identity, I explore how these authors affirm, challenge, and transform their cultural identities through individual artistic expression. My larger argument about personal and social identity as it relates to questions of nationalism and belonging attempts to reconcile seemingly paradoxical definitions of self and culture. The thesis is also an extension of and an intervention into Postcolonial Studies, since it addresses the discipline's theoretical shortcomings and problematic absences. Lastly, I examine the sociopolitical stakes of pluralizing identity, analyzing how reconstructing the self as multilocal can, by extension, multiply individual affinities thereby radicalizing conceptions external to but closely associated with the self, namely home, citizenship, and patriotism.

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## INTRODUCTION

### WARRING WORLD(S), CONFLICTING SELVES

Through the act of writing you call ... the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body. You commence the arduous task of rebuilding yourself, composing a story that more accurately expresses your new identity. You seek out allies and, together, begin building spiritual/political communities that struggle for personal growth and social justice ... [and] forge bonds across race, gender and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism. ... [I]nternal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation—changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ...  
the path of *conocimiento* ... inner work, public acts”

Just as colonialism (and decolonization) progresses unequally, varying from place to place, community to community, person to person, so too does *post*-colonialism. Neither colonialism nor liberation affects every participant, active or passive, in the same way, and the perpetual subjugations, subordinations, and struggles of women and minority groups across the world are testament to the inequalities of life before, during, and, especially, after the colonies. The alleged hegemonic structure of areas of inquiry and discourses categorized as Postcolonial has been severely criticized by many scholars

working both within and without the discipline itself. That some literatures are privileged over others—that is, that some literatures and their authors are given “the Postcolonial treatment”—necessitates further inquiry as to why Postcolonial Theory does not, or has not, or is slow to, venture into certain regions of the world and into certain areas of literature. To what extent is “the Postcolonial treatment” politically informed, and how do current political climates affect what (and who and where) is to be considered and incorporated into (or omitted from) Postcolonial discourses? The question of privilege is indeed a major one in Postcolonial studies, though sometimes, as the discriminatory analyses of literatures across the discipline and the uneven liberations of peoples across the world have made clear, that question is misdirected.

The omissions of certain literatures from the “postcolonial canon” may be attributed to the various shortcomings of Postcolonialism: the theoretical limitations and practical inconsistencies that have been tirelessly addressed and readdressed in well-known and oft-cited debates. To start, there is the definitional problem of what exactly is (or qualifies as) the “post” in Postcolonial. For Ella Shohat, the question of how to define Postcolonialism—or rather, of what Postcolonialism defines—not only raises doubts about its political agency, but exacerbates those doubts with the “dubious spatiality” and “problematic temporality” inherent in the problematic prefix.<sup>1</sup> Even more grave is the argument that Postcolonial Theory is guilty of the same ideological elitism that it seeks to subvert and correct, as Anne McClintock points out in her interrogation of the binaries around which Postcolonial Theory operates:

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Shohat, “Notes on the Postcolonial,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 103. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” in ed. Padmini Mongia, *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 55-71.

If “post-colonial” *theory* has sought to challenge the grand march of western historicism with its entourage of binaries (self—other, metropolis—colony, centre—periphery, etc.), the term “post-colonialism” nonetheless reorients the globe around a single, binary opposition: colonial / post-colonial.<sup>2</sup>

What is at stake here, McClintock continues, is geographical, historical, and institutional specificity, which is surrendered to conflated histories of both otherness and formations of power under the general(izing) umbrella that is Postcolonialism:

Historically voided categories such as ... “the post-colonial,” while having academic clout and professional marketability, run the risk of telescoping crucial geopolitical distinctions into invisibility. ... [T]he inscription of history around a single “continuity of preoccupations” and a “common past” runs the risk of a fetishistic disavowal of crucial international distinctions that are barely understood and inadequately theorized. ... Most problematically, the historical rupture suggested by the preposition “post-” belies both the continuities and discontinuities of power that have shaped the legacies of the formal European and British colonial empires (not to mention the Islamic, Japanese, Chinese and other imperial powers). Political differences *between* cultures are thereby subordinated to their temporal distance *from* European colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that colonialisms, or, to speak contemporarily, imperialisms, still exist today in various parts of the world, to varying degrees, and in various and ever-evolving forms, further contradicts the “end” or “after” of colonialism signified by the “post” in Postcolonialism. Although one must concede that the old Western European (especially British) forms of colonialism exist no longer, the by-products of colonialism (and the perseverance of old ideologies that had fed colonialism in the first place, such as notions of supremacy based on color of skin, way of life, path to God, and so on) are still very much alive and well all over the world, long after formal independence has been declared

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<sup>2</sup> Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Postcolonialism’,” in eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, *Colonial Discourse / Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1994), 254. Emphases in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 255, 256. Emphases in the original. The quotations contained therein are from the 1989 edition of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin.

and new nationalisms celebrated. Thus, the question of what exactly constitutes the Postcolonial gives way to another set of questions, which Shohat aptly poses: “The question at stake is this. Which perspectives are being advanced in the ‘post-colonial’? For what purposes? And with what slippages? ... When exactly, then, does the ‘post-colonial’ begin? Which region is privileged in such a beginning?”<sup>4</sup> And, might I add, which *literatures*?

In her brief but provocative analysis of “Children” (trans.), Mahasweta Devi’s haunting story exemplifying how tribal peoples “have been literally and figuratively crippled in post-independence India,” Ania Loomba notes:

[T]he story reminds us that anti-colonial movements have rarely represented the interests of all the peoples of a colonized country. After independence, these fissures can no longer be glossed over.... The newly independent nation-state makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly: the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonized countries. “Colonialism” is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people, not just something that operates with the collusion of forces inside, but a version of it can be duplicated from within. So that “postcolonialism,” far from being a term that can be indiscriminately applied, appears to be riddled with contradictions and qualifications.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars, such as Rey Chow and Benita Parry, have also criticized Postcolonial Theory’s “deliberate deafness to the native voice,” with Shohat reaffirming that “the ‘post-colonial’ leaves no space ... for the struggles of aboriginals in Australia and indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, in other words, of Fourth World peoples dominated by both First World multinational corporations and by Third World nation-

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<sup>4</sup> Shohat, 100, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 16.

states.”<sup>6,7</sup> Feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak, Sara Suleri, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, to name only a few, have tirelessly interrogated the absence—the exclusion—of female agency in anti-colonial and post-colonial struggles, while also criticizing the notion of Feminism as a universal(izing) ideology, a notion that fails to measure or account for the ways in which race and socioeconomic class informs, reforms, or even deforms Feminist objectives.<sup>8</sup> As these various criticisms collectively attest, the end of the colony or empire is indeed Janus-faced: formal independence entails not only an end to external oppression, but the beginning of internal oppression(s).

It is these internal oppressions and imperialisms, constructed from internal differences, which most complicates (if not ruptures) the polarizing categories of systemic subjugations theorized by Postcolonial studies, categories which apply more (or only) to some national or community experiences and less to others. Subordinating the reality that difference, oppression, exploitation, and extermination exist or unfold within nations to the more often broadcasted fact that such animosities exist between nations is to miss both the diversity of human experience and the experiential variables that make historical and political reevaluation productive.<sup>9</sup> Such a realization becomes especially imperative for the current era, in which we have and are continuing to witness the plights of entire communities divided and demoralized (even destroyed) from tensions within the very societies to which they belong.

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<sup>6</sup> Benita Parry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 39. See also Rey Chow, “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” in ed. Mongia, 122-46.

<sup>7</sup> Shohat, 105.

<sup>8</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “French Feminism in an International Frame,” *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 154-84; Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition,” in ed. Mongia, 335-46; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-88.

<sup>9</sup> I should add that nations are not the only spheres where subjugations can be located. I especially have in mind here LGBT communities, whose struggles are not only endured within national structures, but also within the individual’s own racial, cultural, religious, and familial structures.

At a time when the world seems to be anything but black and white, the East/West(ernized) division of world and worldview is no longer sufficient. Thus, it is useful to keep in mind that throughout the 1970's and into the early 80's, the Argentine government unleashed a brutal military campaign against its own citizens. The infamous massacre of Palestinian refugees at Sabra and Shatila in 1982, and the brutal "war of the camps" that followed, were perpetrated not by Europeans or Americans (or "the West"), but by other Arabs (right-wing Lebanese Christians, to be exact). In the 1990's, Bosnian Muslims were persecuted and murdered by Bosnian Serbs. Over the course of 100 days in 1994, more than half a million Rwandans (Tutsis) were slaughtered by Rwandans (Hutus).<sup>10</sup> Since 1993, thousands of impoverished, dark-skinned and dark-featured young women looking for work have been the targets of rape, mutilation, and murder in Juarez, while the Mexican government remains conveniently blind and inactive. Today, the Fatah-ruled West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip are more divided than ever, though not so much from their Israeli occupiers or Arab counterparts living within Israel, as from each other. Here in the U.S., racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia comprise the daily realities of some Americans, and such -isms and phobias occasionally erupt into hate crimes from domestic terrorist groups or paranoid individuals, such as the August 2012 attack on a Sikh temple in Milwaukee.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this is not to defer the effects of geopolitics and (especially) First World foreign policies on intra-national agendas, nor to oversimplify or negate international involvement in shaping such internal oppressions (namely, the U.S.-backed Israeli alliance with Lebanese Phalangists, who were responsible for the massacres at Sabra and Shatila during the Lebanese Civil War, or the legacy of British colonialism in Rwanda, which included hierarchical racial classifications and consequent color laws, marked by internal segregation and preferential treatment which would ultimately lead to strife between Hutus and Tutsis long after the colonial regime had ended). Rather, my intention here is to call attention to the ways in which violent oppressions can be perpetrated from within, with or without international assistance or alliances, and often in favor of a projected nationalistic agenda.

I should hasten to clarify here that the goal of these examples is not to promote a morally relativistic understanding of the world's troubles (as if to say, "Western Europe or the U.S. is not so bad because other regions and peoples are just as guilty of committing the same atrocities"), but rather to reaffirm the limits and inadequacies of categorical binaries, and to reevaluate internal sociopolitical systems of subjugation with which Postcolonial studies do not always fully engage.<sup>11</sup> As Arif Dirlik emphatically argues, "postcoloniality is designed to *avoid* making sense of the current cris[es]," an argument that he shares with Shohat, who also critiques the discipline for its lack of engagement with contemporary struggles:<sup>12</sup>

The globalizing gesture of the "post-colonial condition," or "post-coloniality," downplays ... the possible discursive and political linkages between "post-colonial" theories and contemporary anti-colonial, or anti-neo-colonial struggles and discourses. ... Despite their partly shared discourses with Third World nationalism, these contemporary struggles also must be historicized, analyzed in a present-day context, when the "non-aligned" discourse of revolutions is no longer in the air.<sup>13</sup>

This particular charge against Postcolonial studies mirrors that of many contemporary historians and economists, who argue that the discipline fails to account for new forms of colonialism, namely neo-imperialism and the phenomenon of globalization (from which Postcolonialism allegedly suffers as well).

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<sup>11</sup> Notable exceptions include Edward Said's provocative analysis of the Palestinian condition, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (NY: Columbia UP, 1999). A recent essay by Martin Orkin also examines the racial tensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, within the context of contemporary Israeli productions of Shakespearean dramas: see Orkin, "Rendering Shakespeare, War and Race in Present-Day Israel," *Shakespeare* 6.1 (April 2010): 74-89. Latin American scholars have been especially astute in this area: see Fernando Coronil, "Can Postcoloniality Be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power," *Public Culture* 5.1 (1992): 89-108; J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of 'Colonialism,' 'Postcolonialism,' and 'Mestizaje,'" in ed. Gyan Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 241-75.

<sup>12</sup> Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," in ed. Mongia, 313. Emphasis in original.

<sup>13</sup> Shohat, 104.

After much consideration and research into these various criticisms—the absence of indigenous voices, the lack of attention paid to contemporary systems of internal oppressions that can sometimes replay the various histories and uneven developments of imperialism, the failure to reconcile Postcolonial Theory with the double binds and liminal spaces occupied by the “contemporary anti-colonial / anti-racist struggles carried under the banner of national and racial oppression” (to which Shohat pointedly refers as “pre-postcolonial”)—I arrived at the conclusion that perhaps certain literatures, such as Palestinian, Latin American, and First American literatures, were not omitted from Postcolonial discourses *despite* readily fitting within it, but were omitted *because* they did not fit so neatly.<sup>14</sup> Eager to further explore how these particular literatures reveal and confront the limitations of Postcolonial Theory, while working both against and within the discipline, I decided to begin with the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish. Soon enough, however, I was again confronted with another problem, one that is also a significant component of Postcolonial inquiry: the language problem.

Although some (though not nearly all) of Darwish’s works are available in English, in-depth textual analyses require reading those texts in their original language. The reason for this is obvious enough: the politics of translation, which ranges from deciding what gets (or qualifies for getting) translated, translator bias, and decisive word choices to linguistic challenges (that is, proper versus colloquial dialects, how to translate slang and reproduce idioms without losing meaning, how to negotiate the writer’s style and tone with the limitations posed by the language and culture into which it is being translated). It is appropriate to digress here in order to address briefly the definition, the function, the use of language, as it corresponds to the social and political stakes at the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



heart of the medium by which texts, narratives, and literatures are constructed. To begin, meaning, like language, is produced, and it is useful to mention here that so, too, is culture. As Stuart Hall notes, language and meaning are not referential, nor are they reflective of a certain culture's "different way of classifying the world."<sup>15</sup> Instead, meaning is produced by, not simply found in or transferred through, language: "Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be *made to mean*. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced."<sup>16</sup> Postcolonial studies are very much concerned and engaged with this notion of the productions of language and culture, a notion which can invoke a sense of empowerment but also a sense of anxiety: that language and culture are human products attests to the power of inter / intra human relationships while also raising doubts about that same power. The paradox of meaning-production thus becomes inevitably tied into hierarchical constructions of meaning and legitimacy, of cultural (and narrative) authority and prevalence:

What this insight put at issue, then, was the question of which kinds of meaning get systematically and regularly constructed around particular events. Because meaning was not given but produced, it followed that different kinds of meaning could be ascribed to the same events. Thus, in order for one meaning to be regularly produced, it had to win a kind of credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself. That involved marginalizing, downgrading or de-legitimizing alternative constructions.<sup>17</sup>

The conditionality and social practice of meaning-making points to the conception of language and meaning as neither external nor immune to history, neither a fixed nor everlasting entity that transcends history. Language and meaning, like their producers, are products of history—that is, the producers of meaning and the meanings they produce are

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<sup>15</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology'," in eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 1050.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

informed by their situations within specific (and continuously changing) times and spaces.

This perspective of language as relational, and of ideas and meaning as continually informed by previous (and consensual) communications and applications of language, is what Mikhail Bakhtin termed the “dialogic” of language, and is what comprised the basis of Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis. That meaning and, by extension, formations of knowledge, are constructed in the relationships among author, text, reader, and environment, emphasizes not only the importance of studying the text itself, but also the necessity of engaging with what is outside of the text. Thus, to contemplate in this way language, meaning, knowledge, literature, culture, as (hierarchical) social constructions, and to consider both authorship and the (conditioned) interaction between reader and text, is to further problematize the translated text as potentially dubious. Altering the language of a literary text, especially a poetic one, is, to a certain extent, to remove the text from its contexts, thereby separating it from the conditions under which it was produced and, as a result, manipulating (for good or ill) its meaning. After all, etymologically speaking, translation is synonymous with removal; in the context of imperialism, translation was precisely part of the imperial agenda: a literary (and linguistic) appropriation of the knowledges, tongues, and images of the subjugated.<sup>18</sup> Not to dismiss translations entirely, because there are many important works that are productively read and studied in translation, nevertheless (and fortunately so, since one cannot possibly learn all the world’s languages and still make time to read its works). But one cannot help but be aware of the dangers of translation, especially

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<sup>18</sup> “Translate, v.” *Oxford English Dictionary* Online. September 2012. Oxford UP. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204841?rskey=ydXLZX&result=2> (accessed October 3, 2012).

when it comes to an author like Darwish. Given the controversial nature of his poetry, as well as his affiliations with the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Israeli Communist Party, it is not surprising that translations of Darwish should especially warrant this kind of suspicion.<sup>19</sup> Nor is it tangential, to recall the earlier discussion of internal imperialisms, to mention that the narrative of Israeli nationalism, like that of all nationalisms, had and continues to depend on the suppression of not only Palestinian voices, but also that of Arab and leftist Israeli factions. Loomba's summary of post-nationalism's internal oppressions is again useful here:

The line between oppressor and oppressed is, however, drawn by caste and not colonial oppression. ... Thus, nations are communities created not simply by forging certain bonds but by fracturing or disallowing others; not merely by invoking and remembering certain versions of the past, but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed.<sup>20</sup>

Language is crucial to the fracturing of certain bonds. Whether through the delegitimizing of languages other than the national language, the prohibition of literatures other than the designated national literature, or even the censorship of national literatures in the national language that contradict or oppose the projected national image in all its national(istic) objectives, the suppression of a people almost always involves a constraint on the very means of their communication. To suppress language is to deny access to a community—by obstructing existing relations within communities and by averting potential relations between communities. Thus, translation can move in either direction, favor either side: translation can transform meaning, but it can also transcend barriers.

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<sup>19</sup> For a brief summary of the controversy surrounding an English translation in the *Jerusalem Post* of Darwish's 1988 poem, "Passing in Passing Words," see "Palestinian's Poem Unnerves Israelis," *New York Times*, April 5, 1988. <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/05/world/palestinian-s-poem-unnerves-israelis.html> (accessed October 5, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Loomba, 169.

But the translation of Darwish's work turned out to be only part of the language problem: the fact that a Palestinian American (paternally, anyway) would have to resort to reading a Palestinian poet in English introduced a whole new set of questions, less about scholarly theory and more about personal identity (ultimately revealing how identity informs scholarly theory, or rather, puts that theory into practice). What bearing does language have on cultural identity, and how does multilingualism and / or multiculturalism complicate cultural identification(s)? Spivak is correct to observe that it is not so much cultural identity itself, but "the *feeling* of cultural identity [which] almost always presupposes a language."<sup>21</sup> In that case, how is language problematic in contemplating cultural identity, or, to put it another way, how does language problematize or conflict with perceptions of what it means—what it *feels*, to borrow from Spivak—to belong to a particular culture, when that culture's identity is largely (though not exclusively) determined by the language in which it engages with its members? And, furthermore, how does one manipulate or negotiate language in order to reconcile multiple cultural identities, and vice versa?

Some of the most exciting developments to have emerged from Postcolonial studies are concerned precisely with these discrepancies between language and cultural identity (or nationality, or heritage, or birthplace)—and, by extension, with the politics and anti-essentialist critiques of human identities. These developments work within Postcolonial Theory's characteristic deconstruction of text and analysis of cultural imperialism—of the imperial underpinnings of language, creativity, and subjectivity—while simultaneously venturing beyond Postcolonialism. Among them are hybridity;

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<sup>21</sup> Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," in ed. Mongia, 199. Emphasis mine.

transnationalism, migratory and diasporic studies; and (contemporary) critical cosmopolitanism.<sup>22</sup> Collectively, these critical approaches serve to deterritorialize culture and identity, while also exposing the unreliability of attempting to locate culture and identity within structures that only appear intrinsic and fixed, but are, in fact, conditioned and in constant flux. While hybridity can also generally refer to the intermixing of race and ethnicity, especially in the Latin American and Caribbean contexts (*mestizaje* and *creolization*), the term as conceptualized by Homi K. Bhabha (but simplified here) is the merging of identities formerly considered as distinct and separate—namely (though not exclusively), that of the colonized and the colonizer—a merge compelled by the inevitable and various exchanges between the two “opposing” sides.<sup>23,24</sup> The rhetoric of hybridity undermines the vocabulary of colonial authority, and highlights the dynamics of the colonial encounter by theorizing the ways in which the colonized subverted colonial authority, working intuitively within, instead of against, the colonial system. But hybridity, of course, should not be limited to colonial encounters, and should also be informed by colonial *dislocations*—namely, the migrations of people(s) who flee to and recreate their lives (usually) in First World metropolises, undergoing the kind of hybridization of which Román de la Campa or Paul Gilroy speak.<sup>25,26</sup> The great

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to contextualize cosmopolitan thinking—that is, to distinguish between contemporary cosmopolitanism, as most popularly philosophized by Kwame Anthony Appiah, and the different “projects” of cosmopolitanism prior to the current era. For an insightful history of cosmopolitan thinking, see Walter Dignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 721-48. For Appiah’s philosophy of cosmopolitanism, see Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006); and Appiah, “Education for Global Citizenship,” *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* 107.1 (April 2008): 83-99.

<sup>23</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of Caribbean creolization, see Édouard Glissant’s extraordinary work, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> See Román de la Campa, *Latin Americanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

migrations (and diasporas) of peoples in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—from exiles and refugees seeking political asylum or social freedom, to expatriates and immigrants lured by capitalism’s promise of a better life—are a reality of the globalized world in which we are living. Many (if not every) facets of life have been affected by this increased movement of peoples, and the various forms of racial and ethnic, intellectual and cultural, exchanges have blurred the lines denoting and separating one group from another—lines which Bhabha, among others, claims never to have existed, except in the imagination. One of the most readily apparent consequences of this exchange is the intermixing of languages. Globalized English remains the subject of some of the most intense language debates, which revolve around: a) the sustained elevation of English as *the* language of multinational exchanges in business, politics, and higher education; b) its status as “official” language in regions where it is not traditionally spoken; and c) its penetration of other languages, and the incorporation of English-language (especially American) slang into non-English colloquialisms such as that of youth cultures, which is undoubtedly the result of the popularization and pervasiveness of the American entertainment industry.

But the language debate is not exclusive to English. In her analysis of Bengali filmmaker Mrinal Sen’s 1986 film *Genesis*, Spivak aptly distinguishes between native language and national language, which then becomes a reflection on the discrepancy

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<sup>26</sup> It is also important to extend analyses of hybridization and migration beyond its effects on and exchanges with the First World; to include, for instance, the migration of Indians to Uganda in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Indian immigrant experience during the Ugandan Indophobia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which had resulted in Idi Amin’s 1972 Asian Expulsion campaign. See also a compelling recent essay by Stephanie Jones, “The Politics of Love and History: Asian Women and African Men in East African Literature,” *Research in African Literatures* 42.3 (2011): 166-86.

between official, or proper (or imagined) language and the mixed origins of actual(ized) spoken language:

The film [*Genesis*] is made by an Indian whose native language is not Hindi, the national language. Do you see it now? To be in a new “nation” (itself catachrestical to the appropriate development of nations), speak *for* it, in a national language that is not one’s mother-tongue. But what is a mother-tongue?

A mother-tongue is a language with a history—in that sense it is “instituted”—before our birth and after our death.... Thus the seemingly absurd self-differential of a non-native speaker of a national language can be used to show that this ... is only an instantiated representation of how one is ‘at home’ in a language. There is no effort in *Genesis* to produce the rich texture of “authentic” Hindi, nor its Beckettized skeleton. This is just the spare Hindi of a man slightly exiled from his national language. ...

The extreme edge of Hindi as the “national language” is a peculiar concoction with a heavily Sanskritized artificial idiom whose most notable confection is the speech of the flight attendants on Indian airplane flights. By contrast, Hindi as it is spoken and written is enriched by many Arabic and Persian loan words....<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that Spivak’s observations are grounded in a post-nationalism context rather than within the context of globalization. Nevertheless, her analysis is useful here because it recalls the earlier discussions of the concept of language as a consensual construction, and of the deterritorialization of culture—which holds that the assigning of culture to a geographical location, or the assigning of a geographical location to a culture, is erroneous and unreliable (even impossible) given that the location of culture is obscured precisely by culture’s lack of location. Spivak’s concern with cultural identities that are dislocated by the nationalistic conception of culture as tied to place, of identity as fixed in or belonging to a geographical position, stems from her analysis of the multiple origins of language, as it is invented and reinvented throughout space and time.

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<sup>27</sup> Spivak, “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,” 211-12. Emphasis in the original.

Furthermore, her analysis of the attribution of language to a history presents language as an imaginary though intangible homeland, capable of stirring within the individual feelings of both nation and imagination, of longing and belonging. Spivak then presents us with the dilemma of the individual search for cultural identity, in a profoundly poetic affirmation: “Progress is made by way of the imagined identity of an original caught between two translations.”<sup>28</sup> The dilemma and paradox of “in-betweenness”—that is, that one must live on the borders in order to transcend them—is also tirelessly expounded by Bhabha, who declares that “it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture,” and that “it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate *the differences between them* into a kind of solidarity.”<sup>29</sup>

This idea(l) of solidarity built not in spite of difference but upon difference is at the heart of contemporary cosmopolitanism, in which “authenticity” lies in the “mixtures.” Contemporary cosmopolitanism embraces the “victims of modernity ... bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging” represented by “refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles,” while privileging the “ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home ... of inhabiting multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller.”<sup>30</sup> The tensions of multiple (and multiplying) identities are exemplified, for instance, by my earlier concern with the problem of identifying oneself (and one’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>29</sup> Bhabha, 38, 170. Emphases in the original.

<sup>30</sup> Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Cosmopolitanisms,” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 582, 587.



connection to a culture) by the language she speaks, or of using language as a marker of identity, when in fact language is often inconsistent with, if at all revealing of, the (dislocated) individual's cultural affinities. As far as cosmopolitan thinking is concerned, such a concern is not at all problematic as it is representative of the critical need "to attend more to the negotiation of identities by their possessors, recalling always that each identity, however central it is to our self-conceptions, may in some situations simply not be the one we need."<sup>31</sup> Though cosmopolitanism stresses multilingualism, in so far as it facilitates broader communication, it does not rest on language as a clear marker of identity—rather, language is another part of identity in need of negotiation.

Some scholars are less celebratory and more skeptical of this so-called differential solidarity, the potential of which can be just as regressive as progressive (if we consider international sects of neo-Nazis, transnational criminal gangs, and the global drug trade). After all, "if what can be hateful, if coerced, can be celebrated when it flows from free decisions of individuals or of groups," then cannot that which flows from free decisions be hateful and coerced just the same?<sup>32</sup> For Kwame Anthony Appiah, the answer is rather simple: "As long as these differences meet certain general ethical constraints—as long, in particular, as political institutions respect basic human rights—we are happy to let them be."<sup>33</sup> In this sense, cosmopolitanism seems less a radical sociopolitical philosophy and more a pragmatic approach to living. Though he does not use the term cosmopolitanism, what Achille Mbembe describes in his eloquent elaboration on Postcolonial thinking as postcolonialism's "dream" is essentially cosmopolitical: "the dream of a new form of

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<sup>31</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Multiplying Identities," *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 629.

<sup>32</sup> Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," *Critical Inquiry* 23.3 (1997): 618.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

humanism, a critical humanism founded above all on the divisions that, this side of the absolutes, differentiate us. It's the dream of a *polis* that is universal because ethnically diverse."<sup>34</sup> Despite all the criticism against Postcolonial Theory, Mbembe's commentary reminds us of the merits of Postcolonial praxis upon which contemporary cosmopolitanism is founded: the unmasking and the critique of asymmetric narratives of history and definitions of humanity which favored those in power; the tireless interrogations of European modes of thought, especially humanism; and the proposal that formations of culture are conditioned, and can thus just as well be advanced once we arrive at a place (not geographical, of course) in which mutual respect is not a dream but the rule. One of the most valuable lessons learned from colonialism, as demonstrated by Postcolonialism and advanced by cosmopolitanism, is that cultures, histories, languages—identities—have multiple beginnings and no absolute endings, and they transcend borders just as people have been doing for centuries.

It is here that I arrive at my objectives, my vision, for this project. The language challenge posed by Darwish has compelled me to contemplate issues surrounding cultural identities as they are tied into language, especially as they are informed by contemporary cosmopolitanism. And it has led me to consider authors who: a) expose the limitations and challenge the role, the definition, the position (or lack thereof) of the postcolonial individual; and b) produce fairly contemporary narratives in and through which the effects of hybridity, migrancy, multiculturalism, and globalization (in all its glories and guises) are contemplated. In these respects, the works of Roberto Bolaño, Ben Okri, and Suheir Hammad exemplify the contemporary cosmopolitan ideal. The Chilean writer

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<sup>34</sup> Achille Mbembe, "What is Postcolonial Thinking?" Interview by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, and Jean-Louis Schlegel, trans. John Fletcher, *Eurozine* (January 9, 2008): 11.

Bolaño, exiled in Mexico (among other places), speaks to the hybridization of the Latin American variety, emphasizing the global presence of the Latin American diaspora. Writing in Spanish, Bolaño creates characters that, like the author himself, are at once everywhere and nowhere: such is the quintessential figure of the exile, trying to forge a post-national homeland in which to be “Latin American” becomes an identity that is specific yet located all over the world.<sup>35</sup> Okri, a Nigerian poet and novelist who lives and writes in England and in the English language, is not entirely at home in either Chinua Achebe’s perspective of African literatures or that of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Instead of reconciling “Africanness” with English (Achebe), or eliminating English altogether in restoration of “Africanness” (Ngugi), Okri forges his own vision of Africa by redefining homelands as hopeful imaginings, and “re-dreaming” a newer version of the world in which cultural diversity is the grand narrative. The distinctive voice of Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad, born in Jordan to Palestinian refugee parents but raised in Brooklyn, is a fusion of English and Arabic, among other dialects from which Hammad pulls in order to paint an alternative portrait of the contemporary American woman, at home but never comfortable in a world where oppression is still a standard of living. Hammad exemplifies the artist who, instead of molding her voice to fit within “proper” English, molds the English language to suit her own voice(s), and complement her amalgams of identities—as a woman, a Muslim, a Palestinian and an American.

Collectively, these authors simultaneously affirm and transform their cultural identities—identities not easily located in ethnicity, nation, or language—through individual artistic expression, which both engages with and disengages from those

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<sup>35</sup> Because *The Savage Detectives* is the primary work discussed in the chapter on Bolaño (Chapter 1), I have consulted both the Spanish and English versions of the work. But note that the passages cited in the chapter are from Natasha Wimmer’s superb English translation.

cultural identities, in their various forms. At the center of these literary works, manifesting in the multilevel dislocations of each author (projected through the multiple voices in their work, either fictional or their own), is a search: the dislocated being's search for a cultural identity that is renewed as it is recreated, that is rooted both inside and outside of the self, along and across (and against) borders and barriers. In this way my project has evolved, becoming not only an academic exploration of human difference, as it is theorized, but also a personal meditation on human difference, as it is lived.

## CHAPTER 1

LOST AND FOUND (AND LOST AGAIN) IN LATIN AMERICA:  
 THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF MULTIPLYING IDENTITIES IN ROBERTO  
 BOLAÑO'S *THE SAVAGE DETECTIVES*

I saw him with my own eyes: he looked like a worm with a straw hat  
 and an assassin's glare  
 and he traveled through the towns of northern Mexico  
 as if wandering lost, evicted from the mind,  
 evicted from the grand dream, everyone's dream,  
 and his words were, madre mía, terrifying.

—Roberto Bolaño, "The Worm"

In the well-known ninth thesis of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"  
 Walter Benjamin delivers a concise but nevertheless profound interpretation of Paul  
 Klee's now iconic 1920 painted copper etching, *Angelus Novus*:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel  
 looking as though he is about to move away from something he  
 is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open,  
 his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of  
 history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a  
 chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps  
 piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.  
 The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole  
 what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it  
 has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can  
 no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the

future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before  
him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>36</sup>

Benjamin's "angel of history," and the "storm called progress" that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned," while the wreckage before him continues to grow and worsen is, interestingly enough, alluded to from the outset of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*. Just prior to Juan García Madero's admission into a gang of poets who considered themselves inheritors and revivalists of an arguably failed Mexican avant-garde literary movement from the 1920's called Visceral Realism, the seventeen year-old "narrator" (whose diary entries comprise both the first and last parts of the novel) learns that "the present-day visceral realists walked backward ... 'gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away from it, walking straight toward the unknown.'"<sup>37</sup> There is, however, one notable difference between Benjamin's "angel of history" and Bolaño's visceral realists: while the angel is "irresistibly" pushed backward towards the future, the visceral realists (or, more specifically, the novel's protagonist-poets and self-proclaimed leaders of the gang, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima) instead walk backward "straight toward the unknown," implying a voluntary action. Needless to say, Bolaño's evocation of Benjamin is not coincidental, and consequently sets the stage for the events to come—the catastrophes that will befall Belano, Lima, and García Madero as they journey across Mexico in search of the lost poetess Cesárea Tinajero, catastrophes which will continue to plague Belano, Lima, and the visceral realists decades after.

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in Benjamin's *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 259-60.

<sup>37</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2007), 7. The novel will henceforth be cited as *SD* in the notes.

Furthermore, this strangely prophetic description of the visceral realists as moving blindly into the future while stubbornly gazing at a fixed moment in the past—a move that is represented by the search for a presumably lost literary figure from a lost past who is believed to hold the key to the (abysmal) future of not only Mexican poetry but of Latin American literature in general—can be extended to Bolaño’s overarching preoccupation with nationality, identity, and the “state” of literature in Latin America. In many ways, the novel addresses both explicitly and implicitly questions of associations and identifications: namely, what does it mean to be Latin American? Where is this definition of the Latin American located, or formed? Is it found or forged in nation, in language, in literature? And what does the movement backwards suggest about Latin American identity formations? More specifically, how does Bolaño’s depiction of visceral realism—of Latin American literary movements—complicate or even problematize Latin American identity formations? That the novel begins with “Mexicans lost in Mexico” (the title of the first section) and ends, literally, in the unknown as symbolized by “the Sonora desert” (the title of the last section) where they find and lose Tinajero, not only recalls Benjamin’s metaphorical description of the relationship between history and progress, but also suggests the futility (and fatality) of the search for an elusive identity that is both regional and specific. For Bolaño, the “Latin American identity” is intangible precisely because it is simultaneously rooted within and beyond a conception of Latin America that is “at home” neither in the myth of pure and absolute Pre-Columbian origins nor in the grand dream of a prosperous future from which Bolaño believes Latin America to have been evicted and forgotten.

The production of identity and of literature—or, more significantly, the production of identity within literature, and the production of literature as an expression and an extension of identity—is both the primary objective and the underlying source of frustration and conflict in the novel, embodied first by the journey to find Tinajero and later by the restless wanderings of Belano and Lima (among other Latin American poets) throughout the world. The visceral realists’ search for the lost Mexican poetess is, essentially, a figurative representation of the search for an individual and collective identity across post-independence, post-national, and post-dictatorial Latin America—identity being, as Stuart Hall reminds us, a narrative in its own right: “Identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something that is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one’s own self.”<sup>38</sup> Thus for the visceral realists, the future of Latin American poetry—and, by association, of Latin American identity—rests upon their (re)discovery of Tinajero in the archetype of the unknown (the desert), as Belano and Lima boldly proclaim to the newly-initiated García Madero:

Belano shook my hand and told me that I was one of them now, and then we sang a *ranchera*. That was all. The song was about the lost towns of the north and a woman’s eyes. ... I asked them whether the eyes were Cesárea Tinajero’s. Belano and Lima looked at me and said that I was clearly a visceral realist already and that together we would change Latin American poetry.<sup>39</sup>

The “lost towns of the north” referenced in the song not only serve as a literal reference to the Sonora Desert (which links the American southwest to the Mexican northwest), but figuratively the “lost towns” symbolize that liminal state between history (Mexico) and

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<sup>38</sup> Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in ed. Anthony D. King, *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 49.

<sup>39</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 8.



progress (the U.S.) from which Mexico (and, by extension, Latin America) suffers. Consequently, the reference to Tinajero (or the “woman’s eyes”) becomes suggestive of what is at stake for the visceral realists and Mexico on the one hand, and for Latin America and Latin American poetry on the other: the discovery (or recovery, rather) of the “lost” Tinajero would “change” (meaning consciously reawaken) Latin American poetry. What seems to be visceral realism’s call to revolution is similarly expressed later by García Madero during a conversation with his soon-to-be love interest, the skeptical María Font:

[María Font:] “I don’t give a shit about the visceral realists.”  
 [García Madero:] “But I thought you were part of the group. The movement, I mean.”  
 “Are you kidding? Maybe if they’d chosen a less disgusting name ...I’m a vegetarian. Anything to do with viscera makes me sick.”  
 “What would you have called it?”  
 “Oh, I don’t know. The Mexican Section of Surrealists, maybe.”  
 “I think there already is a Mexican Section of Surrealists in Cuernavaca. Anyway, what we’re trying to do is *create a movement on a Latin American scale*.”  
 “On a Latin American scale? Please.”  
 “Well, that’s what we want in the long term, if I understand it correctly.”<sup>40</sup>

The brief dialogue between García Madero and María Font about the objectives of visceral realism is exceptional for two reasons: first, it reinforces early in the novel the collective “mission” of the visceral realists to create a pan-Latino literary movement; and second, it distinguishes *this* literary movement from other, more nationally specific literary movements (like the Mexican Section of Surrealists) precisely on the basis of its post-national, pan-Latino aim, and especially on the basis of its being *visceral* instead of surreal.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28. Emphasis mine.

Interestingly (and significantly) enough, the term “visceral” carries definitions that are at once external and internal, physical and emotional. While “visceral” indeed relates to the viscera (namely the “guts”), it can also relate to deep inward feelings rather than intellect, with the viscera being regarded as the “seat of emotion.”<sup>41</sup> Thus if “visceral” realism’s aim is to change Latin American poetry, then what that “change” denotes is a rupture from within (not outside of) Latin America, where it is not roots but emotions from whence the poet came and to which the poet returns. Not only that, but this aim of the visceral realists figures into the larger issue of intellect versus emotion in the narration (or construction, rather) of what is within (the self) and what is without (the world). And it is this conflict between the unconscious mind (surrealism) and the conscious “seat of emotion” which is further explored—and questioned, and criticized, and challenged—in the second and largest section of the novel, from which the novel’s title is derived.

“The Savage Detectives” is comprised of a series of narrative interviews with a variety of characters who allegedly knew or had been acquainted with Belano and Lima over the course of two decades. It is here that Bolaño explicitly, albeit densely, conveys diverse views on the state of Latin American poetry in particular (and of literature in general) via the voices of poets, writers, editors, publishers, students, journalists, lovers, and literary or cultural figures, both real (such as Octavio Paz) and fictional—though many of the characters are purported to be alter egos of actual people, most notably Belano being Bolaño’s own alter ego and Lima being that of Bolaño’s best friend, the relatively unknown Mexican poet José Alfredo Zendejas Pineda (pen name Mario Santiago Papasquiaro). In the narrative of the poet Fabio Ernesto Logiacomo, winner of

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<sup>41</sup> “Visceral, adj.” *OED* Online. February 2013. Oxford UP.

the Casa de las Américas poetry prize who is interviewed by “the Chilean” (Belano) and “the Mexican” (Lima) regarding “the state of new Latin American poetry,” Logiacomo makes an eerily puzzling observation:

... I noticed something strange about them, it was as if they were there but at the same time they weren't there, I'm not sure how to explain it, they were the first young Mexican poets I'd met and maybe that was why they seemed odd, but in the previous few months I'd met young Peruvian poets, young Colombian poets, young poets from Panama and Costa Rica, and I hadn't felt the same thing. I was an expert in young poets and something was off here, something was missing: the camaraderie, the strong sense of shared ideals, the frankness that always prevails at any gathering of Latin American poets.<sup>42</sup>

The passivity that Logiacomo senses from Belano and Lima (to the point that he questions their very existence) and the limbo, so to speak, which the men appear to occupy, if only for the duration of the interview, obscures not only the progression of the discussion but also the progression of literature in Latin America. This suspension of identity and the consequent pain of a liminal state of being is described further at the haunting conclusion of Logiacomo's narrative:

Literature isn't innocent. I've known that since I was fifteen. And I remember thinking that then, but I can't remember whether I said it or not, and if I did, what the context was. And then the walk (but here I have to clarify that it wasn't five of us anymore but three, the Mexican, the Chilean, and me, the other two Mexicans having vanished at the gates of purgatory) turned into a kind of stroll on the fringes of hell.

The three of us were quiet, as if we'd been struck dumb, but our bodies moved to a beat, as if something was propelling us through that strange land and making us dance, a silent, syncopated kind of walking, if I can call it that, and then I had a vision, not the first that day, as it happened, or the last: the park we were walking through opened up into a kind of lake and the lake opened up into a kind of waterfall and the waterfall became a river that flowed through a kind of cemetery, and all of it, lake, waterfall, river, cemetery, was deep green and silent. ... [O]ne of them asked me what hurt (the word *hurt*, so right, so fitting) and I should have told them that *what hurt was my whole body, my*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 153-54.

*whole being*, but instead I told them that the problem was probably that I wasn't used to the altitude yet, that it was the altitude that was getting to me and making me see things.<sup>43</sup>

Logiacomo's alienation here, exacerbated by the prevailing feeling that "something was off," unfolds amid a "stroll on the fringes of hell," once again evoking both Benjamin's angel of history and Lima's description from the beginning of the novel of the visceral realists as "walking backward into the unknown." This "hell" or "strange land" into which Belano, Lima, and a seemingly delirious Logiacomo are "propelled" is Mexico, or more specifically, as Logiacomo reveals to us, El Bosque de Chapultepec (Chapultepec Forest, sometimes referred to as Chapultepec Park) in Mexico City.

Historically, Chapultepec Forest, which earned its name from the Toltecs (the first inhabitants), was occupied by a variety of Mesoamerican cultures. During the Aztec Empire, Chapultepec became both a military retreat and a sacred burial ground for the ashes of Aztec rulers. After the Spanish Conquest, a portion of Chapultepec was appropriated by Cortés to one of his captains, who would go on to become the husband of Cortés' indigenous interpreter, intermediary, and (in)famously favorite mistress, La Malinche—the first to bear a child of mixed indigenous American and Spanish ancestry.<sup>44</sup> Following Mexico's independence from Spain in the nineteenth century, Chapultepec became the official residence of Mexican heads of state until the 1940's (including the infamous dictator Porfirio Díaz, who was overthrown during the Mexican

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 154-55. Emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Doña Marina, or La Malinche ("The Wicked Woman"), is an iconic figure in Latin American, but especially Mexican, art and literature. Today, she remains a controversial figure, and depictions of La Malinche range from a seductress / traitor, singularly blamed for the collective downfall of Mesoamerican empires, to a queen / Madonna, who is celebrated as the "mother" of the "new" Mexican—that is, the *mestizo*, or ethnically mixed person—thereby permanently linking the New World with the Old World. For the quintessential analysis of La Malinche and her significance in contemporary Mexican culture, see Octavio Paz, "The Dialectic of Solitude," in Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 195-212.

Revolution in the early twentieth century). It is also worth mentioning that Chapultepec was the site of one of the most important (and violent) battles of the Mexican-American War, a battle which would result in the two-year U.S. occupation of Mexico City.<sup>45</sup> Considering Chapultepec's colorful and brutal history, it seems appropriate then that Logiacomo should associate the park with hell, and envision it as "a river that flowed through a kind of cemetery." In this way, if we are to read Bolaño's monumental novel as a large-scale contemplation of Latin American identity, Logiacomo's narrative becomes especially significant in its emotional exploration of Mexico's past. Interestingly, Larry Rother's 1987 travel account for the *New York Times* offers this sentimental but compelling portrait of Chapultepec:

Chilangos, as those who live in the Mexican capital are called, are quick to tell visitors that if they wish to see residents of the world's largest city truly being themselves, a visit to Chapultepec is indispensable. Others go further and say that *Chapultepec is really Mexico in microcosm*. "This is a garden and forest that belongs to all Mexicans," the park's director, Antonio Maldonado y Huerta, said. "It is the lungs of Mexico City, but it contains *the heart and soul of Mexico*."<sup>46</sup>

It is here, in the "heart and soul of Mexico," where Logiacomo paradoxically suffers from a pain in his "whole body," his "whole being." Thus for Bolaño, Chapultepec Park becomes the vehicle by which the author explores "the concept of 'strange lands'" which, "like that of 'home ground' has some holes in it, presents new questions. Are 'strange lands' an objective geographic reality, or a mental construct in constant flux?"<sup>47</sup> This is

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<sup>45</sup> Historical information about Chapultepec Park was gathered from Larry Rother, "Chapultepec Park: Mexico in Microcosm," *New York Times*, December 13, 1987, accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/13/travel/chapultepec-park-mexico-in-microcosm.html>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., n.p. Emphases mine.

<sup>47</sup> Bolaño, "Exiles," trans. Natasha Wimmer, in Bolaño's *Between Parenthesis: Essays, Articles, and Speeches*, ed. Ignacio Echevarría (New York: New Directions, 2011), 49.

precisely the question that troubles and even disorients Logiacomo, whose vision of the park transforming into a cemetery is meant to allude to both the regality (as a sacred repository for the ashes of Aztec rulers) and the brutality (as a battleground) of Mexican and, by extension, Latin American history that are manifest here in this park “on the fringes of hell.” Such a hauntingly fatalistic vision of Mexico burdens any attempt at forming a “wholly” Latin American identity from such a fragmented past, and as Logiacomo’s narrative suggests the “future” of Latin American poetry and identity is ironically contingent upon, even synonymous with, the death and loss—and ritual sacrifice—of an original sense of self.

But for the visceral realists, the future of Latin American selfhood is contained within the prospect of finding Cesárea Tinajero. This is revealed in the narrative of Luis Sebastián Rosado—dated July 1976 which, in the chronology of the novel’s events, situates Rosado’s narrative at about five months after the discovery and death of Tinajero in the Sonora Desert—in which Rosado remembers the urgency of Luscious Skin’s news about the visceral realists:

What I have to tell you, [Luscious Skin] said, will shake the foundations of Mexican poetry. He might even have said Latin American poetry. But not world poetry, no. One could say he restricted himself to the Spanish-speaking world in his ravings. The thing he wanted to tell me would turn Spanish-language poetry upside-down. Goodness, I said, some undiscovered manuscript by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz? A prophetic text by Sor Juana on the fate of Mexico? But no, of course not, it was something the visceral realists had found and the visceral realists would never come anywhere near the lost libraries of the seventeenth century.<sup>48</sup>

Although this news is never disclosed, Luscious Skin is most likely referring to what had turned out to be the fatal discovery of Tinajero, and to the subsequent departures of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., *SD*, 175.

Belano and Lima, the self-professed leaders of the new visceral realism, to Europe (among other places in the world). In this passage, Bolaño again complicates identities (and the attempts to form them) by mentioning Sor Juana, the seventeenth-century poet, scholar, and nun who ushered in Mexican literature in the Spanish language. That Luscious Skin, and the visceral realist gang to which he belongs, should aspire to “shake the foundations of Mexican poetry [and] Latin American poetry” by “turn[ing] Spanish-language poetry upside-down” without ever venturing “anywhere near the lost libraries of the seventeenth century” suggests that this “new” (or, rather, revolutionary) Latin American poetry—and, by extension, identity, as expressed and created (and recreated) in the poetic narrative—will reach beyond language itself, beyond history and origins, and even beyond modernity, as Emilio Sauri argues:

[In] envision[ing] a future capable of redeeming the past, *Los Detectives Salvajes* everywhere points to nothing more than the foreclosure of any possibility as such. Whereas the modernisms of generations of Latin American writers and critics had previously conceived the literary as an opening onto that future, Bolaño’s novel signals the end of this particular aesthetic ideology, if only to suggest that history must now be found beyond it.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, if Spanish is the language of dominion, signifying both a beginning (of Spanish influence in the Americas) and an ending (of indigenous American cultures), then paradoxically a Latin American identity that is created within and through literature must actively transcend the language of its transcription in order to wholly project a fragmented self.

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<sup>49</sup> Emilio Sauri, “‘*A la pinche modernidad*’: Literary Form and the End of History in Roberto Bolaño’s *Los Detectives Salvajes*,” *MLN* 125.2 (March 2010): 431.

It is appropriate here to perhaps discuss the Spanish language and its relationship to transnational Latin American identity formations as expressed through and within literature. According to Octavio Paz:

Languages are vast realities that transcend those political and historical entities we call nations. The European languages we speak in the Americas illustrate this. The special position of our literatures when compared to those of England, Spain, Portugal and France depends precisely on this fundamental fact: they are literatures written in transplanted tongues. Languages are born and grow from the native soil, nourished by a common history. The European languages were rooted out from their native soil and their own tradition, and then planted in an unknown and unnamed world: they took root in the new lands and, as they grew within the societies of America, they were transformed. They are the same plant yet also a different plant. *Our literatures did not passively accept the changing fortunes of the transplanted languages: they participated in the process and even accelerated it.* They very soon ceased to be mere transatlantic reflections: at times they have been the negation of the literatures of Europe; more often, they have been a reply.<sup>50</sup>

It is in this regard that Luscious Skin's bold proclamation, on behalf of the visceral realists, does not seem to be so far-fetched after all. Yet whereas Paz discusses—and reveres—language as a tool that can facilitate Latin America's movement into modernity, the visceral realists envision language as a way to avoid modernity. Thus this idea of reaching beyond modernity, as Sauri had suggested, is perhaps intended to contrast the movement *toward* modernity that was advocated by Latin American poets like Paz (who happens to be abhorred by the visceral realists). For Paz, there is no going beyond modernity because modernity is already the essence of Latin America, long repressed by the popular and centuries-old notion that modernity existed outside of, instead of within, Latin America:

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<sup>50</sup> Paz, "In Search of the Present," trans. Anthony Stanton, Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, Sweden, December 8, 1990, accessed February 4, 2013, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/paz-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/paz-lecture.html). Emphasis mine.



For us, as Latin Americans, the search for poetic modernity runs historically parallel to the repeated attempts to modernize our countries. This tendency begins at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and includes Spain herself. The United States was born into modernity and by 1830 was already, as de Tocqueville observed, the womb of the future; we were born at a moment when Spain and Portugal were moving away from modernity. This is why there was frequent talk of “Europeanizing” our countries: the modern was outside and had to be imported. ... Mexico was searching for the present outside only to find it within, buried but alive. The search for modernity led us to discover our antiquity, the hidden face of the nation. I am not sure whether this unexpected historical lesson has been learnt by all: between tradition and modernity there is a bridge. When they are mutually isolated, tradition stagnates and modernity vaporizes; when in conjunction, modernity breathes life into tradition, while the latter replies with depth and gravity.<sup>51</sup>

Paz’s argument, that modernity “breathes life” into Latin America’s past, is precisely what the visceral realists contest, evidenced by their relentless search for a poetess of the past. For the visceral realists, modernity is exclusivity, something that only happens outside of Latin America and therefore must be redefined (or relocated) if it is to include Latin America. The present does not “breathe life” as much as stifle the continent, and yet to exist outside of modernity—to reach (and write) beyond it—is what allows Latin America to endure, to continue to exist when Time itself has ended. This perception of Latin America is suggested by María Font in an interesting aside, in which she recounts a memory of her high school teacher who “claimed to know exactly what he would do if World War III broke out: go back to his hometown, because nothing ever happened there ... in a way he was right, when the whole civilized world disappears Mexico will keep existing, when the planet vaporizes or disintegrates, Mexico will still be Mexico.”<sup>52</sup> As this passage suggests, only that which exists outside of linear time can survive it, yet this survival is contingent upon remaining isolated from the rest of the world.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>52</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 193.

And yet, there remains in the novel a sense that this isolation—this neglect, this forgetting—of the Latin American continent is restrictive, confining identity to a liminal state on the threshold of life and death, of discovery and disposal. It is this sense of loss, stemming from an isolated and neglected existence, which the self-proclaimed “mother of Mexican poetry” (an Uruguayan poet) laments in her haunting narration of her twelve-day hideout in a restroom at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) during the Tlatelolco Massacre in October 1968, in which the Mexican government arrested, wounded, and killed thousands of students and civilians peacefully protesting against government repression and extravagant economic expenditures amid rising unemployment and poverty. Acting out of desperation (or delirium, from trauma and lack of food and sleep), Auxilio Lacouture both consumes and flushes away the toilet paper on which she had written poetry, only to mourn her loss of these poems and, by association, her sense of self:

... I thought I was lost. I thought: despite my cleverness and all my sacrifices, I'm lost. I thought: what a poetic act to destroy my writings. I thought: I should have swallowed them instead, because now I'm lost. I thought: the vanity of writing, the vanity of destruction. I thought: because I wrote, I stood my ground. I thought: because I destroyed what I wrote they're going to find me, beat me, rape me, kill me. I thought: the two acts are related, writing and destruction, hiding and being found.<sup>53</sup>

The last sentence, in which Lacouture makes synonymous the acts of hiding and being found, becomes especially significant within the context of the search for Tinajero at the heart of the novel while also implying the ease with which one can write themselves into and out of existence, especially on a historically tumultuous continent where literacy is revolutionary, and where writing can mean certain death. At the conclusion of her

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 204.

narrative, despite the terror of her ordeal, Lacouture nevertheless gives a heartfelt declaration of her love for the diverse Latin American “poets,” “swept” in from everywhere and nowhere in search of “a place to live and a place to work ... the common fate of all mankind”<sup>54</sup>:

... [T]hey look at me and say: Auxilio, you’re the mother of Mexican poetry. And I say (or if I’m drunk, I shout): no, I’m not anybody’s mother, but I do know them all, all the young poets of Mexico City, those who were born here and those who came from abroad and the provinces, and those who were swept here on the current from other places in Latin America, and I love them all.<sup>55</sup>

The transitory nature of the Latin American experience to which Lacouture alludes is what Amaryll Chanady terms “trans-American displacement” of the archetypal “trans-American outcast”:

[T]he trans-American outcast is to be found throughout the Americas and is the product of various connections among different places in the hemisphere. The translocalities in which the outcast moves explode national boundaries to embrace a wider hemispheric mapping of the Americas ... showcas[ing] as particular connection between these individuals and place—both the place in which they now live and the hemisphere as a whole.<sup>56</sup>

Thus if the first part of the novel is largely concerned with Mexicans lost in Mexico, then the collective theme of the narratives that comprise the second part is of Latin Americans lost in Europe (and throughout the rest of the world). As Will H. Corral correctly points out, Bolaño’s novel, like much of his other fiction, revolves around a “nebulous cosmos, populated by anxious ‘citizens of the world’ who are never content with the borders

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 488.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>56</sup> Amaryll Chanady, “The Trans-American Outcast and Figurations of Displacement,” *Comparative Literature* 61.3 (2009): 336.

established by their previous lives,” and who, consequently, are inclined to helplessly wander the world in search of self and belonging.<sup>57</sup>

Needless to say, the constant flux or “current” on which peoples (and the cultures they bring with them) have disseminated across the world inevitably complicates any notion of identity that one might have, and nowhere is this more evident than in intercontinental movements of Latin Americans. This is suggested by Simone Darrieux’s narrative, recounting her romantic relationship with Belano in Paris: “When I first met him he was a Mexican like any other Mexican, but toward the end he felt more and more like a foreigner. Once I said: you Mexicans are like this or that, and he said I’m not Mexican, Simone, I’m Chilean, a little sadly, it’s true, but like he meant it.”<sup>58</sup> Such episodes of “mistaken” identity is, according to Bolaño, part of the exilic experience, in which “Chileans tell me I talk like a Spaniard, Mexicans tell me I talk like a Chilean, and Spaniards tell me I talk like an Argentine: it’s a question of accents.”<sup>59</sup> And this question of accents—of language—and of foreignness recurs in the narrative of Roberto Rosas, in which he recounts first meeting Lima also in Paris, where “there were twelve rooms in our attic apartment. Eight of them were occupied by Latin Americans: one Chilean ... one Argentinian couple ... and the rest of us Peruvians, all poets, all at war with one another.”<sup>60</sup> In a state of restless desperation, Rosas remembers the epiphany he had (while translating French poetry into Spanish) about the state of Latin Americans abroad in Europe and beyond:

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<sup>57</sup> Will H. Corral, “Roberto Bolaño: Portrait of the Writer as Noble Savage,” *World Literature Today* 80.6 (November-December 2006): 49.

<sup>58</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 235.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, “Exiles,” in *Between Parenthesis*, 54.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, *SD*, 240.

You have to understand, Ulises, I would say to him, we're revolutionaries, we've seen the insides of the jails of Latin America. So how can we care about poetry like that? ... I was suddenly overcome by the full horror of Paris, the full horror of the French language, the poetry scene, *our state as unwanted guests, the sad, hopeless state of South Americans lost in Europe, lost in the world*, and then I realized that I wasn't going to be able to finish translating "Satin Blood" or "Blood of Satin," I knew that if I did I would end up murdering Bulteau in his study on the Rue de Téhéran and then fleeing Paris like an outlaw.<sup>61</sup>

Rosas' restlessly violent hostility towards Paris, the French language, and South Americans "lost in the world," like the exchange between Darrieux and Belano, once again recalls Chanady's analysis of trans-American displacement:

The trans-American movement of individuals and families is represented by a continuum of figures of location and dislocation that emphasize the historical, geographical, economic, and cultural connections among various parts of the hemisphere, and the narratives that represent this movement are characterized by significant differences concerning the culture, national origin, gender, class, and race of the protagonists.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, the liminal state of Latin American "wanderers" can reinforce Latin American solidarity while isolating Latin Americans from the nations in which they find themselves living (or dying). Latin America's isolation, stemming from its geographical and emotional separation from Europe, is evident in the narrative of Bulteau himself (murderously despised by Rosas, evidenced in the passage above) who recounts his brief and puzzling correspondence with Lima:

[I]n occasionally unintelligible English the Mexican reeled off a story that I had trouble following, a story of lost poets and lost magazines and works no one had ever heard of, in the middle of a landscape that might have been California or Arizona or some Mexican region bordering those states, a real or imaginary place, bleached by the sun and lost in the past, forgotten, or at least no

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 242, 243. Emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> Chanady, 336.

longer of the slightest importance here, in Paris, in the 1970s. A story from the edge of civilization.<sup>63</sup>

Although the story that Lima vaguely explains to Bulteau is undoubtedly the quest to find Tinajero years prior, the significance of this passage lies not in Lima's story but in Bulteau's reaction to that story, calling it "a story from the edge of civilization," signifying Latin America as that "real or imaginary place ... lost in the past, forgotten, or at least no longer of the slightest importance" in Paris, and arguably everywhere else in the world.

The story from the edge of civilization is not, however, limited to the visceral realists and their quest to find Tinajero. Rather, it is the story of an entire continent—of the plight of its inhabitants as reflected throughout the novel's second part. In one of the later narratives, Jacinto Requena recounts a peculiar conversation he has with Lima following the latter's return to Mexico City after he had "disappeared" in Nicaragua.

He told me that he'd traveled along a river that connects Mexico and Central America. As far as I know, there is no such river. But he told me he'd traveled along this river and that now he could say he knew its twists and tributaries. ... A constant flow of people without work, of the poor and starving, drugs and suffering. A river of clouds he'd sailed on for twelve months, where he'd found countless islands and outposts, although not all the islands were settled, and sometimes he thought he'd stay and live on one of them forever or that he'd die there.<sup>64</sup>

Lima's "disappearance" then gives way to an allegorical discovery:

Of all the islands he'd visited, two stood out. The island of the past, he said, where the only time was past time and the inhabitants were bored and more or less happy, but where the weight of illusion was so great that the island sank a little deeper into the river every day. And the island of the future, where the only time was the future, and the inhabitants were planners and strivers, such strivers, said Ulises, that they were likely to end up devouring one another.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 249.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 387-88.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

One cannot help but consider Lima's disappearance and discovery alongside Gabriel García Márquez's poignant and powerful Nobel lecture, in which the seemingly endless struggle of Latin American peoples parallel the Latin American writer's endless struggle to transcribe (much less do justice to) these violent realities by literary means:

Our independence from Spanish domination did not put us beyond the reach of madness.

... [T]he Europeans of good will—and sometimes those of bad, as well—have been struck, with ever greater force, by the unearthly tidings of Latin America, that boundless realm of haunted men and historic women, whose unending obstinacy blurs into legend. We have not had a moment's rest. ... There have been five wars and seventeen military coups; there emerged a diabolic dictator who is carrying out, in God's name, the first Latin American ethnocide of our time. In the meantime, twenty million Latin American children died before the age of one—more than have been born in Europe since 1970. Those missing because of repression number nearly one hundred and twenty thousand. ... Because they tried to change this state of things, nearly two hundred thousand men and women have died throughout the continent, and over one hundred thousand have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

One million people have fled Chile ... that is, ten percent of its population. Uruguay, a tiny nation of two and a half million inhabitants which considered itself the continent's most civilized country, has lost to exile one out of every five citizens. Since 1979, the civil war in El Salvador has produced almost one refugee every twenty minutes. The country that could be formed of all the exiles and forced emigrants of Latin America would have a population larger than that of Norway.

I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression ... that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty.... Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of

conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.<sup>66</sup>

García Márquez's speech in essence situates the historical and contemporary states of Latin America within Lima's allegory of the islands. Thus, Latin America's "striving" for the future has "devoured" its inhabitants by subjecting and subjugating them to a relentless cycle of revelations and revolutions, of violence and of unimaginable suffering—the tragedies that propel Latin Americans away from the continent either voluntarily or forcibly, as was the case with Roberto Bolaño himself.

But the "crux of solitude," which García Márquez has attributed to "a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable," is what has propelled Latin American poets and writers away from their craft, as can be derived from the final narrative of Amadeo Salvatierra, an original visceral realist who possesses the only published poem by Tinajero:

[B]lack then everyone forgot her and then they started to forget themselves.... Like so many Mexicans, I too gave up poetry. Like so many thousands of Mexicans, I too turned my back on poetry. Like so many hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, I too, when the time came, stopped writing and reading poetry. From then on, my life proceeded along the drabest course you can imagine.<sup>67</sup>

This crux is perhaps addressed by the visceral realists' (and Bolaño's) attempt to move beyond the conventional means of language, as illustrated by Tinajero's wordless poem of figurative drawings that García Madero would imitate in the final entries that end the novel. (After all, Bolaño "always wrote about how lost and wandering souls are impotent against the intolerance of aesthetic and political debate and the frauds of polite society.

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<sup>66</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," trans. Sture Allén, Nobel Lecture, Stockholm, Sweden, December 8, 1982, accessed February 4, 2013, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html)

<sup>67</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 586.



Like no writer of his time, he did not choose himself as the center, and opted to showcase the literary world marginalized by intransigence.”<sup>68</sup>) In response to Salvatierra’s self-loathing, Belano and Lima make the compelling promise that would spark their cross-country quest to find Tinajero: “Don’t worry, Amadeo, we’ll find Cesárea for you even if we have to look under every stone in the north ... we’re not doing it for you, Amadeo, we’re doing it for Mexico, for Latin America, for the Third World ... [W]e’re going to find Cesárea Tinajero and we’re going to find the Complete Works of Cesárea Tinajero.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, the young poets keep the first part of their promise—but before they even have a chance to compile the Complete Works, per the second part of their promise, Tinajero is shot and killed while trying to defend the poets from an abusive pimp and his corrupt police officer accomplice who throughout the novel have been in hot pursuit of Lupe, the pimp’s prostitute-girlfriend who escapes him by running away with the poets. Not to mention that just prior to the climactic ending when the poets begin to lose hope in ever finding Tinajero—or worse, of Tinajero being dead and long gone—the poets and Lupe convene to decide whether or not to return to Mexico City:

The problem with El Palito was that [Belano] couldn’t enter the United States. Why not? asked Lupe. Because I’m Chilean, he said. They won’t let me in either, said Lupe, and I’m not Chilean. And García Madero won’t get in either. Why not me? I said. Does anyone have a passport? said Lupe. No one did, except for Belano. That night Lupe went to the movies. When she got back to the hotel she said that she wasn’t going back to Mexico City. So what will you do? said Belano. Live in Sonora or cross over into the United States.<sup>70</sup>

In the end, the fate of the poets (and of Lupe) mirror that of the fates of many Latin Americans faced with the choice of staying or leaving—of finding themselves within or

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<sup>68</sup> Corral, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Bolaño, *SD*, 587-88.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

beyond Latin America. It is, as García Márquez solemnly reminds us at the conclusion of his Nobel lecture, the fate of “the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude,” in search of “a second opportunity on earth.”<sup>71</sup>

This search for “a second opportunity on earth” that characterizes the Latin American experience is part of Enrique Dussel’s analysis of the ways in which Latin Americans (whom he calls *hispanos*) “live creatively,” as Alexander Stehn notes in his introduction to Dussel’s essay, “Being-in-the-World-*Hispanically*”: “Dussel does not intend to provide yet another description of who the *hispano* is (as though the identity of *hispanos* was pre-determined by race, history, or culture) but rather to develop a description of how *hispanos* live creatively given a remarkably multifaceted history,” thereby arguing that “existing as a *hispano* is a particular way of being human, and the *hispanic*-being (*ser-hispano*) is a particular mode of the human being (*ser humano*).”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Bolaño’s *Savage Detectives* strives not to define the Latin American but rather to depict the creative process (which includes creating literature and creating identity) of a people and a generation without a singular “home” or world or “being.” As Dussel contemplates, the distinction of Latin American identity is such that it is an identity formed of other identities, a world formed of other worlds:

The *hispano*, like every human being, lives (ex-ists) inevitably in a “world.” His / her “being-in-the-world” has a “world” that has subsumed “many” worlds whose histories are not chronologically simultaneous but have instead unfolded with different rhythms and in diverse places, developing distinct contents. We name the resulting horizon “being-in-the-*hispanic*-world” as a concrete, current, and complex facticity whose intercultural riches converge to form an identity. This identity is always in formation, interstitial, born in a “border land” with

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<sup>71</sup> García Márquez, n.p.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Stehn, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Enrique Dussel, “‘Being-in-the-World-*Hispanically*’: A World on the ‘Border’ of Many Worlds,” trans. Alexander Stehn, *Comparative Literature* 61.3 (2009): 258.

such a wide range that *hispanos* pass from one tonality to another continuously without ceasing to experience themselves within *hispanic* solidarity.<sup>73</sup>

Bolaño speaks to this “hispanic solidarity” when he criticizes the “provincialism of the book market” as “a problem even worse than being forgotten,” since it is the market which divides and generalizes Latin America by “corral[ing] and lock[ing] away Spanish-language literature, which, simply put, means that Chilean authors are only of interest in Chile, Mexican authors in Mexico, and Colombians in Colombia, as if each Latin American country spoke a different language or as if the aesthetic taste of each Latin American reader were determined first and foremost by national—that is, provincial—imperatives.”<sup>74</sup> But the journey(s) at the heart of Bolaño’s novel not only illustrates Dussel’s concept of the *ser-hispano*, but also redefines the concepts of world and self: “[T]o be exiled is not to disappear but to shrink, slowly or quickly get smaller and smaller until we reach our real height, the true height of the self. ... *exile* [is] the secret word for *journey*.”<sup>75</sup> And so it is appropriate to end here with a continuation of Dussel’s provocative portrait of the *hispano*:

The *hispano* can be ... many worlds in one world. A world that today in the hegemonic North American society is despised, dominated, impoverished, and excluded (beyond the horizon of the acceptable *anglo* world, beyond the “line” of Heideggerian ontology, on the border where non-being, the non-sense of Levinasian alterity commences). They are the last ones on the social, cultural, and epistemological scale ... The “*hispanic* world” is like a phantom, a specter that roams around in “exteriority.”<sup>76</sup>

Perhaps this specter is precisely what Bolaño wants us, beckons us, to see when he asks, “What’s outside the window?”

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<sup>73</sup> Dussel, 262.

<sup>74</sup> Bolaño, “Writers Lost in the Distance,” in *Between Parenthesis*, 195.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., “Exiles,” 49-50.

<sup>76</sup> Dussel, 262.

## CHAPTER 2

## TO WANDER AND TO WONDER:

## REIMAGINING THE WORLD AND RECLAIMING THE SELF IN BEN OKRI'S

*ASTONISHING THE GODS*

Is it that we don't feel entirely at home in the world? Or is it that the world  
we have made doesn't quite correspond to the dreams and hopes that  
somewhere dwell in us?

—Ben Okri, *In Arcadia*

In a parable told to the spirit child Azaro in Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment*, human beings were once said to have been without language. They owned nothing—there was no such thing as names or ownership—and the human race lived in relative peace. But that all changes once the first rainbow appears, and the first words spoken are: “I saw the rainbow first. It is mine.” With these covetous words, feelings of possessiveness and jealousy are aroused, sparking anger and hatred until violence breaks out. Although humans now possess language, “they no longer understood one another. They broke into tribes. They had wars all of the time. And they moved away from the great garden that was their home.”<sup>77</sup>

While the movement away from the “great garden,” and the problem of language that necessitates it, allude to both the Fall of Man and the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament respectively, in Okri's parable the concept of language is reworked, becoming

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<sup>77</sup> Ben Okri, *Songs of Enchantment* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 73-8.

the cause for destruction and discord instead of the source of strength and power.

Language, in the story of Babel, unites, and it is this union that facilitates (or inspires) humanity to strive for greatness: because humanity speaks a single language, they have the potential to build a city with a tower that could reach into heaven. But for Okri, it is precisely humanity's possession of language (much less the same language) which ultimately divides and consequently provokes violence and war as humanity strives for individual, instead of collective, greatness. Such a self-centered greatness can only be reductive, since it is achieved through a form of gain—ownership—that is contingent upon the deprivation of others. As Robert Fraser similarly notes: “In Okri’s alternative creation myth [humans] drift away from perfection because they have learned how to speak, and hence to argue. Language is the harbinger of violence. Most damaging is naming—the kind of language that takes aim and declares, ‘I name this. This is mine.’”<sup>78</sup>

The act of naming—or, more specifically, of using language to claim and conquer—forms the basis of much of Okri’s skepticism and distrust of words and the often malicious and deceitful uses to which they are put. The limitations, as well as the destructive potential, of language are what Okri relentlessly interrogates in his fiction, poetry, and essays. Okri’s use of language to challenge language comprises his grand (re)vision for language and its by-product, literature. In other words, Okri elevates writers as truth-seekers and as dream-makers who use language to create beauty and construct a reality that is both superior to and transcendent of the reality in which one actually exists:

Writers represent the unconscious vigor and fighting spirit of a land.

They symbolize a people creative enough to dream new possibilities that will expand the psychic and moral resources of the land, and free enough to launch into great new adventures of

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Fraser, *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City* (Devon: Northcote House, 2002), 4.

the spirit. In this way true writers herald discovery, productivity, fertility, and resistance to spiritual despair. They embody that sublime sense of fearlessness in the challenging enterprise of civilization.<sup>79</sup>

Despite his caution against the efficacy of words used to name and label, to objectify and destroy, Okri does not dismiss language as much as reevaluate and re-envision language, pushing words to their limits and elevating them in an attempt to achieve a higher art form by which the world can be re-imagined and its (deprived) populations restored. Thus, language must transcend the destructive human inclination towards possessiveness in order to become a truly constructive force that can survive and ultimately redeem the present state of the world:

First, Okri declared, words can describe—but they can also misdescribe—reality. When employed to misdescribe, they can prove treacherous, even fatal. Lastly, words can go only so far in the evocation of the world. There are certain tasks for which they seem ideally suited, others for which they are patently not designed. *When it enters the latter territory, language must falter, soar into transcendence, or else cease.* ... Words seem well equipped for certain purposes. How is it, then, that this very equipment occasionally proves so harmful?<sup>80</sup>

That language should “occasionally prove so harmful” has more to do with the writer, as the employer of words, and less to do with the words themselves. The act of writing, then, becomes a responsibility: to one’s self, to others outside of that self, and to the “new” world to which the writer—the “poet,” the truth-seeker, the creator—should commit.

This question of responsibility as it relates to language and literacy recalls the oft-cited debate between Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, regarding the state of African literature (or, more specifically, in which language African literature should be

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<sup>79</sup> Okri, “Writers and Nations,” in *A Time for New Dreams* (London: Rider, 2011), 15. The collection of essays will henceforth be cited as *TND* in the notes.

<sup>80</sup> Fraser, 1-2. Emphasis mine.

produced).<sup>81</sup> Whereas Achebe argued for a reconciliation of “Africanness” with the English language (or French, or Arabic, or any number of “official” languages culled from the continent’s long history of colonization and imperial regimes) on the grounds that Africa is less a language and more a way of being, Ngugi adamantly pushed for a restorative vision of Africa that necessarily included a return to, an embrace and an employment of, traditional African languages indigenous to the various communities of the continent. For Ngugi, Africa as a “way of being” is contingent upon, not above or beyond, language, since it is African words which can best express or project an African self. Although Okri seems aligned with Achebe in that he chooses to write in the English language, his concern with re(dis)covering the pure origins of Africa is reminiscent of Ngugi’s arguments. But for Okri, these “pure origins” are located neither in history or language, but *beyond* both: origins must be recreated rather than retrieved.

Thus in Okri’s work, the issue at hand is not which language can repossess and express an African self, but rather how language can do away with such ownership entirely and reconfigure the self as containing many selves, many worlds. In problematizing language, and challenging its relationship to—or description of—culture or identity, Okri moves towards a reimagining of world and world order by reevaluating the ways in which we engage with, or disengage from, that world through our words. We see this philosophy and vision most readily in *Astonishing the Gods*, Okri’s fantastical novel in which a young man, weary of his own invisibility, embarks on a search for the

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<sup>81</sup> See Chinua Achebe, “The African Writer and the English Language,” in Achebe’s *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), 91-103; and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “The Language of African Literature,” in wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986), 4-33. See also Obiajunwa Wali’s excellent report on the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression, “The Dead End of African Literature?” *Transition* 10 (September 1963): 13-15.

“secret of visibility,” a search which leads him to an enchanted island where nothing is what it seems, where silence is a form a speech, and where physicality is inferior to mentality. In this invisible city, Okri not only confronts the limitations of language in superficially constructing self-identity, but also stages his new world order in which the “laws of the land” are diversity, wisdom, and love. Okri’s invisible city restores humanity to its “origins” as set forth in the earlier parable, in which there was peace and harmony despite there being (or perhaps because there was) no language, and in which humanity existed—and coexisted—beyond words. In *Astonishing the Gods*, Okri presents us with provocatively alternative ways of seeing ourselves and the world, and of being ourselves in the world. By imagining alternative ways of speaking, seeing, and being, the concept of invisibility as it most often relates to removal and exclusion is instead reasserted as a symbolic manifestation of transcendence that can withstand the existential erasures imposed by hegemonic structures of knowledge and power.

When the novel opens, we are introduced to the unnamed “invisible” protagonist who, upon realizing his condition, is both disturbed by his invisibility and curious to learn the meaning of visibility:

It was in books that he first learnt of his invisibility. He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn’t exist. This troubled him so much that he resolved, as soon as he was old enough, to leave his land and find the people who did exist, to see what they looked like.<sup>82</sup>

From the outset, Okri draws a connection between the alleged nonexistence of a people and the manipulation of language that alleges such nonexistence through the production of a body of “knowledge” that erases the bodies of others, represented here by the

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<sup>82</sup> Okri, *Astonishing the Gods* (London: Phoenix House, 1995), 3. The novel will henceforth be cited as AG in the notes.



“history books” that not only teach and reflect the young protagonist’s invisibility, but have rendered him invisible in the first place. Just prior to the young man’s startling epiphany, the omniscient narrator tells us that the lives of the invisibles “stretched back into the invisible centuries and all that had come down from those differently colored ages were legends and rich traditions, unwritten and therefore remembered ... because they were lived.”<sup>83</sup> This elevated description of the prehistoric, pre-recorded, pre-language “sunlight of the unwritten ages” (all of which the young man discovers is defined as “invisibility”) juxtaposes the dark void of both historical and literary productions wherein peoples are stripped of their visibility and emptied of their meaning, excluded and forgotten.<sup>84</sup> At this, the restless protagonist is spurred to action, fleeing his home and travelling for seven years with a burning desire “to know why I am invisible.”<sup>85</sup> He eventually arrives at the invisible island and ultimately decides to remain there, both enchanted and compelled by its strangeness. When approached by a formless and nameless voice which he soon realizes is his spirit guide, the young man asks about the name of the island. The spirit responds: “It doesn’t have a name. We don’t believe in names. Names have a way of making things disappear. ... When you name something it loses its existence to you. Things die a little when we name them.”<sup>86</sup> The paradoxical association of disappearance with naming, a process typically associated with recognition, exemplifies Okri’s concern over language that is used to name and ultimately claim. In this sense, names are a form of dispossession, a reductive process, a way of stripping something of its meaning so that “it loses its existence.”

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 6.

But naming is not the only way of losing existence. As the story progresses, Okri proposes another mode of disappearance: refusing to cross bridges. Literally, the story's protagonist must cross a bridge that can only be held up by the person crossing it. Figuratively, the crossing of the bridge, an imagined fixture that is supported only by the crosser, serves to counter those barriers which are constructed by a divisive mind intent on dividing and dominating. To therefore cross the bridge requires a constructive, not destructive, imagination that can support the weight of the bridge while also surpassing it. In Okri's tale, one's very existence depends upon such crossings—on this enchanted and enigmatic island, crossing bridges becomes a matter of life or death, of emergence or disappearance, as the spirit guide reveals to the hesitating protagonist:

“You will be nowhere. In fact, you will be worse than nowhere. Everything around you will slowly disappear. Soon you will find yourself in an empty space. Then you will stiffen. You will lose all life. You will become the image of what you essentially are. Then, not long afterwards, half dead and half alive, unable to breathe and unable to die, you will become the statue of your worst and weakest self. In the morning, you will be collected by the garbage men and set up in the negative spaces of the city as another reminder to the inhabitants of the perils of failing to become what they can become. ... I assure you, it is better to try and cross that bridge and fail, than to not try at all.”<sup>87</sup>

At this, the young man crosses the bridge, though neither he nor the reader is quite sure how until the very end of the book, when the protagonist declares that “creativity and grace” was the key to crossing the mysterious bridge.<sup>88</sup> Thus the mental construction of bridges—fixtures that join rather than separate—can be derived from and are embodied in the creativity and grace of poetry and other arts. Okri attests to the unifying powers of poetry in his essay, “Poetry and Life”: “Poetry returns us to the surprise of our similarities. It brings us back to the obscure sense that we are all members of a far-flung

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 155.

family, sharing feelings both unique to us and oddly universal. ... But we need to constantly raise the possibilities of poetry.”<sup>89</sup>

Okri’s imperative to “constantly raise the possibilities of poetry” expresses not only his concern for aesthetic (or more specifically, for an aesthetic that restores as it elevates), but it also suggests that such an elevation, such an exceeding of limits, is contingent upon crossings. This is exemplified by the association of the various “crossings” of the invisible city’s inhabitants (known as the Invisibles) with the awe-inspiring richness of their civilization:

As if in a mist, he saw whole peoples rising from the depths of a great ocean, rising from the forgetful waters. ... [H]e saw them walking to an island of dreams. There they began building a great city.... They built a great new future in an invisible space. They built quietly for a thousand years. They built a new world of beauty and wisdom and protection and joy to compensate for their five hundred years of suffering and oblivion beneath the ocean. They had dwelt as forgotten skeletons on the ocean bed, among the volcanic stones and the dead creatures that turn into diamonds. ... Then he realized that towards the end, the bridge had turned into air, and into dreams.”<sup>90</sup>

Here, bridges are envisioned as sites of creativity through which dreams can be realized.

And it is the construction of bridges that is essential for, if not synonymous with, invention and development, prominence and power. If, as Okri himself warns, we are to “tear down the barriers wisely, or else we won’t be able to get out and nothing will be able to come in,” then the idea of building bridges becomes revolutionary in its resistance of hegemonic structures of knowledge and power that are contingent upon that ancient

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., “Poetry and Life,” in *TND*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., *AG*, 27.

maxim of dividing and conquering.<sup>91</sup> Thus it is only across the bridge—at the heart of the dream—where the beauty and majesty of a new and more promising world can be found:

[H]e was filled with wonder at the great and enduring beauty of the new civilization they had built for themselves in their invisible spaces. They had built it as their sanctuary. It was the fruit of what they had learned during those long years of suffering and oblivion at the bottom of the ocean. ... They had constructed palaces of wisdom, libraries of the infinite, cathedrals of joy, courts of divine laws, streets of bliss, cupolas of nobility, pyramids of light. They had fashioned a civic society in which the highest possibilities of the inhabitants could be realized. They had created an educational system ... in which creativity in all spheres of endeavor was the basic alphabet, and in which the most sublime lessons possible were always learned and relearned from the unforgettable suffering which was the bedrock of their great new civilization.”<sup>92</sup>

For this alternative civilization, invisibility becomes both a type of strength and a source of empowerment: the suffering community’s way of restoring and reasserting themselves. If the peoples’ invisibility resulted from the same removal, exclusion, and erasure (signified by the peoples’ “long years of oblivion at the bottom of the ocean”) that the protagonist had discovered earlier in the history books, then the existence of this wondrous new civilization serves to re-appropriate that invisibility imposed by hegemony. Invisibility thus becomes a form of transcendence, and transcendence for this community is power.

It is not surprising that the transcendence and power of invisibility should go hand in hand with the cerebral constructions of bridges as well as the crossing of those bridges. The concept of imagination as the ultimate form of mental transcendence plays a significant role in both Okri’s story and his artistic philosophies. The function and elevation of imagination within Okri’s invisible city brings to mind Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., “The Human Race is Not Yet Free,” in *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix House, 1997), 57. This collection of essays will henceforth be cited as *WBF* in the notes.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., *AG*, 28.

declaration that “imagination is the supreme sovereign, for it is not bound by time and space, nor by authority.”<sup>93</sup> When analyzed in this context, imagination becomes a liberating force, and is essentially what frees the Invisibles from their suffering and stupor. Thus if the Invisibles are to survive what Ngugi calls the “enslaving aesthetic” of their imposed invisibility via hegemonic productions of language and knowledge (namely, literature and history), then they must “construct the foundation of a *liberating* aesthetic reflecting a sovereign people whose capacity to imagine a new world—whole, unfragmented—is set free. This would be a people who have overcome a state of alienation imposed by others.”<sup>94</sup> The new civilization of the Invisibles was founded precisely on and through the “liberating aesthetic” of imagination, fully realized in art and creativity. Because the history books have rendered peoples invisible, as the protagonist had discovered in the beginning of the story, these peoples have had to transform their misfortune into greatness, investing their creative energies into education and even the alphabet (or, by extension, language itself) to produce books that restore their image and attest to their promise and potential, instead of their idleness and exclusion.

Although invisibility is perceived as a problem by the protagonist, in this new world invisibility is the solution to the “problem” of visibility. And even though he does not initially realize it, the protagonist marvels at the accomplished dreams of “the people who had risen, as if from a millennial sleep, from the ocean bed that had been their home” and is astounded by their prominence as measured by their artistic creations:<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Freeing the Imagination,” *Transition* 100 (2008): 168.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>95</sup> Okri, *AG*, 28.

He was stunned by the beauty of their eternal sculptings. Their paintings were glorious: they seemed to have reached such heights of development that the works imparted the psychic luminosity of their artistry in mysterious colors, concealed forms, and even more concealed subjects.

Awed by their majestic festivals, astonished by the infinite ways in which everything done in the civilization was touched with wisdom, and inspiring passionate delight, he found himself soaring in the dreams of this mysterious people.<sup>96</sup>

In examining their artistic endeavors and achievements, the protagonist “soars in the dreams of this mysterious people.” Not to mention that it is through art that this “mysterious people” have managed to elevate themselves, one another, and the alternate reality of the new world that they have created. And it is the constructions and accomplishments of this alternate universe which unfolds in the course of the protagonist reaching the other side of the bridge, carried by the dreams of this people. This association of artistic expression and creation with advancement and elevation is reiterated in another of Okri’s works, his (partly non-fiction) novel *In Arcadia*:

Would that the cultivated acres created the conditions for the greatest cultivation of the human genius in all those that reside in them. Would that great architecture were the external sign of the greatness of those that dwell within.

... Art is an indication of how balanced, how serene, how great, how beautiful we can be—an impossible indication. Civilizations are therefore measured by their dreams, by their aspirations in stone, in words, or paint, or marble. It is the artistic ideals of civilizations that signal where those civilizations hope the human spirit can go, how high it can ascend, into what deeds of astonishment it can flow. *Art is the best selves of a people made manifest*, one way or another. It is not their reality.<sup>97</sup>

Okri’s definition of art as the “best selves of a people made manifest” attests not only to the power of creativity, but also to the multiplicity of identities within a community that

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., *In Arcadia* (London: Phoenix House, 2002), 165-66. Emphasis mine. This novel will henceforth be cited as *IA* in the notes. Though the characters are fictional, the novel is loosely based on Okri’s 1996 travels through Western Europe to the Peloponnese in search of the legendary Arcadia for the BBC television series, *Great Railway Journeys*.

can be both liberated and advanced through art. But even though art may elevate reality, it may also counter it just the same. Thus language, as a tool for literary creativity and artistic production, can also be contemplated in the same way.

In fact, Okri pays particular attention to the paradoxes and complexities of language when the protagonist encounters indecipherable words inscribed on “elegant stone monoliths where the founding fathers of legend had made the public declaration of the creation of a new civilization.” The protagonist observes that “the original words of the initiators of the new civilization ... had the brevity and authority of universal laws. They were words of a language that he couldn’t decode, a language no longer spoken. Then he realized that *all along he had assumed a similarity of language*, when in fact he had been *communicating with his guide beyond words*.”<sup>98</sup> With this passage Okri implies an association between the initiation and achievements of this “new civilization” and the peculiar way in which they communicate “beyond words.” Because language has proven inadequate to a civilization erased by and thus suspicious of the destructive potential of words, the Invisibles have had to create a new mode of communication “beyond words” and the assumptions they carry and perpetrate. That language not only assumes (or assigns, rather) meaning but also complicates perception of both self and world is an especially significant component of the story to which Fraser draws attention:

Though his unseen guides communicate deeply within him, he soon realizes with astonishment that no language in the ordinary sense has passed between them. All along they have been relating “beyond words.” The islanders distrust language because they regard it as an extension of that name-calling [with] suspect tendencies ... *Astonishing the Gods* informs us of one additional aspect of the insufficiency of language. This has to do with personal identity: a reality that has a tendency to confound ordinary descriptive language. I, after all, am not what people

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., AG, 35-6. Emphases mine.

say about me: I am not that shifting mass of color, shape, sound, and gesture that is seen, and of which others speak. ... [Thus] those ... whose presence is habitually ignored or slighted [like the Invisibles] possess this intellectual advantage: they know the limits of seeing, and they respect the limits of language.<sup>99</sup>

The act of “seeing,” like language, is indeed equally suspect in this novel as it is throughout Okri’s works, especially the kind of seeing that relies on descriptive language: “All perception is superstitious. All perception is false.”<sup>100</sup> That this new civilization’s existence—or rather its resurrection from the “long years of suffering and oblivion at the bottom of the ocean”—is contingent upon transcending language somewhat recalls the dilemma that Okri poses in the parable from *Songs of Enchantment*. If in the parable language was associated with the death, destruction, and discord that the human race would be doomed to suffer once the first words were spoken, in this alternative society, equipped with an alternative way of communicating “beyond words,” the parable is reversed as citizens collectively work towards a spiritual greatness that is realized in the physicality of their inventions.

While the spiritual (internal) does mirror the physical (external) in this alternate world where the beauty of the enchanted civilization is reflective of the beauty of the spirituality that is the essence of their existence, such is not necessarily the case in the “real” world that lies outside of the text, where the physical and the spiritual are often at odds with one another. The tension between the inner and the outer is significant for Okri, whose concern lies with the spiritual development of humanity amid the physical components that have brought nothing but trouble to world, evidenced by what Okri calls “the trial of color”:

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<sup>99</sup> Fraser, 91-2.

<sup>100</sup> Okri, *IA*, 12.



But seldom did he dwell in the nature of color, and color differences on the great globe, because *he lived, in spirit, within humanity's abstraction, within the oneness of it. He believed, deep down beyond thought, we all are one.*

But now ... he felt himself materializing into a state that Camus called “humiliated consciousness”: the consciousness of being automatically suspect, automatically distrusted, automatically de-humanized, less than humanized, demonized, because of color differences, because of variety in nature’s canvas, because of history, the eyes, what people read into the skin illusions.<sup>101</sup>

The “color differences” and “skin illusions” of human physicality that threaten the spiritual oneness of humanity is particularly problematic because it dehumanizes and demonizes the way words name and claim. The paradox of “visible” human difference is that it can make invisible entire races of people: like language, physicality can also be appropriated and associated with erasure. To “read into skin illusions” and essentially strip someone of their very humanity “because of color differences” is to force that person into disappearance. Thus in his interrogation of perception and visibility, Okri declares that “the laziness of the eyes has to go” because “it won’t do anymore to let our hearts and minds be affected by the color of someone’s skin.”<sup>102</sup> *Astonishing the Gods* is Okri’s attempt to reevaluate and rework perception and visibility—the alternative for which lies in art and aesthetic creation, both of which elevate the spirit because it “sees” (or makes visible) the spirit, as opposed to the corporeal eyes which see only that which is physical:

When nations do amazing things, that is because they create from what they know. And that is a lot. When they do extraordinary things, that is because *they create from places in themselves they didn’t suspect were there.* But when a nation or an individual creates things so sublime—in a sort of permanent genius of inventiveness and delight—when they create things so miraculous that they are not seen or noticed or remarked upon by

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 105-6. Emphasis mine.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., “O, Ye Who Invest in Futures,” in *TND*, 60.

even the best minds around, then that is because *they create always from the vast unknown places within them. They create always from beyond.* ... [T]heir most extraordinary achievements are *unseen, invisible, and therefore cannot be destroyed.*<sup>103</sup>

To create “from beyond” is contingent upon a new way of seeing: to see the unseen, to “create from places in [oneself] they didn’t suspect were there” (in other words, to create from *imagination*) is to empower invisibility by transforming it from a form of erasure to a mode of transcendence. Okri’s persistent emphasis on “the beyond” reaffirms that the hope of peoples made invisible by the present state and hierarchical organization of the world lies in a future that is beyond that world, beyond its history and language and illusions instead of being a continuation of it. Here, the future is redemption—a reconstruction of the past via a reevaluation of the present. And the power of invisibility lies in its being a form of transcendence or, perhaps, the physical manifestation of transcendence itself. In essence, the creative process as Okri envisions it is the movement from the outward in, from the top down, springing from those “vast places within” ourselves which are “unseen, invisible,” and thus indestructible:

“Don’t you think we should try and *go beyond ourselves?* ... *I pour out what’s at the top to get to what’s at the bottom.* I’m interested only in the essentials, the most intangible things. To find them I have to get rid of so much dross, so much fine rubbish, so much froth. I have to get rid of all my thoughts, opinions, and perceptions. They are not important, and can be had by anybody, or will be, or variations of them can occur to anybody. ... I’m not interested in me. I’m interested in what’s not me that’s within me. *I’m interested in getting to the things in me that’re beyond me, beyond speech, but which can be refracted in words, or channeled through words,* or like light be made at least to illuminate a room or house or world through the transparency of the windows, or the lovely colored glass of art. I get rid of so much of myself in order to let the light come through.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., AG, 51, 52. Emphasis mine.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., IA, 86, 88. Emphases mine.

Identity and identity formation is founded on this concept of the self as being beneath and within; thus, art becomes a paradoxical “ridding” of the self in order to uncover the self. In this way, language, speech, and words all become that “fine rubbish” and “froth” that must be scraped away in order to “get to what’s at the bottom,” an essence which can only be “channeled through words.” This is precisely what Okri asserts in his essay, “Plato’s Dream”:

[W]e are more than we suspect ... Knowledge of self ought to be the great project of our lives. Knowing ourselves we will know others. Only by knowing ourselves can we begin to undo the madness we unleash on the world in our wars, our destruction of the environment, our divisions, our desire to dominate others, the poverty we create and exploit. Only through self-knowledge can we reverse the damage we do with all the worldly knowledge we have, which has been only a higher ignorance. ... Then we will start again the great project of humanity, with humility and new light.<sup>105</sup>

If we are to consider the protagonist’s language challenge in light of Okri’s celebration and affirmation of the importance of self-knowledge from within to undo the damage from without, then the obstacle of deciphering the inscription on the stone monoliths therefore requires a new and different kind of reading aligned with a new and different kind of language, the key to which lies deep within the self: “If you cannot read me inside out, like a riddle or a paradox, how will you ever make sense of the invisible inscriptions?”<sup>106</sup> Because the protagonist and his spirit guides had all along been in deep communication “beyond words,” he was able to “decode” the mysterious words of “a language no longer spoken.”

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., “Plato’s Dream,” in *TND*, 28-9.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 21.

The communication “beyond words,” within the self and with the spirit, recurs when the protagonist is faced with another language challenge yet again requiring him to decipher an inscription on the city gates in order to gain entrance:

It was as if the words were a law he had known all his life, a pitiless law which when forgotten creates its own punishment. And the punishment was that of complete abandonment, till the condition of the words was reached. Then it would be no longer necessary to know what the words were, because the person waiting at the gate would have become the words, would have incarnated them.

He was becoming the words as he trembled in his emptiness.<sup>107</sup>

That the trembling spirit within the emptiness of the body “becomes the words,” or a language in itself, is precisely what permits the young man entrance into the city. Again, Okri exemplifies how communication with the spirit, beyond speech, can overcome even the most impossible of obstacles and barriers. If words can close doors, lock gates, and keep out, then to act beyond words—namely, with the spirit—is to open those doors, unlock gates, and let in. And it is here, in this city and behind these gates that the protagonist witnesses the inner-workings of a society whose very existence relies less on words and more on a “vast network of thoughts” that is channeled through creativity:

Suddenly, he saw the city as a vast network of thoughts. Courts were places where people went to study the laws, not places of judgment. ... They also went [to the library] to increase the wisdom of the race. ... The universities and the academies were also places where people sat and meditated and absorbed knowledge from the silence. Research was a permanent activity, and all were researchers and appliers of the fruits of research. The purpose was to discover the hidden unifying laws of all things, *to deepen the spirit, to make more profound the sensitivities of the individual to the universe, and to become more creative.* ... The civilization was dedicated to a simple goal, the perfection of the spirit and the mastery of life.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., AG, 63.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 66, 67. Emphasis mine.

With this new vision of society, Okri interrogates the current world order of life as it is by recreating its most important institutions, such as the judicial and educational systems in which everyone contributes to the advancement of others and in which the health and development of the spirit is primary so as to accommodate “the sensitivities of the individual to the universe.” Such an accommodation consequently facilitates creativity, a positive and constructive interaction between self and world. In this new city, the protagonist had observed that “useful new ways of seeing things imparted possibilities ... [and] the only hunger there was existed in the city’s dream for a sublime future.”<sup>109</sup> In transcending perception, language, and the “old world,” the Invisibles had the potential to transcend their own being, moving towards divinity:

[T]hey had perfected the art of invisibility, and could not be seen by him. But he began to wonder if they were gods, or if as a people they were becoming almost divine, through careful spiritual and social evolution. The possibility of a whole people approaching, in their humanity, the condition of divinity, scared and astonished him. The thought that suffering could give people insights into the intersection of life and eternity filled him with amazement.<sup>110</sup>

What constitutes this divinity is the reconciliation and celebration of one’s many identities, of one’s many selves, acting in harmony both within the body and the world. Okri advises us to “accept our many selves, and our one self. We need to be unified. All our different selves must breathe and be healthy—the side of us that dreams, the part of us that lives beneath the stream of forgetfulness, the body’s need for celebration and ecstasy, the soul’s need for work, the divine in us that quietly longs for higher union.”<sup>111</sup> And with these many selves comes many worlds—many homes—and before one can feel

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., “The Human Race is Not Yet Free,” in *WBF*, 55.

“at home” in the world and with other selves, one must first feel “at home” in one’s own self.

Like language, civilization, and identity, the complexity of home is redefined as being both within and without—home, much like the self, is paradoxically the place from which one ventures out and *away* in order to find. To locate home (and the self), one must both create and then leave both only to continually recreate it elsewhere, as the protagonist discovers: “He felt as if he had stepped into the great old dreams he had heard tell about, where the dreamers find themselves in that place in all the universe where they feel most at home, and where their deepest nature can breathe and be free. *He felt he was in that place where he could step out of himself into the unbounded realms.*”<sup>112</sup> But when the feeling of familiarity, the “mood of at-homeness,” begins to set in, he experiences an “odd premonition”: “He sensed that his true destination was a place that he would eventually lose, would set out from, continuing his original search. Then, after finding what he wanted, and discovering that it wasn’t what he really wanted, he would set out, on a sad quest, to the place he had lost, and would never find it again.”<sup>113</sup> The search for home is portrayed as an elusive and a perpetual one because the search for (or the recreation of) the self is never-ending. As David C.L. Lim astutely notes, “‘Home’ is clearly multilocal, yet it is, paradoxically, never fully ours for all times, despite one’s never-ending search for it. Experienced at most as something missed, it is what Lacan would call ‘the never-here,’ since ‘it is here when I search there; [and] it is there when I am here’.”<sup>114</sup> For Okri this concept of the home as fleeting necessitates creative

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., AG, 80. Emphasis mine.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>114</sup> David C.L. Lim, introduction to *The Infinite Longing for Home: Desire and the Nation in Selected Writings of Ben Okri and K.S. Maniam* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), xiii. The quotations contained

expression, since art is “a homeland of the dreaming self given concrete shape.”<sup>115</sup> But if home is neither fixed nor truly “ours,” then the self must reflect this and refuse to be fixed or to stay in place. Therefore, “the only hope is in daring to redream one’s place in the world,” whereby one creates “alternative values [and] alternative realities.”<sup>116</sup>

Part of this “alternative reality” is making the universe one’s home—of locating the universe within oneself. Because if the existential problem is that “there is a relationship between the troubles in a people and the troubles in the atmosphere of the world,” then the only solution is for humanity “to think of the universe, even the remote stars, as its true home.”<sup>117</sup> To behold the universe in this way, and to “redream” our relationship to that universe, is the ultimate form of transcendence as manifested in art, which the spirit guide reveals to the protagonist:

“[O]ur highest creative acts, our highest playfulness, our self-overcoming, our purest art, our ascending songs, by some mysterious grace transcend so many boundaries and enter so many realms that we occasionally astonish even the gods.

The best things in the world dwell in the realm of pure light, from where they spread their influence to all corners of the universe, to stones and men and worms, and even to stars and the dead and to angels. We are learning to be masters of the art of transcending boundaries. We are learning to go beyond the illusion that is behind illusion.”<sup>118</sup>

One of the most problematic illusions, with the highest stakes, is that the world is hierarchical, and it is our differences which determine the formation of this hierarchy. Thus the human race must venture beyond this illusion and transcend the boundaries that perpetrate and prolong such illusions: “If we need a new vision for our times, what might

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therein are from Lacan’s “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever” (1966).

<sup>115</sup> Okri, *IA*, 167.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., “The Human Race is Not Yet Free,” in *WBF*, 55.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., “Healing the Africa Within,” in *TND*, 135, 139.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., *AG*, 148.

it be? A vision that arises from necessity or one that orientates us towards a new future? I favor the latter. ... Our planet is under threat. We need a new one-planet thinking.”<sup>119</sup>

This movement towards oneness is precisely where the protagonist’s journey leads him, and by the novel’s end he simultaneously loses and gains himself, symbolized by the missing mirror reflection that signifies his place among the Invisibles: “It came as a shock to him that as he looked into the glowing mirror, he could no longer see himself. He was not reflected there. ... He had become one with the Invisibles. It seems odd and beautiful that he who had left his home in search of the secret of visibility should have found a higher invisibility, the invisibility of the blessed.”<sup>120</sup> The protagonist’s invisibility and missing mirror reflection ultimately represents not only his own elevation through transcendence but also the reconciliation of his individual identity with the collective one among the Invisibles. His search for a presence, for a “home” in the world, leads him to an entirely new world in which the only “home” is in the mind, beyond the senses, names, and words.

This idea—of making the universe one’s home—carries social and political implications that not only blur national and cultural lines, but also urges a solidarity among people(s) in the face of hegemonic discourses of erasure. And it is this solidarity which has the potential to realize Okri’s reimagining of the world, a restorative project beginning with the “home” that is the self. As the poet June Jordan wisely observes, “My life seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle. You begin with your family and the kids on the block, and next you open your eyes to what you call your people and that leads you into land reform ... and if you’re lucky,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., “A Time for New Dreams,” in *TND*, 145.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., *AG*, 159.



everything comes back to you.”<sup>121</sup> While Okri certainly shares Jordan’s sentiment, all the while championing the perseverance of the human spirit, such a new way of being has little room (and much less time) for luck, and his warning is simple: “We must transform ourselves, or perish.”<sup>122</sup> For Okri, it seems that transformation, transcendence, and imagination are all synonymous with creativity. And creativity is precisely at the heart of Okri’s vision for the world in *Astonishing the Gods*, which coincides with his larger project of spiritual renewal and social justice in a world gone awry amid war and violence, poverty and prejudice, enmity and slavery. The “dream of the Invisibles” to “create the first universal civilization of justice and love” therefore mirrors Okri’s own dream of a better and more just world, in which we can relearn our humanity from the sufferings and triumphs of the world’s oppressed<sup>123</sup>: “For in their patience and in their egalitarian triumph they can teach us all how to live again and how to love again and could well make it possible for us all to create the beginnings of the first truly universal civilization in the history of recorded and unrecorded time.”<sup>124</sup> The spiritual inclination to love must sooner than later overpower the human propensity for destruction if we are to survive on an increasingly hostile planet characterized by separation and domination. In essence, Okri’s novel (like any project concerned with social justice) is less about “who we are” and more about how much (or, in Okri’s words, “how wisely”) we love—and even more so how we can make that dream of a universal civilization of justice and love a reality.

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<sup>121</sup> June Jordan, “Foreword to *Civil Wars* (1981),” in Jordan’s *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic/Civitas, 2003), 308.

<sup>122</sup> Okri, “A Time for New Dreams,” in *TND*, 146.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., *AG*, 155.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., “Redreaming the World,” in *WBF*, 133.

## CHAPTER 3

“WOMAN WALKING HEAVY/BROWN WORLDS IN HER FACE”:  
GLOBAL(IZED) IDENTITIES AND UNIVERSAL PATRIOTISM IN THE POETRY  
OF SUHEIR HAMMAD

We are all composites of where we come from and where we want to go. I  
want to go to a better, more just world. I have to bring all of me there. I  
want you to bring all of you.

—Suheir Hammad, “Composites”

At the height of the Second *Intifada* (also known as the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*) which began in September 2000, a 23 year-old white American student from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, arrived in Gaza to initiate a sister-cities project between Olympia and Rafah, a city in southern Gaza where the vast majority of the population is comprised of Palestinian refugees. As an active volunteer for the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), a nonviolent organization dedicated to the Palestinian cause, she was particularly engaged in protests against the demolition of Palestinian homes by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It was during one of these protests, on March 16, 2003, less than two months after her arrival, that Rachel Corrie was murdered—run over twice, crushed to death by an IDF armored bulldozer on its way to demolish another Palestinian home.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> For more on Rachel Corrie, see Therese Saliba, “On Rachel Corrie, Palestine, and Feminist Solidarity,” in eds. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2011), 184-202; Rachel Corrie,

Three days after Rachel Corrie's murder, Palestinian American social activist Suheir Hammad's poem "On the Brink of..." was circulated on the internet. Frustrated by the violence against Palestinians in general, and against Rachel Corrie in particular, Hammad writes, "the murder of this white/girl from Olympia Washington has/my heart breaking and my blood faint./Something like ten Palestinians have been killed since/yesterday, when a Caterpillar bulldozer driven/by a man demolished the home that was her body."<sup>126</sup> While the conflation of home and body is a significant motif that appears throughout Hammad's work, that conflation becomes especially complicated in the case of Rachel Corrie who, despite the "privilege" (to use Corrie's own words) of her race and nationality, was considered Palestinian in the weeks leading up to, and the months and years following, the tragedy. Not only did Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat proclaim her a "daughter of Palestine," even naming a street in the West Bank city of Ramallah after her, but in her journals Corrie had professed her love for the Palestinian people and had identified herself with them, as did the people of Rafah who spray-painted "Rachel has Palestinian blood" across city walls after her murder.<sup>127</sup> And, in response to the vehement criticism of Corrie's active solidarity with the Palestinian people, Evergreen professor Therese Saliba remembers her futile attempt to comfort a troubled colleague by explaining that Corrie had "become Palestinian, and she will be

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"Letter from Palestine (February 7, 2003)," in eds. Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 608-9; and eds. Craig and Cindy Corrie, *Let Me Stand Alone: The Journals of Rachel Corrie* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

<sup>126</sup> Suheir Hammad, "On the Brink of..." *The Electronic Intifada*, March 19, 2003, accessed November 27, 2012, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/brink/4466>.

<sup>127</sup> The graffiti in Rafah to commemorate Corrie is described in Saliba, 186.

attacked in the same way the Palestinians have always been attacked and their struggle discredited. She will be called a terrorist or a terrorist sympathizer.”<sup>128</sup>

Saliba’s sentiment that Corrie had “become Palestinian” borrows from the Caribbean American poet June Jordan’s “Moving Towards Home,” published in 1985 in response to the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila, in which Jordan proclaims: “I was born a Black woman/and now/I am become Palestinian/against the relentless laughter of evil/.../It is time to make our way home.”<sup>129,130</sup> This concept that Jordan lyrically explores—of being “born” a certain identity and “becoming” another by way of establishing solidarities built on an inclusive morality, shared social ethics, mutual respect, and shared experiences with (or shared understandings of) human struggle—was exemplified and embodied by Rachel Corrie, whose “born” identity as a white American woman was complicated and expanded, even transformed, by her love for the Palestinian people and her fight for justice on their behalf (both of which would ultimately cost her her life). It is Jordan’s powerful declaration of being (re)born a Black Palestinian woman that would not only inspire Hammad’s debut poetry collection, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (first published in 1996, expanded and reissued in 2010), but would also become both a persistent concern and a consistent theme throughout much if not all of Hammad’s works. In her poetry, Hammad negates and negotiates varying identities in order to engage with and connect the various struggles of (primarily, though not exclusively, colored) peoples across the world. For Hammad, such identification is facilitated through

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>129</sup> Over the course of three days in September 1982, during the Lebanese Civil War, thousands of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut were slaughtered by a Lebanese Phalangist militia, aided by the IDF.

<sup>130</sup> Jordan, “Moving Towards Home,” in Jordan’s *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1989), 143.

a global (and globalized) sense of self coupled with collective self-love, in which we identify ourselves within others (and them within us) in order to form a global alliance based on shared affective love. Thus, by resituating her own difference within that of various marginalized communities in the U.S. and abroad, Hammad's poetry redefines individual identity as a cultural collective built upon a solidarity of shared marginalization in the face of global oppressions, through which "patriotism" transcends nation, and the love of self is (re)located in—and conflated with—a universal love for others.

Universal patriotism (particularly in Hammad's poetry) is synonymous with what Kwame Anthony Appiah interchangeably calls "global citizenship" or "cosmopolitan patriotism." This way of seeing, living, and being in the world is founded on the sentiment that if the whole universe is our "home," then as "citizens" we have a responsibility to nurture it—to concern ourselves with the cultures and politics of all parts of our "home," which just so happens to be the "home" of others as well. For Appiah, difference does not undermine, threaten, nor conflict with this all-embracing conception of home; rather, difference is a part of "home" and is precisely what makes "home" both tangible and malleable. And because home is figured (as it most often is) within kinship and country, cosmopolitan patriots can be considered "true patriots" because they "hold the state and the community within which they live to certain [moral] standards," understanding that while "it is all very well to argue for, fight for, liberalism in one country—your own," it is even more imperative to extend that fight to include those outside of our countries and selves, since our very own rights "matter as human rights ...

only if the rights of foreign humans matter, too.”<sup>131</sup> Thus Appiah not only reconciles traditional views of patriotism with his philosophy of cosmopolitanism, but also expands the definition of patriotism beyond national borders, thereby enabling it to accommodate a changing world and worldview. Although the essence of patriotism has long been argued to consist of “the responsibilities as well as the privileges of citizenship,” Appiah argues that patriotism is more importantly a feeling of connection:

Patriotism is about what the nineteenth-century Liberian scholar-diplomat Edward Blyden once so memorably called “the poetry of politics,” which is the feeling of “people with whom we are connected.” It is the connection and the sentiment that matter, and there is no reason to suppose that everybody in this complex, ever-mutating world will find their affinities and their passions focused on a single place.<sup>132</sup>

Since we are all connected, so to speak, and especially since that connection is not a single, mutually exclusive stream flowing to and from a single place, then there is no reason that cosmopolitanism and patriotism cannot be merged into a collective vision for the betterment of humanity: “We cosmopolitans *can* be patriots, loving our homelands (not only the states where we were born but the states where we grew up and the states where we live); our loyalty to humankind—so vast, so abstract, a unity—does *not* deprive us of the capacity to care for lives nearer by.”<sup>133</sup> Rather than conflict, these loyalties to “lives nearer by” and to all of humankind appear to be interrelated, mirroring the interrelatedness of peoples across the world while working towards bridging the gaps between “here” and “there,” “us” and “them,” “our” struggles and dreams and “their” struggles and dreams.

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<sup>131</sup> Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” 620.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. Emphases in the original.

The construction of such bridges among peoples and across cultures is precisely what concerns Hammad, and to which her poetry is intensely committed. Her literary gesturing towards universal self-identification is often connected with an affirmation of collective marginalization, demonstrated here for instance by her contemplation of the “many usages of the word ‘Black’”:

- Black    like the coal diamonds are birthed from  
           like the dark matter of the universe  
           like the Black September massacre of Palestinians  
           the Arabic expression “to blacken your face”  
           meaning to shame.
- Black    like the opposite of white  
           the other  
           Indians in England, Africans in America,  
           Algerians in France and Palestinians in Israel  
           the shvartza labor of cleaning toilets and  
           picking garbage
- Black    like the genius of Stevie, Zora and Abdel-Haleem  
           relative purity  
           like the face of God  
           the face of your grandmother<sup>134</sup>

The first group of usages signifies the negative connotations of “blackness”: the blackness of coal that “births” precious gems but is not a precious gem itself; the all-encompassing, sublime blackness of the unknown or the unfamiliar (“dark matter of the universe”); the blackness of death (“Black September,” which refers to the events of September 1970, in which King Hussein of Jordan unleashed a brutal military campaign against the Palestine Liberation Organization based in Amman, resulting in the slaughter of thousands of Palestinians); and the idiomatic blackness of shame. The second group places blackness within a racial context and furthermore connects “blacks” (here a metonym for marginalized peoples) and black struggles across the world, from the U.S.,

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<sup>134</sup> Hammad, “author’s preface (1996),” in Hammad’s *Born Palestinian, Born Black & The Gaza Suite* (New York: UpSet Press, 2010), 12. This collection will henceforth be cited as *BPBB* in the notes.

to Europe, to Israel. It is not until the final category that Hammad reclaims blackness, and posits it in an alternative way that is righteous and sacred (the “relative purity” of blackness); constructive and inspiring, associated with creation instead of death (referring not only to the face of *the* Creator, but also to the artistic “genius” of black “creators,” such as Stevie Wonder, Zora Neale Hurston, and the influential Egyptian singer from the 1950’s and 60’s, Abdel-Haleem Hafez); and deeply personal and relational (the black “face of your grandmother”). Hammad’s second and third definitions of blackness as both connective and empowering are a significant theme in her writings, and lay the groundwork for much of her poetry.

Collectively, Hammad’s poems explore the concepts (or, rather, the acts) of both self-definition and the continual redefinition of that self. As the poet herself makes clear, “we need to own our definitions and live by them. We need not be afraid to adapt or change them when necessary. Borders are manmade, and I refuse to respect them unless I have a say in their formation.”<sup>135</sup> These manmade borders—between persons, peoples, nations, cultures, movements—are precisely what Hammad undermines and transcends with the formal and thematic diversity of her poetic voice, as Siréne Harb notes:

Hammad exploits the flexible potential of borders and stresses the significance of discovering embryonic entities. Such entities allow her to reorganize cultural practices so as to creatively juggle/redefine cultural, linguistic, and stylistic norms. For this poet, thus, the construction of identity depends on acts of adaptation and appropriation ... shaping ways in which she situates herself in discursive spaces and negotiates the heterogeneousness of narrative, social and historical borders.<sup>136</sup>

Hammad’s “acts of adaptation and appropriation” and the “heterogeneousness of narrative, social and historical borders” are readily apparent in the poem “taxi,” in which

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>136</sup> Siréne Harb, “Transformative Practices and Historical Revision: Suheir Hammad’s *Born Palestinian, Born Black*,” *Studies in the Humanities* 35.1 (June 2008): 35.



Hammad connects the plight of the people in the Palestinian Territories with that of African Americans in the U.S. Separated into three sections, the first section, addressed to the self-proclaimed “urban warrior” and “street soldier,” trivializes and scolds the ghetto mentality for which Salman Rushdie offers one of the better, more succinct definitions: “The adoption of a ghetto mentality [is] to forget that there is world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers.”<sup>137</sup> Hammad’s criticism of those in the African American community whose understanding of struggle is limited to “not gettin taxis and little white ladies/claspin purses” necessitates a definitional expansion of “struggle” in all its forms and faces, and what it means for marginalized peoples in other parts of world, particularly in the Territories.<sup>138</sup>

This is precisely the subject of the second section, in which Hammad recounts the nightmarish reality of “refugee camps that make you long for/the projects .../this aint no/boy scout trip this is the real deal hell/on earth *what it’s about*.”<sup>139</sup> It is not until the third section that Hammad connects both worlds, both realities, in her call for a more all-encompassing understanding of struggle from which transnational solidarity can be built:

conscious comrade  
there’s a place uglier than uptown’s slum  
where the people are just as beautiful  
strugglin sister  
there’s a *debke*<sup>140</sup> beat funky as p.e.’s riff  
signalin revolution liberation and freedom

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<sup>137</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” in Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Granta, 1991), 19.

<sup>138</sup> Hammad, “taxi,” in *BPBB*, 26.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>140</sup> *Debke* (or *Dabkah*) is a Palestinian folk dance, practiced also in Syria and Lebanon. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, and even more so after the Six Day War in 1967, *Debke* assumed a political role, becoming a fervent symbol of Palestinian nationalism. As such, *Debke* performances have been (and continue to be) repeatedly banned by Israel, particularly during times of heated conflict, such as the First and Second *Intifada*.

so when we're vibin on the pale  
 evil of welfare and crack *know i'm*  
*across the street and across the sea* so when  
 we're combatin cops and prisons know there are prisons  
 like ansar iii<sup>141</sup> nazis wouldn't touch pigs wouldn't visit  
 so when we read baraka and listen to malcolm  
 let's read darwish and keep on  
 listenin to malcolm

so when you call me sista  
 ask after our family  
*this shit is about more*  
 ...  
*it's bigger than*  
*our hoods and our heads*  
 it aint all about this poem  
 and it aint all about  
 taxis  
 and little white women<sup>142</sup>

Here, the urban warrior/street soldier has been replaced by “conscious comrade” and “strugglin sister” as Hammad urges the African American community to extend its own struggle to include that of Palestinians on the other side of the world, who similarly struggle against poverty and crimes of the State, denoted by the “pale evil of welfare” and “cops and prisons.” She associates Palestinian *Debke* with one of the most influential American hip-hop groups, Public Enemy, to bridge the gap between one black pride revolution and another. Hammad’s imperative, that “when you call me sista/ask after our family” serves to remind us, as Michelle Hartman notes, that “merely local or parochial concerns of one community cannot be the main or only focus of social change. Developing an expanded sense of community must be more than simply calling someone ‘sister’ but show a deeper level of respect by asking about the larger family and

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<sup>141</sup> The infamous Ktzi’ot Prison, known by Palestinians as Ansar III, is a detention camp run by the Israeli army. During the First *Intifada* (1987-1993), an estimated 1 in 50 Palestinian males from the Territories were detained there, according to a 1991 report from Human Rights Watch.

<sup>142</sup> Hammad, “taxi,” 27-8. Emphases mine.

community to which this person is tied.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, when Hammad proposes that “when we read baraka and listen to malcolm/let’s read darwish and keep on/listenin to malcolm,” she is gesturing towards and broadening a collective sense of responsibility, for “closed universities and open prisons/curfews and house demolitions/.../...the faces of mournin mothers/losin more sons to american tax dollars” that fund the Israeli military (directly) responsible for such destruction of human life and livelihood.<sup>144</sup> In this way, the references to Amiri Baraka, Malcolm X, and Mahmoud Darwish, like those to *Debke* and Public Enemy, serve “to bridge, through the juggling of a number of cultural notions, different types of struggle for social justice.”<sup>145</sup> As Carol Fadda-Conrey explains, the positioning of diverse cultural and creative icons in Hammad’s work, evidenced by poems like “taxi,” is a reflection of the poet’s own diverse origins:

[Hammad’s] poetry mirrors the intermixture of influences in Hammad’s life, including Palestinian displacement, connections to African American and Puerto Rican cultures that Hammad was exposed to while growing up in Brooklyn, and the various forms of violence she has experienced and been a witness to, manifested, for example, through the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as through the harsh circumstances surrounding urban youth culture in New York and the disenfranchisement of peoples of color all around the world.<sup>146</sup>

Hammad’s linking of peoples across the world via their struggles against oppression and marginalization foreground what Chela Sandoval and Keith Feldman call, respectively, “oppositional consciousness” and “interracial insurgency,” both of which are explicitly at work in Hammad’s poetry in general and in “taxi” in particular, where Hammad actively

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<sup>143</sup> Michelle Hartman, “‘A *Debke* Beat Funky as P.E.’s Riff’: Hip Hop Poetry and Politics in Suheir Hammad’s *Born Palestinian, Born Black*,” *Black Arts Quarterly* 7.1 (2002): 6.

<sup>144</sup> Hammad, “taxi,” 27.

<sup>145</sup> Harb, “Transformative Practices and Historical Revision,” 45.

<sup>146</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey, “Weaving Poetic Autobiographies: Individual and Communal Identities in the Poetry of Mohja Kahf and Suheir Hammad,” in ed. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Arab Women’s Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007), 163.

attempts to instill a camaraderie—a global patriotism—constructed from a fragmented sense of self that is located in multiple places, at multiple times, amongst multiple peoples.

It is precisely this collective sense of self that will enable both the individual and the group(s) to which she belongs to transcend nationality and reach beyond skin color in order to combat social injustices and sufferings from one end of the globe to the other, as Feldman similarly argues:

If one is to incorporate the multiple fractures of identity politics into the composition of self, then one must also address the political concerns of those individuals living beyond the political borders of the United States from whence the cultural elements have originated, the multiple heritages that have imbued the urban site with its complex of cultural forms. In this way, [Hammad] links ghetto with ghetto and forwards a political act both across the street of the urban metropolis and across the sea in the material locale of her national heritage.<sup>147</sup>

Because the self is composed of multiple fragments, then it follows that to identify others within the self, and to identify the self within others, is to align the concerns of the self with the concerns of those outside of that self. For Hammad, it is (and paradoxically so) human difference which connects and empowers us, as Trinh Minh-ha had profoundly asserted in her seminal essay exploring the interlocking identities of postcolonial women: “Otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference when it is not given but recreated.”<sup>148</sup> Embodying otherness as a way of being and employing difference as a means of realizing that “political and social commitment to justice depends on a broader vision of home/self” comprises Hammad’s poetic vision of the universal patriot, enlisted

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<sup>147</sup> Keith Feldman, “Poetic Geographies: Interracial Insurgency in Arab American Autobiographical Spaces,” in ed. Golley, *Arab Women’s Lives Retold*, 64.

<sup>148</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” in eds. McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 418.

in a collective battle against various injustices and oppressions that, despite specificity (of geographic location, of oppressive authority, of victimization) affects us all.<sup>149</sup> As Hammad reminds us, “to find ourselves we hold up a mirror to the worlds we all inhabit,” and it is these worlds with which we relate and for which we fight.<sup>150</sup>

The poem “manifest destiny” not only exemplifies the broader (re)vision of home/self, but also the connective potential of multiplying identities and the power of difference that unifies diversity. In an interview by Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman, Hammad speaks of her multiple identities and identifications, shaped by her immigrant experience and her father’s insistence on her “difference”:

“I didn’t grow up Arab American—what the fuck is Arab American? I grew up Palestinian and Brooklyn, really specifically. And my father’s like you’re not this, you’re not that. And then I’d meet other Palestinians and he’d be like, yeah, but you’re not like them either. You know, because it was a very specific immigrant experience at a very specific time, and I didn’t relate to the problems that were being written about. I didn’t have a half-white parent or a white parent. I didn’t have the sense of cultural clash in my body. I had it outside of my body. In my body I felt like, I look like everyone else I grew up with—whether they were Puerto Rican or Italian or light-skinned black people.”<sup>151</sup>

The self-described similarity of Hammad’s physical appearance to the “Puerto Rican or Italian or light-skinned black people” with whom she grew up complicates notions of race as it relates to Arab and Arab Americans.<sup>152</sup> But rather than pose an obstacle, for

<sup>149</sup> Harb, “Transformative Practices and Historical Revision,” 39.

<sup>150</sup> Hammad, “Foreword: From the Margin to the Page,” in ed. Jocelyn Burrell, *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer* (New York: Feminist Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>151</sup> Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman, “Interview with Suheir Hammad,” *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 31.4 (2006): 85.

<sup>152</sup> For more on the politics (and the problem) of race in relation to Arab and Arab American identities, see Ian F. Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York UP, 1996); Salah D. Hassan, “Arabs, Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State,” *Middle East Report* 224 (2002): 16-21; and esp. Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Arab-Americans and the Meaning of Race,” in eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, *Post-Colonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2000), 320-37.

Hammad this complication provides the perfect site for negotiating, adapting, and appropriating both individual and socio-cultural identities. This is especially evident in “manifest destiny,” in which an intimate dinner scene with a group of friends sets the stage for Hammad’s exploration of interior and exteriors, as they relate to questions of identity, cultural expectation, and poetry. The poem begins with a collective “*we* four/sitting nursing/plates of rice and beans in a Cuban diner/we all *should* have been other people/with other people.”<sup>153</sup> The imperative “should” suggests that such a gathering, at least from the outside, is far from typical, and it is this unlikely friendship among a diverse group of people sharing a meal which undermines the alleged tension between outer and inner, between what *should* be and what *is*. The individual descriptions of each person begin with who she may appear to be, and who she actually is: “one/who should’ve been a neo-nazi aryan baby breeder/a machete wielding man-hating dyke/was a lover of both men and women girl of riot and a poet” while “another/who should’ve been a witness of jehovah knocking down doors/or a gyrating video hoochie/was a scholar of african glory lover of knowledge and a poet.”<sup>154</sup> The repetition of “and a poet” ending each description functions to reinforce not only the common ground uniting them all, despite (or, perhaps, because of) their differences, but also the power of poetry to unite people across borders and barriers.

While each person’s identity runs counter to their exterior, to their appearances and who or what the observing culture expects or assumes them to be, Hammad ends the poem with an affirmation of another characteristic connecting them all, on a level that is personal and intimate: “missing my family/who couldn’t understand/we four all missing

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<sup>153</sup> Hammad, “manifest destiny,” in *BPBB*, 72. Emphases mine.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

family who wouldn't understand/creating a family/we struggling to understand/we were where we needed to be/we are who we have to be."<sup>155</sup> As Feldman notes:

The family unit is renarrated here to contend with the notion of family as the social receptacle of an identity based on genetic descent; rather, it is reconceived in the scene of cultural and political exchange. Heritage is a component of identity here that becomes malleable and contingent on the social construction of wider community, a community situated, in this case, within a transnational urban setting.<sup>156</sup>

For Hammad, this type of unity and community is essential—foundational—to establishing a collective self-identity based on her configuration of home and self, and the conflation of that home/self with other homes/selves, from which a “transnational mobilization of diasporic communities in ghettoized spaces” is made possible.<sup>157</sup> Hammad’s transnational autobiographical identification, which “plac[es] the autobiographical self in solidarity with a network of diasporic populations,” becomes a sociopolitical outlet through which traditional, essentialist, or isolationist understandings of identity are undermined and replaced by a more inclusive, transnational, trans-racial redefinition of home/self.<sup>158</sup> To return to Feldman’s reading of Hammad’s poem:

Hammad locates home in the production of a future through manifold resources of a culture forged in a transnational context and through transnational solidarities. As a community surviving displacement, exile, and diaspora, as Palestinian, as Arab, as Arab American, as a community forged through material, political, and cultural connections with others who survive the material effects of the diaspora, Hammad locates the potentiality for the building of a new home in which members of those ‘othered’ communities—like herself—might speak their own life experiences....<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Feldman, 67.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 69.

Similarly, Harb argues that Hammad's relocation of home and her re-situation of self within that home, in all its multiple locations, move towards a "universalism which acknowledges the importance of gendered and ethnic specificities, while at the same time stressing the commonalities and zones of intersection among different groups. As such, the universal is redefined as a form of political awareness of the workings of power and systems."<sup>160</sup> From this redefined universalism—and re-imagined universe—comes the formation of a collective self, comprised of multiple (and multiplying) identities, and the practice of love towards that self and the others in which it is located, enacted through (and even synonymous with) responsibility.

The association of love (of self and others) with personal and social responsibility is at the heart of Hammad's (seemingly) romantic "we spent the fourth of july in bed." Here, the act of lovemaking is interrupted by images of violence and thoughts of suffering—realities that invade and pervade even the most intimate moments, and that continuously haunt the poet/lover and pollute her memory. After an extensive and intensely morbid chronicle of various gruesome sufferings in the world, from the "exploding legs" of Iraqi girls and "ants crawl[ing] out of somali eyes" to the "puerto rican women" and "young philipinas" who "go blind constructing computer discs/poems like this are saved on," the troubled poet/lover pauses for a moment as she returns to the lusty scene of the erotic encounter: "yeah the smell of suffer/lingers even now/lover as we lay/in amazement and/if baby as you say/my skin is the color of sun/warmed sand then you're/my moonless night/and we the beach/wet and tidal all that/good shhhh

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<sup>160</sup> Harb, "Transformative Practices and Historical Revision," 35.



wet.”<sup>161</sup> This sensual serenity is then interrupted, once again, by images of violence, as the poet/lover’s mind returns to the global scenes of the crime:

yet  
as we lay  
shrapnel awakens pain on  
an island of paraplegics  
courtesy of the 80s gun craze  
to our generation *violence*  
*isn't a phase it's the day to day*

and though my head is filled  
with your sweetness now  
this same head knows  
nagasaki girls picked maggots out of stomach sores with  
chopsticks  
and hiroshima mothers rocked headless babies to sleep  
this head knows  
*phalestini*<sup>162</sup> youth maimed absorbing rubber bullets  
homes demolished      trees uprooted      roots dispersed<sup>163</sup>

The shift to and from the bedroom and the world outside, between the dreamlike sensuality of post-coital bliss and the nightmarish reality of human suffering, serves to bridge the spatial gaps between the “here” and the “there,” lending a sense of urgency to the poet/lover’s need to end these sufferings. Hammad reminds us that the “there” is *right here*, and her internalization of the “outside world” connects the lovers to the world that is outside of them (at least physically, anyway) and for which they are responsible. ““It’s this idea that we are not responsible for those we push aside,”” that Hammad’s poetry contests, as the poet herself explains, ““I do believe in accountability on an individual level, but that can only exist legitimately within societies where we hold each other accountable as well.””<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Hammad, “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” in *BPBB*, 78.

<sup>162</sup> Arabic for “Palestinian.”

<sup>163</sup> Hammad, “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” 78-9. Emphasis mine.

<sup>164</sup> Knopf-Newman, 87.

If human suffering is foreground by human intimacy, then individual and social accountability are foreground by human suffering. In “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” eroticism is offset by horror while the illusion of privacy, of the inner self / outer world binary, is shattered:

this same head with  
 all them love songs  
 and husky whispers knows  
 our moans *come with a history*  
*deeper* than our groins    our  
 groans marry a story older  
 than this lust

as we lay            and love  
*our touch is not free it comes with memories*  
*and the reality* that even now  
 food is a luxury  
 viruses free

...  
 we baby  
 look into our brownness to  
 see those who’ve gone without  
 knowing this    comfort of entangled legs  
 foreheads of sweat    heart beats of love and sex

our sighs indeed *heavy with*  
*history*    destiny    cum    *and responsibility*  
 even now            in this heat  
 on this futon  
 we are not alone<sup>165</sup>

Here, love is not confined to romance, between a pair of lovers, in a room. Rather, the concept of love is broadened to include the whole world, all of humanity:

The boundaries of the marginalized collective are extended to encompass third world, predominantly female, victims of racial and imperial oppression. Here again, the connecting “we” supersedes the collective Arab American identity, linking the plights of Iraqi, Malaysian, Filipina, Puerto Rican, Yemeni, and Palestinian girls, women, and youth, as well as women from Nagasaki and Hiroshima, thus creating a solid unity out of their suffering, [that] unifies diversity.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Hammad, “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” 79-80. Emphases mine.

<sup>166</sup> Fadda-Conrey, 166-7.

If the self is a collective formation, then it necessarily follows that the love of self, and the responsibility that love entails, exceeds the individual and extends to the community and, even further, to the world. In this way, the intimate “sighs” of the lovers are “indeed heavy with/history...and responsibility” for that which is “outside” of them. Thus, Hammad revisits the inside(r) / outside(r) binary she began exploring in “manifest destiny,” as well as the here / there binary she had begun to challenge in “taxi,” and incorporates collective responsibility as the driving force behind Sandoval’s oppositional consciousness and Feldman’s interracial insurgency. It is useful here to return to Minh-ha’s essay about interlocking identities among marginalized peoples, particularly women, in which she also addresses difference and spatial binaries, arguing that “differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities. They are also at work within the outsider herself or the insider, herself—a single entity. She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life.”<sup>167</sup> As Hammad demonstrates in this poem, there can be no peace, not even in the privacy of one’s bedroom or home (or “self”), when the world is at war, with poverty, disease, injustice, violence, and other residual effects of imperialism: “even as we lay in/all this good feeling/people lay in dirt vomit shit and blood/and I gotta tell you/that my sincere love for real/is for my peeps my family humanity/love for real for real freedom/well fed human dignity for sisters and their lovers/.../there aint enough good feeling/to push the pain and awareness out.”<sup>168</sup> It is fitting, then, that on the day of American Independence, the poet/lover realizes and asserts that the most patriotic thing

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<sup>167</sup> Minh-ha, 418.

<sup>168</sup> Hammad, “we spent the fourth of july in bed,” 80.

to do is to celebrate *interdependence*, by setting out to correct the troubles of the world for which she is personally and socially responsible: “we gotta get up soon/come on now baby/we got work to do.”<sup>169</sup>

Hammad demonstrates that universal patriotism, facilitated by universal love, begins with an awareness of pain as universal—a recognition that can link people to people, struggle to struggle, and “over here” to “over there.” This recalls Appiah’s imperative that it is also patriotic—*cosmopolitically* patriotic, that is—to concern ourselves with and defend the rights of others “over there” in addition to our own “right here”:

We should, in short, as cosmopolitans, defend the rights of others to live in democratic states, with rich possibilities of association within and across their borders; states of which they can be patriotic citizens. And, as cosmopolitans, we can claim that right for ourselves. ... [T]he freedom to create oneself—the freedom that liberalism celebrates—requires a range of socially transmitted options from which to invent what we have come to call our identities ... giv[ing] us a language in which to think about these identities and with which we may shape new ones.<sup>170</sup>

Through the construction and contemplation of a multitude of identities, Hammad is able to subsequently engage in the linking of global struggles as reenacted in “letter to anthony (critical resistance),” in which Hammad connects the issue of prison reform in the United States to both the Palestinian struggle for legitimacy and justice and the global sex trade. In doing so, the poem lends itself to a contemplation of the concept of criminality as a residual effect of imperialism’s oppressive agendas, executed through economic exploitation of the poor (and often colored), the subjugation of women, and the suppression of “minority” voices. In the second section of the poem Hammad issues a confession, an admission of her own guilt: “i have always loved criminals/i tell people

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>170</sup> Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” 624-25.

who try to shame/me into silence.”<sup>171</sup> As the poem continues, the poet conflates the criminal with “10/years to go nowhere how much deeper/you going to get until a system based/on money deems you rehabilitated” with the Palestinians, deemed “criminals” by a system (Israel) built on their forced absence and perpetual incarceration in refugee camps:

i have always loved  
criminals and not only the thugged  
out bravado of rap videos and champagne  
popping hustlers but my father  
born an arab boy  
on the forced way out  
of his homeland his mother exiled  
and pregnant gave birth in a camp

the world pointed and said  
palestinians do not exist palestinians  
are roaches palestinians are two legged dogs  
and israel built jails and weapons and  
a history based on the absence of a people  
israel made itself holy and chosen  
and my existence a crime.

*so i have always loved criminals  
it is a love of self*  
and i will not cut off any part of  
me and place it behind fences and bars  
and the fake ass belief  
that there is a difference between  
the inside and the outside

*there is no outside anywhere  
anymore just where we are and  
what we do while we are here*<sup>172</sup>

In “letter to anthony,” prison becomes a symbol of forced separation, the embodiment of the inside / outside, here / there binary erected and enforced by hegemonic power structures and their exclusionary politics. Hammad associates Anthony, the “criminal”

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<sup>171</sup> Hammad, “letter to anthony (critical resistance),” in Hammad’s *ZaatarDiva* (New York: Cypher Books, 2005), 66. This collection will henceforth be cited as *ZD* in the notes.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 66-7. Emphases mine.

sitting in an American prison and to whom she is writing, with her father and, by extension, her people: Palestinians whose very existence has been criminalized by Zionism's agendas. Furthermore, she equates her love of criminals with a love of self—that is, her own “criminality,” namely her Palestinian heritage. Her refusal to abide by the “fake ass belief/that there is a difference between the inside and the outside,” and her conclusion that “there is no outside anywhere/anymore,” recalls her internalization of the external that was at the heart of the poem, “we spent the fourth of july in bed.” The poem's ending is indeed a powerful affirmation of humanity—and the global patriot's promise to continue to defend the rights of others everywhere—as well as a reassurance to Anthony in the American prison and to Nazim in the Palestinian refugee camp that there are people, like the poet herself, who erase the lines between inside and outside, bridge the gap between the here and the there.

This is essentially how Hammad connects struggle to struggle across the world and resists on behalf of those who are withheld and withdrawn by structures more powerful than they:

and there  
 are people anthony who make a connection  
 between you puerto rican rhyme slayer beautiful man and  
 young girls twisted into sex work and these  
 people nazim they are working to stop prisons  
 from being economically beneficial to depressed  
 communities and these people  
 bronx bomber they imagine a world  
 where money can't be made off the hurt  
 of the young the poor the colored the  
 sexualized the different  
 ...  
 they believe human  
 beings can never be reduced  
 to numbers not in concentration  
 camps or reservations not in  
 refugee camps not in schools  
 and not in jails

...  
 stay well  
 and safe  
 resist  
 and love  
 suheir<sup>173</sup>

In “letter to anthony,” Hammad attributes incarceration to invisibility, and invisibility to the hegemonic campaign against the coalitions of difference—like the ones Hammad is constructing in her poetry—that threaten that hegemony. As Minh-ha reminds us:

Difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another. This means that at the heart X must be X, Y must be Y and X cannot be Y. Those running around yelling X is not Y and X can be Y, usually land in a hospital, a rehabilitation center, a concentration camp, or a reservation.<sup>174</sup>

For Hammad, love, and the alliances born of love, serves not only to bridge disparate struggles and identities across many fronts, but also to connect the traumatic experiences that can otherwise isolate the individual and jeopardize the collective self-love meant to empower them. Collective self-love and the interracial insurgency it motivates (or necessitates, rather) is at the center of “open poem to those who rather we not read...or breathe.” Again, Hammad begins with a collective “we” and an affirmation of a shared interracial, presumably (though not exclusively) third world alliance: “we children of children exiled from homelands/descendants of immigrants denied jobs and toilets/carry continents in our eyes/survivors of the middle passage/we stand/and demand recognition of our humanity.”<sup>175</sup> The opening of “open poem” testifies to “a collective past fraught with subjugation and discrimination (extending to the present)” and reaffirms that Hammad’s “own Palestinian history of exile cannot be disengaged from the larger history

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 67-8.

<sup>174</sup> Minh-ha, 415.

<sup>175</sup> Hammad, “open poem to those who rather we not read...or breathe,” in *BPBB*, 73.

of imperialism and colonialism that scatter peoples across the world and sever them from their homelands, whether they are exiles, immigrants, or descendents of slave-trade victims.”<sup>176</sup>

Thus Hammad reconceptualizes “third world,” broadening its scope to include the plights of those who are marginalized in the first world, corresponding to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s de-limiting description of “third world” as being “defined through geographical location as well as particular sociohistorical conjectures ... thus incorporat[ing] so-called minority peoples or people of color in [first world nations like] the U.S.A.”<sup>177</sup> Such a revision of the “third world” as an “imagined community of ... oppositional struggles ... is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance.”<sup>178</sup> This movement away from essentialism and exclusion in an effort to unify and mobilize diversity against hegemonic and hierarchical power structures is precisely what is at work in “open poem,” where Hammad “locates her individuality within communal concerns and struggles, thus explicitly situating the poetic ‘I’ within a ‘we’ ... represent[ing] a united but multiple-colored voice denouncing American white hegemony,” and in doing so redraws the maps of struggles.<sup>179</sup> As Harb similarly notes, “Hammad accomplishes a critique of power through the rearrangement of traditional geographies and seemingly unrelated spaces. In this process, she uses historical experience rather than geographic location as the frame of reference for the redrawing of

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<sup>176</sup> Fadda-Conrey, 165.

<sup>177</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction—Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in eds. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991), 2.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>179</sup> Fadda-Conrey, 164.



maps of struggle against a number of oppressive practices.”<sup>180</sup> This is evident in the poem’s powerful reclamation of humanity through a declaration of resistance, in which “brown-eyed girls clash with governments of war” in their determination to “think, analyze, fight back, and be human beings”:

we  
witness and demand a return to humanity

we      braid resistance through our hair  
         pierce justice through our ears  
         tattoo freedom onto our breasts

the bluesy souls of brown-eyed girls  
clash with blood on the pale hands of  
governments of war  
... sent on a mission to set back  
our strength      power      love

we be political prisoners walking round semi-free  
our very breath is a threat  
to those who rather we not read  
and think      analyze      watch out      and fight back  
and be human beings the way we need to be<sup>181</sup>

Thus, the transnational poetic geographies that Hammad establishes set the stage for a collective resistance against the structures of power intent on “setting back,” meaning marginalizing, various “semi-free” peoples determined to claim full freedom through solidarities built on the power of love. In this way, the cartographies of struggle are themselves composites, much like identity and the “self” it projects, to which Marco Villalobos attests:

Hammad has drawn a map full of dots we still take pleasure in connecting. ...[She] reminds us the distance between millenary African Cities and a Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the distance between Cairo and Jerusalem, is only 265 miles—closer than Los Angeles to San Francisco; closer than Manhattan to Washington, D.C.; that Jordan is only set apart from the African continent by the Sinai Peninsula; that the Red Sea doesn’t make

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<sup>180</sup> Harb, “Transformative Practices and Historical Revision,” 35.

<sup>181</sup> Hammad, “open poem,” 74.

so much of a difference in this respect, since it is crossed by the dust of footprints and the wet of tears, since without the wind's help ululation reaches from one side of the Suez to the other.<sup>182</sup>

This linking of struggles—and securing one's own link to a variety of peoples through shared concern for and participation in those struggles—is reenacted throughout Hammad's poetry, and it is through her poetry that she revisits the sites of struggle to engage with the multicolored voices and multiple narratives of oppression, on all levels and at all distances.

By envisioning identity as flexible, relational, and polycentric, Hammad is able to transcend distance and employ disparity as a battle tactic in the fight against hegemonic structures of power and their oppressive practices. Such intercommunalism, or multicultural polycentrism, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, is not only “a more substantive and reciprocal approach” but also a “profound restructuring and reconceptualization of the power relations between cultural communities” which produces “informed affiliation on the basis of shared social desires and identification.”<sup>183</sup> This is very much the basis of Hammad's universal (or cosmopolitan) patriotism, designed to counter what Steven Salaita calls, “U.S. imperative patriotism,” which “assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory. It is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that unconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be ‘the national interest’ is unpatriotic.”<sup>184</sup> Hammad's poetry not only confronts this notion, but proposes an alternate form of “patriotism” that aligns itself with Appiah's emphases on multilocal

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<sup>182</sup> Marco Villalobos, introduction to Hammad's *BPBB*, 15-16.

<sup>183</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 47, 49.

<sup>184</sup> Steven Salaita, “Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11,” *College Literature* 32.2 (2005): 154.

connections amidst an increasingly global “feeling” of interconnectedness. It is this redefinition of patriotism that links tragedies across disparate geographical locations so that struggle is no longer figured in terms of binaries, such as “them” and “us.” And as such, each individual becomes responsible for the struggles of others and, by extension, all communities become subject to answer for the ills of the world.

This belief in both a collective responsibility and in a more global(ized) form of patriotism are unsurprisingly at odds with governing bodies intent on maintaining, militarizing, and exploiting borders and boundaries. This tension is most evident in Hammad’s poem “Beyond Words,” written between 2003 and 2004 as chaos was unfolding around—engulfing—the world: “the axis of evil” was cemented into American political rhetoric; Saddam Hussein had fallen; the United States was in the midst of war with both Iraq and Afghanistan; sexual violence in the Congo was the most rampant in the world; and just as news broke about the horrors at Abu Ghraib, the town of Rafah on the Gaza Strip (where Rachel Corrie had been killed) was nearly destroyed by the IDF, determined to quell the Second *Intifada*. The poet, who had found—or created, rather—a “home” in poetry, who sought refuge in language, was now at a loss for words:<sup>185</sup>

“Where has my language gone?/The poet searches for words to wrap around these times/Make them sense Make them pretty Make them useful/.../Desperate for words I can write/.../Language has failed me.”<sup>186</sup> Although Hammad had constructed entire bodies of work upon the premise of a collective struggle against various forms of global oppression, that premise was now under threaten, once again, of being delegitimized by

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<sup>185</sup> See Hammad, “On Refuge and Language,” *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 21.2 (2006): 240-41.

<sup>186</sup> Hammad, “Beyond Words,” in eds. Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, 3.

the vocabulary of separation, the mentality of isolation, and the politics of exclusion: “I am told over and over/Iraq is not Palestine/Kabul is not New York/.../Haiti is not Chechnya/Chiapas is not East L.A./Iraq is not Palestine/Over and over I am told/.../No connections here/No illuminated parallels/Two different histories and two different peoples/Make no links/Do not confuse the issues/Only confuse the people.”<sup>187</sup> Hammad finds herself in limbo, and though her sense of responsibility is immense, it is, ironically, the interconnectedness of conflict that leaves her struggling with paradoxical decisions: “How fucked up is it that I have to choose between ending/One occupation or another?/Partition my time and portion my information/.../[I] am taking too much on Too much in/I find nowhere to rest this responsibility/If I say nothing I am complicit/If I say something I am isolated as extreme.”<sup>188</sup>

Hammad’s sense of hopelessness gives way to a series of negations:

This is about light and dark  
There is no black and white in humanity

I am told  
Venezuela is not Cuba  
Rwanda is not Kurdistan

I am not the woman kneeling  
In front of soldiers and their cameras and their weapons  
I am not the child shot in the head by the Israel Defense Forces  
I am not the starving AIDS inflicted mother  
Praying I live longer than my children  
So they will not be orphaned and sick and have to bury me  
I am not the child who watched  
Her family chopped to death in Lebanon in Sudan in Nicaragua  
I am not the father who leaves his children so as not to hear their  
empty Bellies call out Baba, where is the bread?<sup>189</sup>

Followed by a series of affirmations:

I am the woman whose taxes outfitted this tragedy

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

The American the Authority does not speak for  
 The Arab the Arab leaders do not speak for  
 The woman whose shouts of Not in My Name  
 Were spit back at me as a slogan of the misguided at best  
 I am the girl from Brooklyn told to mind her business  
 I am the poet in search of new words  
 And a new world Not Mars<sup>190</sup>

By demonstrating how all that separates us can threaten any attempt at collective empathy and struggle, and also how authorities and leaders exploit those boundaries and manipulate (in addition to perpetrating, of course) human suffering so as to maintain those boundaries, Hammad struggles to regain common ground and reconnect the dots across a world on fire. In the end however the poet remains hopeful, reaffirming the power of love despite love's vulnerability in times of chaos:

*There is still love in us*

...

There is still enough resistance in us  
 To create a world where *there is no*  
*Your people or my people*  
*But our people*  
 Our people who kill Our people who are killed

*I somehow know love will save us*

...

*I know somehow love will save us*  
 Though I can't find the passion or desire in my body to make it

There is still a source for peace deeply embedded in this chaos

*I know love will save us*

Though words fail to point out how

Amazingly I still pray

To a god I envision to be larger than any nation Any religion

And I still hunt for language to gather into a poem

That I pray will feed those like me

In need of proof they are not alone<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 8-9. Emphases mine.

The repeated affirmations of love's power to save and unite that end "Beyond Words" can be found elsewhere in Hammad's poetry, such as in "some of my best friends," in which she proclaims "love is larger than our details/these are my people."<sup>192</sup> The poet's—and, by extension, the universal patriot's—determination to stay connected, to continue to assert that "over there is over here" and therefore "their" concerns should also be "ours," brings to mind another profound conclusion drawn by Minh-ha:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she continually drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.<sup>193</sup>

Such is the nature—the mission, the dream—of the universal patriot, neither inside nor outside, here nor there, nowhere but everywhere. In this schema, the world becomes the site of multiple engagements, with home, with self, and with struggle.

In December 2010, *American Quarterly* featured the forum, "From La Frontera to Gaza: Chicano-Palestinian Connections" in which the aim was to "ask important questions about the connections between pursuits of justice and the organization of bodies and nations."<sup>194</sup> I could not help but to draw connections between this particular issue of *AQ* and Hammad's poetry, which essentially strives to accomplish the same ends. Thankfully, it seems that Hammad's poetry is part of an ongoing project in which

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., "some of my best friends," in *ZD*, 89. See also Hammad's "first writing since," written and circulated on the internet a week after 9/11, in *ZD*, 98-102, esp. 100-1.

<sup>193</sup> Minh-ha, 418.

<sup>194</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, "Editor's Note," *American Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2010): v.

nations, especially “America,” are deconstructed and rearticulated as a series of connections within and without its borders. Such a re-articulation necessitates a revision—that is, an expansion—of a term closely associated with nationhood: patriotism. Curiously (though not surprisingly), while nations extend their borders and expand their frontiers, the same does not follow for the concept of patriotism. In her provocative essay “Intifada, USA,” June Jordan, tormented by the onset of the Gulf War and haunted by images of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, endeavors to link struggle to struggle in the very same fashion as Hammad and contemplates the fate of us all:

Clearly, a barrel of oil is worth more than any number of  
 Palestinian lives. Clearly, a barrel of oil is worth more than  
 250,000 young African-American and Mexican-American and  
 Latino and poor white men and women now sweltering on the  
 Arabian desert while they await God-knows-what horrible and  
 untimely death.

I say we need a rising up, an Intifada, USA.

...

We need to rise up. We need to stand against the “standoff” in  
 the Persian Gulf. We need an Intifada, USA.

At night, I go to bed afraid to close my eyes, or sleep: I ask my  
 soul these questions aching on my conscience: What will happen  
 to that little girl, that child of Palestine? What is happening to  
 you and me?<sup>195</sup>

Those haunting questions Jordan poses at the conclusion of her essay rhetorically close the distance and bridge the gap between “them” and “us” by premising that what is happening to “that child of Palestine” is what is happening to “you and me.” The work of Jordan and Hammad, the activism of Rachel Corrie, and the “project of reimagination” at the heart of scholarly publications like *AQ* are continuing to make these connections, and in the process are redefining what it means to love one’s country, one’s people, and

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<sup>195</sup> Jordan, “Intifada, USA,” in Jordan’s *Affirmative Acts: Political Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 7.

oneself in a world that is anything but singular. Unfortunately, however, the obstacles are still there, even growing: given the prevalence of violent conflict all over the world, the comfort of hierarchy and the rhetoric of separation seem only to be disseminating instead of dwindling. And here I am reminded of African American photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks' careful warning, "We cannot get too comfortable in our houses. Wolves still roam the woods. The hawk still hangs in the air. And restless generals still talk of death in their secret rooms."<sup>196</sup> If the world is indeed our house, then as universal patriots we have a huge task ahead of us.

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<sup>196</sup> Gordon Parks, introduction to Parks' *Moments Without Proper Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 3.



## CONCLUSION

## TOWARDS (AND BEYOND) A NEW “HOME”

What if we declared ourselves *perpetual refugees* in solidarity with all refugees needing safe human harbor from violence and domination and injustice and inequality? ...

We are all refugees horribly displaced from a benign and welcoming community.

And the question is: Can we soon enough create the asylum our lives will certainly wither without?

—June Jordan, “We Are All Refugees”

The search for transcendence—of language, of self, of home—that characterizes the works of Bolaño, Okri, and Hammad rests upon the acceptance and projection of infinite ways of being, perpetually supplanted by a constant movement beyond home, beyond history, beyond words. Okri’s assertion that “we think we are one kind of people, when in fact we are always creating ourselves. We are not fixed. We are constantly becoming, constantly coming into being,” is grounded in his exaltation of creativity, an exaltation that he shares with Bolaño and Hammad.<sup>197</sup> In Bolaño’s work, the constant transformation of self and world in and through literature is revolutionary salvation; in Hammad’s, it is urgent refuge; and for Okri, it signals a new “civilizing” mission for a reformed civilization distinguished by a totalizing vision for social justice. For this group of writers, whose lives have been shaped and reshaped by distance, disorder, and

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<sup>197</sup> Okri, “Writers and Nations,” in *TND*, 18.

displacement, the utilization of writing as a vehicle by which the self can engage with (and construct new) realities recalls Salman Rushdie's speculation that "if literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles."<sup>198</sup>

The "long geographical perspective" of which Rushdie speaks stems from the experience of exile—a term which, together with "home," both denotes and connotes perceptions, perspectives, and paradoxes that together comprise the essence of the works studied in this Thesis, whose authors' very identities are arguably founded upon (or formed around) this experience of separation and estrangement. Thus these authors' concerns with the inward versus the outward are materialized in their bodies of work, in which observations of the external (homeland, world) give way to and reflect upon contemplations of the internal (identity, self). In other words, the tension between the inner and the outer, between self and home, is intensified by the removal of self from home—a separation that is a traumatic yet definitive component of Bolaño's, Okri's, and Hammad's creative processes by which external dislocation becomes internalized, manifesting in questions, crises, and negotiations of identity.

That the physical dislocation from home parallels the mental dislocation from self becomes a significant premise upon which these authors construct their narratives. As the quintessential writer of exile Edward Said argues, exile's "intellectual mission" is to refuse what Theodor Adorno called the "administered world"—that is, the notion of home as a "ready-made form" or a "prefabrication" into which all life is pressed: "the

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<sup>198</sup> Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Imaginary Homelands*, 15.

house is past ... [and] it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.”<sup>199</sup>

Elsewhere, Said quotes at some length an extraordinary passage from Adorno, in which he relocates (or recreates, rather) “home,” however elusive and vulnerable, within the dislocated subject’s writing: “‘In his text, the writer sets up house. ... For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. ... In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his own writing.’”<sup>200</sup>

But the state of homelessness that characterizes an exiled or “detached” writer can be a source of privilege and empowerment, as the writers discussed in this Thesis have demonstrated, precisely because the act (or practice, rather) of detachment necessitates border-living and border-crossing. As Said reminds us, “The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.”<sup>201</sup> Although the detachment from, rather than the blind defense of, “home” is indeed invaluable (even preferable), it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that detachment, in the Saidian sense, is not so much an outright rejection of attachments as it is a *working through* of attachments. And chief among these attachments is language.

Thus when Édouard Glissant similarly asserts that “all literacy needs to be buttressed by a cultural literacy that opens up possibilities and allows the revival of autonomous creative forces from *within, and hence ‘inside,’ the language,*” he is

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<sup>199</sup> Theodor Adorno, qtd. in Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard UP), 184.

<sup>200</sup> Adorno, qtd. in Said, “Between Worlds,” in *Reflections on Exile*, 568.

<sup>201</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 185.

implying that language is both the lock and the key.<sup>202</sup> Language locks in and contains “autonomous creative forces,” but it also holds the key to opening up and “reviving” those forces—with the help of a “cultural literacy” that goes deeper than spoken or written language, that is beyond words. For the authors studied in this Thesis, language is indeed beyond words, demonstrated by Tinajero’s enigmatic poetry of shapes and lines for which Bolaño’s relentless young “detectives” search; by the spiritual silence that is communication in Okri’s invisible city; by the horror of violence and destruction all over the world that a distraught Hammad cannot put into words. Yet despite the shortcomings of language, these authors nevertheless work through words in order to transform and transcend. It is through and within language that exile, among other human atrocities and tragedies, is accessed and made accessible to others, thereby unifying seemingly disparate and individualistic experiences. This is what Bolaño suggests when he claims that “the exiled person or the category of exile doesn’t exist, especially in regards to literature ... since every writer becomes an exile simply by venturing into literature, and every reader becomes an exile simply by opening a book.”<sup>203</sup> Literature, then, is home—albeit a lost home that must be actively recreated rather than simply retrieved. To venture into literature not only collectivizes the singular experience of exile, but more so gestures towards a shared human yearning for a “home” that has always been elusive, intangible, and fleeting.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that literature is at once home and beyond home. Because although literature (and the language from which it is created) comes with challenges and limitations, it also has the power to liberate and revitalize,

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<sup>202</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 104. Emphasis mine.

<sup>203</sup> Bolaño, “Exiles,” in *Between Parenthesis*, 51.

enabling us to collect the infinity of fragments that make up who we are and what we mean. In other words, literature participates in (if not facilitates) the “regeneration of humanity” by “making whole again all these great continents within us. We are the sum total of humanity. Every individual is all of humanity.”<sup>204</sup> It reminds us that we are both one and all at the same time, and that we must in turn conceive of a world, a “home” that accommodates all those identities without confining them. Only when this is accomplished will humanity rise from the ashes, so to speak: from the nightmare of exile to which each of us has fallen victim, from the “grave that is home only to the bones” and not to the spirit. As Okri eloquently declares, “exile ends when we sense that home is everywhere that the soul can sing from.”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Okri, “Healing the Africa Within,” in *TND*, 138.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, in *Arcadia*, 224.

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