

# The Fragmenting Force of Memory



The Fragmenting Force of Memory:  
Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon

By

Norman Saadi Nikro

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P U B L I S H I N G

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It's as if we were here as caretakers of fragile substances and were now preparing to absorb the operation of moving our reality, in its entirety, into the domain of memories forming within sight of us. And as we move away, we can see ourselves turning into memories.

—Mahmoud Darwish<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. Translated by Ibrahim Muhawi. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, 59-60.



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To speak in a haptic register, sharing the excitement and moodiness through which this book developed are Tanja, Anas, Yunis and Lelia. This work is dedicated to them.



# DEPARTURE

They may say the war has ended but I haven't finished my story yet.<sup>1</sup>

## Memory, Cultural Production, Civil War

To situate a cultural politics of memory in Lebanon in the singular as counter, oppositional or redemptive narrative practice is to quickly come up against a conundrum. For at the level of the state and what we can call its officially sanctioned *dismemory*<sup>2</sup> of the recent past the civil war seems never to have occurred. Consequently research concerned with political and cultural practices of “counter-memory” has to begin with the uncomfortable realisation that in Lebanon counter-practices do not take place according to a neat binary model of opposition between state-sanctioned official history and its contestation. For in Lebanon there is no official narrative or form of representation that can be directly countered or opposed, only the almost imperceptible, ghost-like traces of a manufactured forgetting that has nevertheless always to work towards rendering itself invisible. This *dismemory* encompasses the glaring absence of any state initiatives to engage a public inquiry into the war, as well as state supported museums, memorials or commemorative practices that could be studied as contested sites of memorialisation. Still in the country's public schools textbooks used for history instruction address events only up to the early 1970s, so as to avoid mentioning the civil war.<sup>3</sup>

In Lebanon practices engaging memory of the civil war are more multiple and dispersed, though located at various sites of friction within

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<sup>1</sup> Iman Humayden Younes, *B as in Beirut*. Translated by Max Weiss. Arabia Books, London, 2009, 227.

<sup>2</sup> I am inspired here by Toni Morrison's term “disremembered”, in her novel *Beloved*. Vintage, London, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> There has been various committees set up by the Ministry of Education to design an updated history textbook that would include the war, *al-Ahdās*, but so far to no avail. As Hassan M. Fattah has observed, “History seems simply to come to a halt in the early 1970s, Lebanon's heyday”. See his article “Lebanon's History Text Books Sidestep its Civil War”. In *The New York Times*, January 10, 2007.

and between various communities and constituencies.<sup>4</sup> The rifts and fractures are thus difficult to pin down according to a neat model of hegemonic and oppositional practice. As one writer has recently observed,

I do not think that the different political communities that formed the Lebanese political arena during the civil war can be hierarchically divided according to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. We are instead confronted with a fragmentation of the social into a multiplicity of hegemonic formations, each constituting its own “regime of truth”.<sup>5</sup>

And as other commentators recognise in Lebanon confessional communities and constituencies do not express essential, primordial entities<sup>6</sup> that are all too often positioned as a primary cause of the civil war. They rather gather and articulate themselves through political processes, the maintenance of social viability, as well as violent confrontations. “The war, partially the result of sectarian conflicts”, writes Traboulsi, “was to become the crucible in which those sects were reproduced”.<sup>7</sup> To be sure this political reproduction of sectarian communities and allegiances also involved efforts to maintain access to basic needs of health care, food, and shelter.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning dismemory of the civil war the local journalist Michael Young has said, writing in 2000, that “For ten years since the war’s end, Lebanon has been rebuilt on a foundation of state-sponsored amnesia”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For memorials in Lebanon, in respect to the politics of memory and community, see Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2010. For a discussion of localised practices of memory and forgetting see Anja Peleikis, “The Making and Unmaking of Memories: The Case of a Multi-Confessional Village in Lebanon”. In Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein (eds) *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. I. B. Taurus, London, 2009, 16.

<sup>6</sup> On the theme of sectarianism as a historical juncture of modernisation in Lebanon, see Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Pluto Press, London, 2007, 229.

<sup>8</sup> For an anthropological discussion of the politics of identification and affiliation in the neighbourhoods of Beirut, particularly ‘Ayn el-Mreisse, see Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> “The Sneer of Memory: Lebanon’s Disappeared and Postwar Culture”. *Middle East Report*, No 217. Winter, 2000, 42.

Over ten years on from Young's observation, twenty years after the Taif Accord framed an uneasy, controversial political consensus to bring about a formal end to the war,<sup>10</sup> one could still remark on "the absence of state-sponsored attempts to establish what happened in the Lebanese Civil War and who was to blame for the human tragedies that accompanied it".<sup>11</sup> Amidst the large number of lives lost (estimated at almost 200,000), physically and psychologically maimed, and livelihoods demographically displaced (estimated at 1 million), there are still thousands of disappeared (estimated at around 17,000), whose fate remains unaccounted for. In 2011 the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon tried once again, with the support of Amnesty International, to press the state to set up an independent commission to look into the fate of the disappeared.<sup>12</sup> What makes this task doubly difficult is that the disappeared have vanished into a war that has itself vanished, at least according to the Lebanese state.

And yet it is certainly no exaggeration to say that alongside of the important memory work of NGOs and civil society organisations<sup>13</sup> the

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<sup>10</sup> See Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Conflict*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, especially 289-303.

<sup>11</sup> Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 4. For a discussion of Lebanon's "state-sponsored amnesia", see also Haugbolle's "Public and Private Memory of the Lebanese Civil War". *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol 25, No 1, 2005. Michael Young himself, writing ten years after he first used the term "state-sponsored amnesia", comments on the absence of any "museum devoted to the war", or "an official day of remembrance", and goes on to say: "Memory could speak, albeit it dissonantly, but those in power were either uninterested or knew that too good a memory might prove to be their undoing". See his *The Ghosts of Martyrs Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon's Life Struggle*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2010, 145. It is also interesting to note that in the aftermath of the 2006 war with Israel an increasing number of the younger, post-civil war generation has become more active in arguing for a vigorous public dialogue over the past. As Pamela Chrabieh says, in respect to what she calls "this tremendous heritage of trauma": "...I learned that a conflict is recurrent as long as a reconciliation process is not implemented, a process that involves justice, recognition and healing". See her "Breaking the Vicious Circle! Contributions of the 25-35 Lebanese Age Group". In Youssef M Choueiri (ed), *Breaking the Cycle: Civil Wars in Lebanon*. Stacey International, London, 2007, 69-88.

<sup>12</sup> Marie Dhumieres, "Investigate Civil War missing: Amnesty". In the *Daily Star*, April 15, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Apr/15/Investigate-Civil-War-missing-Amnesty.ashx#axzz1cMbJvLxL>

<sup>13</sup> On memory specifically, see UMAM Documentation and Research.

civil war has given rise to a prodigious amount of cultural production in Lebanon. This is evident in fictional and autobiographical prose, memoir, feature and documentary film and video, photography and visual arts, installation and sculpture, as well as theatre and performance. Writing in 2001 Angelika Neuwirth and Andreas Pflitsch observed “that virtually all the Lebanese literature written during and after the civil war is a work of processing memory”.<sup>14</sup> More recently, concerning Lebanese film, Lina Khatib claims that “Where history fails, the arts triumph”. She ends her book on Lebanese Cinema by observing: “...perhaps ironically, what seems to unite the films of Lebanese cinema is the Civil War itself...the most visible element of films made over the last 30 years...one can go so far as saying that the Civil War has become *the* defining feature of Lebanese cinema”.<sup>15</sup> The filmmakers Khatib interviews regard their work in large part as a process of employing memory to heal the wounds brought about by the war. In this vein Ghassan Salhab insists that the war “is not part of our memory, it *is* our memory”. Or Bahij Hojeij, in what amounts to the need of a talking cure: “I wanted to exorcise the war from within me. War is imprinted on our memories, and it’s difficult to erase. You have to talk about it to get rid of it”. And as yet another filmmaker says: “to go beyond the wound, and into the healing process”.<sup>16</sup>

A more recent spate of fiction and film situating the civil war<sup>17</sup> suggests indeed an open, simmering wound that has not been adequately represented, memorialised and politically mourned, nurtured and cared for by the Lebanese state and its representative political elite.<sup>18</sup> And yet it is

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<http://www.umam-dr.org/>

<sup>14</sup> In their introduction to their edited book *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies*. Orient Institute, Beirut, 2001, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2008, 188, Khatib’s emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> All quoted in Khatib, xxii. For an earlier work on the transformation of Lebanese cinema emerging from the civil war see Mohammed Soueid, *Al Sinama al-Muajala: Aflam al-Harb al-Ahliyya al-Lubnaniyya*. Mu’assasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya, Beirut, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Rawi Hage, *Cockroach*. Penguin Books, London, 2008; Zena el Khalil, *Beirut, I Love You: A Memoir*. Saqi, London, 2009; Jad el-Hage, *One Day in April*. Quartet Books, London, 2011; Nada Awar Jarrar, *A Good Land*. Harper, London, 2009; Abbas El-Zein, *Leave to Remain: A Memoir*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2009; Simon El Habre’s documentary *The One Man Village (Semaan Bil Day’ia)*, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Six minutes of El Habre’s film was cut because it referred to the civil war, thus “threatening the civil order and peace in our society”, according to the Lebanese

remarkable that much of this cultural production is highly experimental, rarely presented in straight forward realist guise, but somehow always keen to foreground the conventions of form, to render the work and its subjective impulses episodic and provisional, rather than a finished, self-contained form of expression or representation.

While there are to be sure interesting and compelling works produced with straight forward narrative styles and forms of presentation, in this study I am preoccupied with the earlier, largely experimental forms of cultural production that situate and work through personal experiences of the war. Significantly the very style of this work somehow embodies, creatively and critically situates, I argue, a refusal to package and normalise any ideal(ised) account of the war, a related assemblage of temporal continuity, or else a presentation of self as discrete and omniscient. For the writers and filmmaker whose work I engage in this book identity and self-understanding were structured more through their attachments and affiliations to progressive leftist political and resistance movements associated with Palestinian and socialist parties. Elias Khoury and Mohamed Soueid were members of a youthful, pro-Palestinian Maoist movement popularly called “the Student Squad”; Rashid al-Daif a communist; Mai Ghousseub associated with Palestinian camp welfare and resistance; and the Palestinian exile Jean Said Makdisi, who was born in Jerusalem and as part of the Palestinian exodus brought about by the creation of Israel in 1948 moved first to Cairo and later to Beirut in the early 1970s. As I try to demonstrate their works of cultural production situate a working-through of their disillusion with the ideological imperatives of such attachments and affiliations, (dis)locating themselves through what I call *the fragmenting force of memory*.

This departure from or working-through of ideological attachment has been recognized by critics writing on (post-) civil war literature and other forms of cultural production in Lebanon. Most recently Ken Seigneurie, exploring “an aesthetic of resistance against a dominant war ethos”, writes about how the novels he explicates “denaturalize the ideological certitudes

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censor. Quoted in Hayeon Lee, “Censorship and Sensibility”, *Now Lebanon*, November 17, 2009:

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=127010>. Mohamed Soueid, whose documentary trilogy on the civil war I discuss in a later chapter, had tried in 2000 to obtain a cinema release for Randa Chahal Sabbag’s feature film, *A Civilized People*. Faced with an almost three quarter of an hour cut by the censor (controlled in Lebanon by the military), he gave up. The film was screened, and enthusiastically received, at the Beirut International Film Festival in 1999.

of war by sanctioning an open-ended vision of human identity”.<sup>19</sup> I think we can add that the critical/creative impulses of (post-)civil war literature in Lebanon do not only initiate a disillusion with ideological attachment, but emerge as both social condition and literary symptom of the historical junction of this disillusion. This is especially so for women writers who found that through the disturbance of dominant modalities of patriarchal exchange relations they were able to articulate certain lines of escape, alternative practices, values and ways of seeing,<sup>20</sup> in the process foregrounding and calling to account predominating modalities of social life.

For my purposes, to approach the historical juncture in which this work is embedded is to consider how this juncture is critically and symptomatically embodied and entangled in the styles of their composition. Arguably, the refusal of normalisation is a condition of the absence of state practices of political care and nurture addressing the war, and a search for a corresponding change of formal and informal political culture. This is to say that the refusal of normalisation is also directed at a contemporary situation in which dismemory of the civil war is formally normalised. In this sense I am keen to argue that the fragmenting force of memory does not only work to re-collect past experiences, but situates them in a way that the present itself is dislocated and prised open, employing memory to articulate a departure from dismemory.

Assessing the work of three I address in the following chapters—Rashid al-Daif, Jean Said Makdisi, and Elias Khoury—Saree Makdisi has called this experimentation “narratological anarchy”. This he argues “is not merely a meditation on the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of presenting a straightforward narrative of chronological or diachronic continuity, but rather a restless series of experimentations with alternative forms and structures of narrative, of remembering, of temporality and of subjectivity and identity”.<sup>21</sup> And as he intimates this “anarchy” is not so much prescribed by a transplanted postmodernist dissolution of genre and form, or else a playful dissolution of the distinction between fact and fiction, but rather has to do with the exigency and possibility of literature arising from the civil war. To some extent this exigency encompasses a

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*. Fordham University Press, New York, 2011, 1, 32.

<sup>20</sup> See Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women writers on the Lebanese Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

<sup>21</sup> Saree Makdisi, “Beirut, a City without History”? In Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein (eds) *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006, 209.



personal and in many ways publically shared trauma—a literature described by Syrine Hout as “war-engendered trauma literature”.<sup>22</sup> Writing in the almost immediate aftermath of the civil war another Beirut literary critic, Mona Takieddine Amyuni, noted that “a search for a new language to express the sense of loss, fragmentation and despair has been the main preoccupation of Lebanon’s contemporary artists”.<sup>23</sup> Like Makdisi, Hout and Amyuni I approach the seeming confusion between fiction and auto/biographical prose not so much in terms of a postmodernist intermingling of forms, than a belated force of traumatic encounter emerging from the civil war and located in its restless aftermath.

Talking about his work Elias Khoury intimates the belated impulses of this traumatic register reverberating through his literature: “I didn’t know what postmodern was...I was trying to express the fragmentation of society. Beirut’s past is not of stability, but of violent change. Everything is open, uncertain. In my fiction you’re not sure if things really happened, only that they’re narrated. What’s important is the story, not the history”.<sup>24</sup> Between fact and fiction trauma insinuates itself as a pressing demand that constrains the present to consider how it has been stabilised in a way that aspects of the past can no longer approach and address the present. Accordingly, for Khoury it is not a question of his novels substantiating accurate or inaccurate representations of the past, but how the stories they

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<sup>22</sup> Syrine Hout, “Cultural Hybridity, Trauma, and Memory in Diasporic Anglophone Lebanese Fiction”. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol 47, no 3, 2011, 336. In his Foreword to the English translation of Elias Khoury’s *Little Mountain*—Translated by Maia Tabet, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989—Edward Said observes that “in Lebanon the novel exists largely as a form recording its own impossibility, shading off or breaking into autobiography (as in the remarkable proliferation of Lebanese women’s writing), reportage, pastiche, or apparently authorless discourse” (xvi). And yet I would hesitate to identify this with “what Western theorists have called postmodern” (xviii), and rather relate this invigorated style to the eventuating significance of the civil war, to its “worldliness”, as Said would have otherwise said. Concerning literature engaging gender and sexuality, to my mind it is more fruitful to situate this in the context of the civil war, whereby incivility and violence brought about more glaring disclosures of sexual subjugation and opportunities for such themes to be explored and written about. On this theme see Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*. New York University Press, New York, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Mona Takieddine Amyuni, “Style as Politics in the Poems and Novels of Rashid Al-Daif”. In *Middle East Studies*, 28, 1996, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Maya Loggi, “A Circle of Madness”. *The Guardian*, July 28, 2007. [Http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2136141,00.html](http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2136141,00.html)

creatively embody provide a sense of both past and present emerging through their eventuating significance.

As I intimated above this belated reverberation of trauma does not merely arise as a symptom of the war, but rather as a symptom of the expediency of dismemory. In other words the resistance to closure informing the episodic, stuttering style of cultural production can be critically situated against the opportunistic closure administered by the state and its representative political elite. The resistance to closure embraces the fragmenting force of memory as dis-closure.

In a certain sense this resistance to closure informs, and is informed by, an uneasy tension between, on the one hand, *History* as an imaginary gathering and thrownness of self into the future, as an attachment of self to ideal expectations and the leap of faith this entails; and on the other *memory* as the smoldering remains or left-overs coming into view through the failure of ideal expectations. More specifically this tension encompasses a working through of former attachments to history as an idealised, Panglossian leap of faith into the future. We can locate this tension in the *post* of post-ideological, and relate it to a refusal of the present as “the best of all possible worlds”.<sup>25</sup> For al-Daif this tension informs a critical departure from a “literature committed to the interests of the masses, and to the *path of history*”, as his protagonist Rashid gives an account of his physical injury and near-death experience: “When I returned to consciousness, I was seeing for the first time *in history*”.<sup>26</sup> For Elias Khoury’s character Khaleel this tension emphatically implicates history as an ideological suturing of the self: “When you’re surrounded by mirrors on every side, you lose your ability to see, and the monster of history makes you its prey”.<sup>27</sup> Or as Mai Ghousseub’s protagonist, constrained to face the contradiction between violence and “the ideals we had all started from”, comes to question the scope of her personal pact of dismemory: “I cultivated amnesia, because it was easier that way. I built a

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<sup>25</sup> See Francois M. Voltaire, *Candide: Or Optimism*. Translated by Burton Raffel, Yale University Press, Yale, 2005. For all its riotous satire the work offers an alternative ethic of optimism to that portrayed by Dr. Pangloss and his uncompromising “best of all possible worlds” philosophy of history. At the end of Voltaire’s epic-novel *Candide* embraces an ethic of action, working in the garden, rather than an ethics of ideological quietism.

<sup>26</sup> Rashid al-Daif, *Dear Mr Kawabata*. Translated by Paul Starkey. Quartet Books, London, 1999, 144, 152, my emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*. Translated by Humphrey Davies. Harvill Secker, London, 2005, 146.

world with no past in it”.<sup>28</sup> Jean Makdisi articulates it thus: “Ideals were once planted carefully in the earth, from which they were meant to spring in abundance and beauty, but their planting ground has become instead their burial place”.<sup>29</sup> And the documentary filmmaker Mohamed Soueid: “The person lets go all the slogans of which he achieved nothing and suddenly truth turns to lies and love to harm”.<sup>30</sup>

Emerging from the smoldering remains of ideological attachment to grand narratives of liberation, their works of cultural production strive to resituate a sense of self from an agent of history to a casualty of history. For each, history and memory come to be informed by a tension grounded in practice—a tension that cannot be recuperated by or ceded to a form of ideal understanding. The concept of memory I work with in the following chapters is located in the irremediable uncertainty and contingency of this manifold tension. In what follows, before returning to an outline of the chapters, I want to give an account of the theoretical impulses informing my approach.

## Giving an Account of Oneself

In the spirit of a “hermeneutic encounter”, whereby my subject matter to some extent comes to read and interpret my interpretive efforts,<sup>31</sup> my book consists of five, interrelated essays. These are mostly close readings of particular works of fiction and literary memoir, except for one chapter

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<sup>28</sup> Mai Ghoussoub, *Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within*. Saqi Books, London, 1998, 15, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir*. Persea Books, New York, 1990, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Mohamed Soueid, *Tango of Yearning*, Beirut, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> See Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969. In his explication of the work of Gadamer, Palmer writes: “The interpretive situation is no longer that of a questioner and an object, with the questioner having to construct “methods” to bring the object within his grasp; on the contrary, the questioner suddenly finds himself the being who is interrogated by the ‘subject matter’”, 165. And yet I am not convinced by Palmer’s repeated denigration of the value of concepts, which he regards negatively as purely analytical instruments. But concerning the gist of “encounter”, I prefer Vattimo’s more unsettled, restless notion of this term, a “horizon of disclosure”—“the initial shock of *Missverstehen* which occurs as an encounter with the other”—than Palmer’s sedate expectation of mutual understanding, a “fusion of horizons”. See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*. Translated by Jon R. Snyder. Polity Press, Britain, 1988, 150.

on a trilogy of films by the Lebanese documentary filmmaker Mohamed Soueid. All arise out of and engage personal experience of the Lebanese civil war—or series of wars, battles, kidnappings, massacres and assassinations that took place between 1975 and 1990<sup>32</sup>—and its uncertain aftermath. As my readers I hope will come to appreciate this encounter is situated in a way that cultural production is read neither as historical representations of events nor as expressions of personal experience. Rather the works are approached as unsettled, emotionally charged interpretive sites caught up in certain modalities of social viability, phenomenologically labouring to foreground and critically address such modalities through stylistically creative, passionate exercises in unraveling a sense of self and historical circumstance. They are, in other words, already activated hermeneutic sites of inquiry, substantiating something like what Foucault in his late work calls a “hermeneutic of the self”, though more ethically and politically proactive than his more instrumentalist injunctions to “know oneself”, constitute oneself “through the force of truth”.<sup>33</sup>

In giving accounts of themselves the writers and filmmaker whose work I engage can each be described in terms of what Butler calls “a social theorist”. As she says: “when the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, an

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<sup>32</sup> I am not completely comfortable with the term “the civil war”, *al-harb al-ahliyya*, as it tends not only to exclude violence in Lebanon by regional players (Israel, United States, Syria, the Palestinian movement), but presupposes a neat model of two discrete sides or entities engaged in violent confrontation. Fawwaz Traboulsi makes a similar point, in his Freudian inspired “Foreword” to Zeina Maasri’s *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. I. B. Tauris, London, 2009. The Arabic *ahliyya* carries connotations of family, *ahhal* refers to one’s parents and relatives, *ahlān* used as a welcoming reception of another person. In Elias Khoury’s early novel *Jabal Al Saghir* (Al-Adab, Beirut, 1977) — one of the first to be written and published in the midst of the war, fictionally portraying Khoury’s active experience and his incapacity to situate the value and historical significance of this experience—it is mainly only in the epilogue, from the outside location of the metro in Paris, that the term *harb al-ahliyya* is used. Except for a singular instance, when much earlier in the novel the fighter Salem asks: “What is the difference between war and civil war”? (35). And yet from the beginning the war was a *harb ahliyya*, considering the many rural and urban sites of neighbourhood and community violence, in Beirut and Lebanon more generally. I thus proceed with the term.

<sup>33</sup> What he otherwise calls a “historicity of the subject”, or else a “genealogy of the self”. See his two lectures “Subjectivity and Truth” and “Christianity and Confession”, under the title “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self”. In Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. Translated by Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter. Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2007, 165.

account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist".<sup>34</sup> As fragmenting force, we could say, memory comes to bear the burden of having to give an account of not merely an "I" as sovereign subject, responsible only to its self-understanding, but of those modalities of social exchange in which the "I" developed and sustains capacities for the production and maintenance of social viability. My writers and filmmaker, in respect to their acutely personal works of cultural production, strive to situate memory as a site of excavation, toward a discovery not of an undifferentiated, self-referential "I", but of the variable, constraining and enabling, social and political attachments in which the capacity to say "I", to constitute and exchange a sense of self, became possible. I want to add that for my writers and filmmaker memory is charged with an ethical exigency<sup>35</sup> that in her more recent work Butler views as encompassing this "giving an account of oneself". For Butler, in respect to her engagement with the work of Adorno, Foucault and Levinas, this exigency emerges where mutual understanding fails to transpire, so that one's ethical commitment to another arises through a practical effort to persist in a dialogue that implicates and reveals the limits of one's knowledge and understanding:

...the question of ethics emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility, the site where we ask ourselves what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed, where one is, as it were, at the limits of what one knows yet still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgement: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received.<sup>36</sup>

I want to suggest that part of this ethical dimension is to recognize that it is precisely as *knowing* that the "I" founders, a *foundering* (sinking or

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<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press, New York, 2005, 8.

<sup>35</sup> For an ethics concerned more with the social and political dimensions of trauma and memory, see Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie, "Introduction: Mourning and Memory". *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol. 25, No. 1, 2005, 16-29.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, 21-22. A significant aspect of Butler's encounter with Foucault concerns how, drawing on Adorno and Levinas, she introduces an ethics than is not circumscribed by Foucault's somewhat instrumentalist stress on "technologies" of the self—a problematic that arguably informs almost all of his work, from his early "archaeological" to his later "genealogical" studies, and still later to his "hermeneutics of the self".

submerging into what one had imagined to remain above) from which one strives to reconstitute personal and social viability through an exposing and *telling* of oneself. Moreover, considering that these acutely personal works of cultural production situate a critical re-view of ideological and symbolic attachment, this ethical exigency relates to what I called above a *post-ideological* unraveling of self and circumstance. The *post*, here, designates not only a descriptive historical reference point *after* a giving-up of oneself to ideological affiliation, but also a symptomatic register by which the self remains (*remains* of the self) emotionally entwined with such affiliation, though is undergoing a process of seeking a way out. It is in this overlapping sense of descriptive, symptomatic and critical registers that the fragmenting force of memory insinuates itself as departure.

### Postcolonial Symptomologies

To *designate* memory as fragmenting force is in a sense to founder on its use as a mere designation. This is to say that memory has about it a transitive register (transitional and intermediate, implicating a form of social exchange), concerning both its social practice and critical employment as a conceptual term of address. This transitive register suggests a *passing-over*, an exposure and giving of oneself to the ear of another, articulating self-understanding according to a departure towards initiating change and renewal. While this register informs the personal dilemmas, the experimental style and critical scope of the various works of cultural production addressed in the following chapters, it also informs my concern to avoid fixing memory as a mere recollection of the past, an epistemic presupposition that reproductively assumes the present as a stable point of departure.

Towards this it seems to me that it is important to consider both the way in which a work of cultural production *inventively embodies* (identifies, negotiates, narrates, (de)structures, traverses, creatively deploys) the particular tensions of its circumstance, and the way in which the work is *symptomatically embedded* (ideologically, intellectually, politically, socially, emotionally) in such circumstances. To my mind attentiveness to this interplay of embodiment and embeddedness is necessary if one is to avoid abstracting the work from the way in which it engages intersections (physical, emotional, symbolic, conceptual) between the real and its representation.<sup>37</sup> For such abstraction has the effect of either transfixing

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<sup>37</sup> As Andreas Huyssen argues: "Once we acknowledge the constitutive gap between reality and its representation in language or image, we must in principle

the work into a free-floating symbolic vehicle that can be transported across cultures, or transfixing it as a sociological document, a direct expression of particular social and cultural sites of experience. Either way, such abstraction works to guarantee the relevance of one's frame of reference, which in turn is transformed into free-floating, abstracting analytical categories that can be transported across different cultural and intellectual landscapes. Part of the problem, it seems to me, is that criticism has all too often approached works of cultural production as objects that can be dissected and exhaustively explained by the concepts one deals with. This tends to relieve them of their worldliness, a procedure that interactively guarantees the universalizing value of the concepts themselves.

Very often it is conveniently forgotten that a work of cultural production carries its momentum as a vehicle of interpretation—works as a site for the production and dissemination of specific ways to signify, view, question and value understanding. This is to say that the work never lies mute and inert, ready to conform to the dissecting practice of the critic, but carries the force of circumstance in ways that are always both over- and under-determined. In literary studies much critical effort has been invested to determine not only *what* a work may mean, but *how* it works as a site for the structuring of value and significance; indeed how it works to *reproduce* modes of identification caught within relational, symbolic mandates of authority and power. While this has undoubtedly been very fruitful, especially as a corrective to the valorisation of subjectivity as an undifferentiated or exhaustively constitutive locus of knowledge and understanding, it seems to me that in the process works of cultural production are reduced to self-enclosed sites of reproduction; whereby history, subjectivity and agency can only be approached as effects of the circulation of desire and power, the constitutive labour of language and other systems of signification.

This has been a particularly vexing issue in the fields of postcolonial, multicultural, ethnic minority, diasporic, or else transcultural writing and criticism.<sup>38</sup> In practical terms it has to do with how, in addressing a work

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be open to many different possibilities of representing the real and its memories". In his *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Two works that cover these themes are Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, especially chapter 6, "Postcolonialism and Beyond"; and Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1998. Gandhi is particularly severe with what she calls a "romantic

of cultural production, the critic may fall into one of two traps: either the work is read as a sociological document, as a representative account or reproductive site of indigenous, marginal, minority, or ethnic experience and identity; or else the work is somehow abstracted from what Edward Said calls its “worldliness”—the complex or “contrapuntal” ways in which a work is both *embedded* in networks of signification and how the work inventively *embodies* and critically addresses such networks. As Said explains, “texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly”.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Said’s work, while generally recognised as initiating or prompting postcolonial studies (a term that he himself never employed to identify his work, mostly using the term *postcolonial* as a historical marker<sup>40</sup>), encapsulates an ambivalence informing postcolonial theory and criticism. This has to do with an uneasy disjunction between, on the one hand, anti-Humanist impulses of discourse analysis and deconstructive reading strategies, and on the other hand a liberationist working ethic that strives to critically redeem lost and forgotten historical traces of subjugation and entwined acts of resistance.<sup>41</sup>

But what is compelling about Said’s arguments—his insistence on humanism, worldliness, intellectual commitment and “critical consciousness”, rather unfashionable in the early 1980s when he was articulating these themes—is that although in large part his considerations are critically aimed to combat what he, perhaps reductively, calls “textuality”—“the flight into method and system”, an analytical endeavour that tends to approach texts as hermetically sealed sites for the reproduction and dissemination of value and significance—he does not simply suggest a reflectionist analytic that assumes a static relationship between a text and historical circumstance. As he says, engaging scholarly Arab views of language in the “Middle Ages”, a text could be approached

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investment” of postcolonial critics in “postcolonial literature and its migrant writers”, in respect to the concentration on textuality and discourse analysis, which, she claims, “effectively replaces politics with textuality” 154-166.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Vintage, London, 1983, 35.

<sup>40</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism*—Vintage, London, 1993—Said uses the term six or seven times, but always as historical reference. As he responds in an interview in 1997 to a question concerning “postcolonial studies”: “I would rather not myself talk about it because I do not think I belong to that”. “In Conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul, and Ania Loomba”. In David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (eds), *Relocating Postcolonialism*. Blackwell, London, 2002, 2.

<sup>41</sup> This disjuncture can be said to lie between his two works *Orientalism* of 1978 and *Culture and Imperialism* of 1993.



“as significant form, in which...worldliness, circumstantiality, the text’s status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are considered as being incorporated in the text, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning”.<sup>42</sup> In this view, texts, or what I have preferred to call works of cultural production, can be addressed in respect to their eventuating capacity to work as sites for an initiation (not reproduction) of alternative ways of seeing and evaluating, beyond or alongside of their impulses of representation or expression. Hence the work can be thought of as an intensive site for an altercation between the value and significance of historical circumstance and the contingent, often compelling force of transformation.<sup>43</sup>

If a literary text, or work of cultural production, can be approached as a site of departure, it is important to consider that the work is only possible through its entanglement with established or dominant networks of symbolic exchange, caught up in a tensional relationship to such networks. This is to say that the work contributes to emerging ways in which to distinguish and value identities and differences, very often by foregrounding the constraining effects of predominant networks of social

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<sup>42</sup> Said, *The World...*, 39. As another critic comments: “Even though Said’s corpus can be viewed as the attempt to stall the displacement of history by textuality, he is careful not to turn history itself into a kind of absent cause that controls texts”. Asha Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said, and Spivak*. University of Minnesota Press, London, 1995, 128. And yet, one could ask, should “textuality” and “history” only be approached as a diametrical opposition? Varadharajan’s almost vitriolic critique of poststructuralism and postmodernism—situated as “the indiscriminate celebration of otherness, difference, and radical indeterminacy” (68)—is a little too uncompromising, regarding both intellectual movements *en bloc*. For an alternative reading of Said, which strives to out-post postcolonialism’s claim on Said and position his work as poststructuralist, in the process articulating a more nuanced genealogy of the emergence of poststructuralism in North America, see William V. Spanos, *The Legacy of Edward W. Said*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Bill Ashcroft suggests that resistance is more capable when guided by transformative energies that recast, or “interpolate”, forms of European cultural production: “The problem with resistance is that to see it as a simple oppositionality locks into the very binary which Europe established to define its others”. See his *Post-Colonial Transformation*. Routledge, London, 2001, 13. And yet to my mind certain critical positions and political practices are only viable as oppositional or resistant practices, and need not be designated solely as Europe’s Others.

exchange that tend to be naturalised or essentialised.<sup>44</sup> Through the fragmenting force of memory the works of cultural production addressed in the following chapters foreground and creatively destructure forms of normalisation practically and symbolically implicated in the civil war. It is in this sense that they stake out sites of *post*-ideological engagement.

I have mentioned hermeneutics and phenomenology and want to say that far from assuming them as definitive intellectual movements and settled conceptual terms of reference, I grapple with them as an appropriate departure to situate my subject matter and my approach. Part of this grappling concerns a tension between the particular use-value of concepts and their investment and broader circulation as currencies of intellectual exchange—an irresolvable tension that I feel is well worth hanging on to, if one's research is not to be relieved of the epistemological, ontological, and ethical tremors of its own circumstances.

It seems to me that a key term here is *appropriate*, as it has a manifold sense of both rendering something adequate or suitable to the terms of its address or its use, and the taking of something away, as in to steal or borrow. In a certain sense to critically address, say, a work of literature or film is to appropriate it from the historical context—physical, emotional and symbolic—in which it is embedded, in the process rendering it adequate to the force of conceptual dis-closure. Phenomenologically, it is only through such appropriation that the work can at all be critically approached, rendered a meaningful pursuit. And yet to “bracket off” historical context is not to overlook that context, but rather to render its force available for critical inquiry. Hermeneutically, it is well worth considering that any work of cultural production is already enmeshed in variable and differentiating modalities of power, desire, sexuality, nurture and care<sup>45</sup>—social production and exchange more generally—

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<sup>44</sup> Raymond Williams' discussion of what he calls “dominant”, “residual”, and “emergent” remains quite relevant to an understanding of how emergent social and cultural practices can be regarded as either alternative or oppositional (the former very often incorporated as the latter), and can only establish themselves by travelling through, not departing from, predominant signifying networks of exchange. See his *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), 121-127.

<sup>45</sup> Critical theory has been so preoccupied with *technologies* of power, desire, and sexuality that ethical and moral themes of nurture and care have tended to be underexplored. In this respect the later work of Judith Butler is important, as I canvass in the chapter on the documentary films of Mohammed Soueid. For an anthropological approach to social distributions of care, nurture and hope, in respect to national belonging, see Ghassan Hage, “On Worrying: the lost art of the well-administered national cuddle”. *Borderlands*, Vol 2, No 1, 2003.

and contributes to the ways by which such networks are constitutively experienced and negotiated. As works of literature and film are already enmeshed in networks and modalities of social viability and exchange, their critical appropriation (I won't say theft) can only be always late, amounting to what Zygmunt Bauman once called a "secondary hermeneutics". Or as Michael Lambek from an anthropological perspective says, "the question becomes our interpretation of their context and practice of interpretation: our hermeneutic of their hermeneutic".<sup>46</sup>

### Between Memory and History

From a phenomenological perspective, then, I am interested in what writers and filmmakers do with memory, in respect to their works of cultural production that situate both self and circumstance as remnants, leftovers, undigested remains, of the civil war. My central concern is succinctly stated as follows: How do these acutely personal works of cultural production arising out of the civil war employ memory to destructure or unravel both an historical understanding of self and related modalities of being? As fragmenting force, memory is employed towards this unraveling, rendering aspects of self and circumstance into signs that can be cited and read, and hence exchanged—situated in a way that they can be exposed to a critical hermeneutic practice. I work with a notion that these works of cultural production not only draw attention to particular experiences of the civil war. More significantly they substantiate critical, stylistically experimental sites for an exposure and telling of self and circumstance through a questioning of specific social modalities of being; and for a memory practice that is more problematising than memorialising, more questioning of past and present than preserving—managing to creatively situate the present as an exposure of self and an exposure to the past. As fragmenting force memory comes to *render* (etymologically, *to tear, to give back*) the present receptive to the many and varied voices of the past clamouring to have themselves heard. As this memory practice works more to question how the present is gathered and held together through a politically processed and strategic refusal to listen to the past, it

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[http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no1\\_2003/hage\\_worrying.html](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no1_2003/hage_worrying.html) See also his larger work on the ethics of societal care and hope, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Pluto Press, Sydney, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Lambek, "Reflections on Hermeneutics and Translocality". Published online in the Zentrum Moderner Orient's *Working Papers* series, 2011. [http://www.zmo.de/publikationen/WorkingPapers/lambek\\_2011.pdf](http://www.zmo.de/publikationen/WorkingPapers/lambek_2011.pdf)

may well be more accurate to speak of a past haunted by the present, rather than the other way round.

But to speak in terms of a present haunted by the past is to enter into a tension that has come to be situated between conceptual employments of memory and history. From a postcolonial perspective this tension is suggested by another aspect of Said's early work, concerning his critical refusal of a correspondence theory of truth in his *Orientalism*. This relates to his Foucauldian inspired interest in how knowledge of cultures and societies works as discursive assemblages of truth, beyond the scope or regardless of historical verifiability or referentiality. For Said, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'".<sup>47</sup> His qualification of Orient and Occident is telling, in that it questions historiographical assumptions of reference and representation. Seemingly eschewing historiography, Said strives to demonstrate how the various academic and aesthetic practices of Orientalism worked to produce the truth of the Orient, a truth embodied as both objectifying force and subjectifying structures of feeling within the West. The Orient thus has "reality and presence *in and for* the West" (5, my emphasis). As he goes on to say: "...the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient...despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient" (5). This is not to deny the "brute reality" of the Orient itself, but to consider the ways by which the Orient is produced and discursively situated as a "system of thought". In Foucauldian fashion Said is more interested in the epistemic or archaeological positivities of truth in which the Orient is ideologically produced and imaginatively experienced as Other.

The Marxist influences (Foucault, Gramsci, Williams) on Said's early work have more of a geographical and worldly focus. This constitutes a critical departure from the teleological or even eschatological strains of Marxist and liberal historiography. It also partakes in a postcolonial and anti-colonial distrust of progressivist forms of historiography that produced an assumption of non-Western societies and cultures as somehow "traditional", requiring a prophylactic dose of modernization.

I think it is fair to say that the interdisciplinary field of memory studies arose out of this growing distrust in progressivist historiography. As I have already said the tension between memory and history informs the works of

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<sup>47</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1978, 2.

cultural production I address in this book. But between memory and history it is not so much a question of one or the other, but rather considering how the fragmenting force of memory works to foreground and draw attention to the historical circumstances and social modalities in which the war in Lebanon made both objectifying and subjectifying personal sense. As the disintegrating effects of the war weave themselves into what can be called *dis-integrating* styles of cultural production, problematising any imaginary or symbolic equivalence between self and history, character and event, as well as present and past, the labour of narrative to produce a sense of temporal disclosure and sense of self comes to be foregrounded. In calling attention to this constitutive *anachronic fracture*—more simply, an attentiveness to the constitutive split between narrative and story that works to stabilise the present as a vantage point to manage temporal continuity, or for that matter, discontinuity—the dis-integrating style renders subjectivity open to review. It becomes possible to consider the manifold strands informing specific modalities by which an understanding of self and circumstance can be assumed, maintained, practiced and employed through avenues of social exchange. This anachronic fracture is not only evident in the consideration of the various historical forces that impinge on my “interlocutors” retrospectively discomposed itineraries, symbolic attachments, and emotional livelihoods, but also in terms of the fracturing temporalities informing their narrative styles. In respect to memory as a site in which *the tension between past and present* cannot be overcome or definitively recovered, both narrative and subjectivity are fraught with a discomposing sense of contingency and provisionality. To borrow and adapt from Dipesh Chakrabarty, the “time-knots” of my subject matter induce an awareness of “the noncontemporaneity of the present with itself”.<sup>48</sup>

Concerning this tension the anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano has offered the following, somewhat quizzical reflection on the concept of memory. “Indeed”, he writes, “what would a theory of memory look like that started neither with the remembered event nor with the remembrance but with the gap between them?”<sup>49</sup> Far from rhetorical, Crapanzano’s question suggests that memory is neither a retrospective construction of “the” past according to the exigencies of “the” present, nor an event whose significance is firmly past, untainted by the ways in which present concerns and interests compete to position and pass on its sense and value.

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<sup>48</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, 157.

Towards a better grasp of the gist of this apparently paradoxical statement I want to draw a distinction between the otherwise related terms *anachronism* and *anachrony*. In doing so I want to suggest that where the *presentist* assumptions of the former narrow down the complexity and contingency of both past *and* present, the latter is better attuned to a view of the past as a range of proliferating contingencies addressing and dis-closing the temporalising fervor of present expectations.

Anachronism suggests a relic or an archaism, a leftover that seems to have survived the winds of change. And yet such a view conveniently forgets that a leftover's apparent "archaic" value and significance depends on how the present views and situates it—that is to say, the archaism itself would not have been formerly understood as an "archaism". More to the point, this presentist imaginary tends not to reflect on the constitutive temporal scheme encompassing the production of what comes to be situated and addressed as an archaism. It rather assumes the present as an undifferentiated point of departure, through an equally constitutive failure to consider and problematise a positivity of truth that slyly confuses conceptual and descriptive terms of address, works to conceal the conventions and historical force of its epistemic fervor. Anachronism has been described as an "unfortunate tendency of constructing present-oriented long-term historical continuities", "a symptom of the politically charged presentist discourse...imposed upon the annals of the past and narrates, interprets and at times invents facts and events through the prism of the exigencies of the present".<sup>50</sup> This is to say, it seems, that that which *is presented* as archaic, a relic of "the" past, comes to be denuded of the many and varied practices and emotional entanglements in which it made *temporalising sense*. By this I mean that the ways in which aspects of the past were practically experienced and symbolically exchanged in respect to *their* specifically varied temporalising imaginaries of past and future come to be flattened out, restricted to an equally flattened out and restricted present.

By contrast anachrony,<sup>51</sup> as I said above, draws attention to a constitutive, productive split between story and narrative—the wavering

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<sup>50</sup> Ulrike Freitag and Israel Gershoni, "The Politics of Memory: The Necessity for Historical Investigation into Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism". In *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift Für Historische Sozialwissenschaft*. Heft 3, Juli-September, 2011, 314.

<sup>51</sup> This is an important and influential concept of Gérard Genette, which he relates as "one of the traditional resources of literary narration". See his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p36.