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## *Negotiations of Loss: The Comparative Turn in Contemporary Arabic Criticism*

Nouri Gana, *Signifying Loss: Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning*, Bucknell University Press, 2011, 227 pp., \$70.00 US (pbk), ISBN: 9781611485783.

Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$120.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780748655694.

Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, al-Shidyaaq to Darwish*, Fordham University Press, 2015, 368 pp., \$85.00 (hbk), ISBN: 9780823264940.

### *Introduction*

The *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015* is marked by a number of firsts. Among the Association's decennial "Reports" on the discipline of Comparative Literature, running from 1965, it is the first to have been published in digital form; the first not to have been authored or edited by a single (Ivy League) Professor, employing instead an editorial team headed by Ursula Heise (UCLA); the first not to have included a single programmatic statement on the discipline; the first to have abandoned the standard academic essay format, featuring instead an array of shorter or longer pieces under the broad headings "Paradigms," "Futures," "Ideas of the Decade," and "Practices"; and the first whose submissions were not commissioned, but rather selected from an open call for contributions.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a corollary

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<sup>1</sup> See Ursula Heise, et al., eds., *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, <<http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/>>, (accessed November 2015). For previous reports, see Harry Levin, *American Comparative Literature Association Report on Professional Standards (First or Levin Report, 1965)*, <<http://www.umass.edu/complit/aclanet/Levin.html>>, (accessed November 2015); Thomas Greene, *American Comparative Literature Association Report on Professional Standards (Second or Greene Report, 1975)*, <<http://www.umass.edu/complit/aclanet/Green.html>>, (accessed November 2015); Charles Bernheimer, *American Comparative Literature Association Report on Professional Standards (Bernheimer Report, 1993)*, <<http://www.umass.edu/complit/aclanet/Bernheim.html>>, (accessed November 2015); Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and

of its overhauled editorial policy, the 2015 *Report* is also the first to have seriously and substantially reflected on the place of Arabic within the discipline, its history, theories and methodologies, areas of inquiry, and institutional settings. With articles from Wail Hassan, Alexander Key, Mohammad Salama, and Ipshita Chanda, among others, it doesn't just address Arabic *in* Comparative Literature, though; it also posits Arabic as a crucial site *for* imagining the future of Comparative Literature in general.

In his entry, "Arabic and the Paradigms of Comparison," Hassan seeks to contextualize the current upsurge of comparatist interest in Arabic with reference to the Cold War origins of the discipline. Building on his and Amal Amireh's co-edited special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* on "Arabic Literature Now: Between Area Studies and the New Comparatism" (2010), he argues that just as US foreign policy imperatives undergirded the expansion of Russian and the largely European orientation of CompLit in the immediate post-WWII era, so too have these same imperatives driven its turn to Arabic in our post-9/11 "age of globalization and terrorism."<sup>2</sup> While what he calls the "instrumentalist approach to the Arabic language" has led to the influx of Arabists in CompLit programs, new employment opportunities for them both within and beyond the academy, the renewed availability of language instruction, and the increased visibility of Arabic-focused scholarship at venues like the MLA and the ACLA, it has naturally also had a number of adverse consequences that consign Arabic to the sort of "boom and bust cycle" experienced by Russian and Slavic Studies in the preceding generation.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, the instrumentalist approach has either reinforced the "East/West" model of comparison predominant during the Cold War era and translated vis-à-vis Arabic as Orientalism, or, at best, it has allowed for the inclusion of Arabic under a postcolonial "North/South" model that, although critical, nevertheless maintains "North" or "center" as the privileged axis against which "South" or "periphery" is measured. For Arabic to sustain itself in the discipline, Hassan concludes, it is therefore necessary to develop alternate, "South/South" models—what he, with Rebecca Saunders, elsewhere calls "comparative (post)colonialisms"—that imply nothing less than an overturning of the foundational premises of comparatism since its inception as discipline and practice.<sup>4</sup>

In his entry, Key perceives similar limitations surrounding the growing "acceptance" of Arabic in CompLit, but interprets them in terms of "anxiety"—anxiety not so much about "the institutional and political status of being an enemy language," but rather about the vast conceptual burden full integration of the Arabic canon would impose upon a discipline so deeply engrained in European philosophical and theoretical traditions.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood's co-edited translation of Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2014) as an example of acceptance within

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Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Wail Hassan, "Arabic and the Paradigms of Comparison," *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, Ursula Heise, et al., eds., <<http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/arabic-and-paradigms-comparison-1>>, (accessed November 2015). See also Amal Amireh and Wail Hassan, eds., "Introduction," *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Hassan, "Arabic and the Paradigms of Comparison."

<sup>4</sup> See Wail Hassan and Rebecca Saunders, "Introduction," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 23, Nos. 1 & 2 (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Key, "Arabic: Acceptance and Anxiety," *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, Ursula Heise et al., eds., <<http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/arabic-acceptance-and-anxiety>>, (accessed November 2015).

parameters pre-defined by the European tradition, he rhetorically asks what sense it would make to include in CompLit reading lists, “A work from a genre that doesn’t have a name [...] in English? A work with no Church, no State, no Enlightenment and little Plato in its genealogy? A work that no-one has translated into a European language yet?”<sup>6</sup> The task, then, is a “crossing of theory,” a “broadening [of] Comparative Literature’s theoretical tool box” so as to provide “Arabic theory solutions” to questions of not just Arabic language and literature, but also of world languages and literatures.<sup>7</sup> While likely to continue into 2025 and beyond, this task, as well as that prescribed by Hassan, has in effect already been initiated in the digital pages of the *Report* itself.<sup>8</sup> In their entries, both Salama and Chanda seek to deconstruct imperial or neo-imperial conceptual categories—respectively “fundamentalism” and “the Middle East”—from the perspective of local political and cultural epistemologies otherwise occluded from prevalent comparative frameworks.<sup>9</sup> Collectively, these “Arabist” contributions to the *Report* are thus highly instructive in both raising and working towards addressing some of the basic questions Comparative Literature faces as it continues to evolve towards its properly worldly vocation.

In this review essay, I wish to follow the same line of inquiry as set out by Hassan et al., but from the other end of the spectrum, as it were, from the perspective of Arabic Literary Studies as it has undergone what might be thought a “comparative turn” in simultaneity with the evident “Arabist turn” in CompLit. While this discipline continues to be predominated by scholarship on classical and modern literatures in the major language of the region, a brief survey of the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, *Edebiyat: Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures*, and the MESA Convention over the last 10 years reveals at least a new receptiveness among Arabists to typically more comparative topics and approaches. In this period, scholars participating in such core disciplinary venues or otherwise located in Near East Studies departments have gradually turned more of their critical attention to issues of transregional literatures conceived along lines alternate to language and nation (as in Muhsin al-Musawi’s work on the “Islamic republic of letters,” etc.); of translation into and from Arabic (Said Faiq, Salih Altoma, etc.); of diasporic Arabic literatures (Layla Al Maleh, Wail Hassan, Steven Salaita,

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<sup>6</sup> Key, “Arabic: Acceptance and Anxiety.” Key’s example of the Apter, Lezra, and Wood version of the *Dictionary* to make this point is problematic. This is because Apter, for one, has consistently demonstrated in her other work not just an engagement with Arabic (especially Algerian and Palestinian) literary and cultural material, but also exactly the sort of integration of Arabic philosophical material into comparative frameworks that Key argues is absent from the Europe-oriented *Dictionary*. In her recent monograph *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), for instance, Apter deploys the Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito’s theory of language alongside those of more familiar figures such as Benjamin, Derrida, and Spivak in order to develop “the Untranslatable” as a new foundation for Comparative Literature, and thus enacts what Key is calling for regarding the future of the discipline. See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 247-261. See also Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Key, “Arabic: Acceptance and Anxiety.”

<sup>8</sup> And elsewhere, of course, as the example of Apter’s *Against World Literature* in footnote 6 above suggests, not to mention in the large and growing body of what I call “post-Saidian” comparative scholarship on the Middle East to have emerged in recent decades such as the work of Talal Asad, Aamir Mufti, Hamid Dabashi, Muhsin al-Musawi, Saba Mahmood, and so forth.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Salama, “Fundamentalism,” *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, Ursula Heise et al., eds., <<http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/fundamentalism>>, (accessed November 2015). Ipshita Chanda, “The ‘Middle East’ and/or The ‘Global’ (!) War on Terror,” *ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline 2014-2015*, Ursula Heise et al., eds., <<http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/middle-east-and-or-global-war-terror>>, (accessed November 2015).

Nouri Gana, Carol Fadda-Conrey, etc.); of Comparative Literature in the Arab world itself (Etman Ahmed, Ferial Ghazoul, etc.); and so forth.<sup>10</sup> What challenges does this development pose to and what possibilities does it open for Arabic Literary Studies?

I address this question by focusing on the theme of “loss”—and, relatedly, those of mourning, memory, nostalgia, and cultural trauma—that has come to the fore in recent monographs by Nouri Gana, Wen-Chin Ouyang, and Jeffrey Sacks. More or less comparative in disposition, yet more or less situated within the field of Arabic Literary Studies, Gana’s *Signifying Loss: Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning* (2011), Ouyang’s *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (2013), and Sacks’ *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, al-Shidyaq to Darwish* (2015) provide a triptych of related case studies to test the comparative turn therein. Drawing on mainstays of comparative methodology such as Continental theory and philology to examine “loss” in modern Arabic and adjacent literatures, these texts furthermore allow us to trace the implications of this turn for scholarship on the archetypal “loss” of the Arab twentieth century, that of Palestine in 1948. Just as Hassan’s investigation of Arabic in CompLit led to fruitful suggestions for that discipline’s future, so too might this investigation of comparatism in Arabic Literary Studies lead to new insights into its future, especially that of its Palestinian strands.

#### *Nouri Gana’s Signifying Loss: Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning*

*Signifying Loss* is Gana’s first book. It is based on his doctoral dissertation, undertaken at the University of Montreal in 1999-2004, and was completed at UCLA, where Gana is now an Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature. Alongside his and Heike Härting’s co-edited special issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* on “Narrative Violence: Africa and the Middle East” (2008), his edited volume *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (2013), and his edited volume *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English* (2015), it marks a wide-ranging intellectual trajectory focalized around Arabic literature, culture, and politics in their regional and transnational settings.<sup>11</sup> Yet within the wider arc of Gana’s work, *Signifying Loss* is most invested in the critical, theoretical, and disciplinary repercussions of reading Arabic texts in relation to key issues in global (read: Euro-American) literature across the twentieth century.

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<sup>10</sup> See Muhsin al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015); Said Faiq, ed., *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic* (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2004); Salih Altoma, *Modern Arabic Literature in Translation: A Companion* (London: Saqi Books, 2005); Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2009); Wail Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Nouri Gana, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014); Etman Ahmed, *Comparative Literature in the Arab World* (Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); and Ferial Ghazoul, “Comparative Literature in the Arab World,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Nouri Gana and Heike Härting, eds., “Narrative Violence: Africa and the Middle East,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008); Nouri Gana, ed., *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); and Gana, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English*.

In this book, Gana explicitly decries the lack of sustained attention to Arabic literature in what he regards as an “unbendingly Anglophone postcolonial studies” (11). In part an attempt to remedy this neglect, he aims to resituate the contemporary Arabophone fiction of Elias Khoury alongside exemplars of modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism such as James Joyce, Jamaica Kincaid, and Tahar Ben Jelloun. He does so on the grounds of these writers’ shared or overlapping investments in narrative figurations of mourning across a twentieth century where, due to the normalization of global warfare and disaster capitalism, “homeopathic, communal, national, and transnational mourning practices have either withered, or [...] turned into consumable spectacles” (9). In the process, he critically assesses theories of mourning from Freud to Derrida. He seeks, on the one hand, to dislodge our understanding of mourning from the therapeutic model that has prevailed since Freud, and, on the other, to draw out a politics of mourning against Derrida’s notion of an ethics of inconsolability. Through his readings, twentieth century narrative cumulatively emerges as a means to articulate a “geopolitics of mourning” against the devaluation of such practice in contemporary global culture (181).

*Signifying Loss* comprises six chapters and a coda. Chapter 1 (“Thresholds of Mourning: Freud and After”) addresses the oversights and limitations of theories of mourning from Freud, and deploys narrative theory to forge an alternate approach attuned to the politics of such in modernist to contemporary fiction. The following chapters expound upon what Gana calls his resultant “poetics of narrative mourning” via close readings of Joyce, Kincaid, Ben Jelloun, and Khoury (30). Chapters 2 (“Horizons of Desire, Horizons of Mourning: Joyce’s *Dubliners*”) and 3 (“The Vicissitudes of Melancholia in Freud and Joyce”) focus on the chronologically earliest of these writers. In them, Gana argues that Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) provides a symptomatology of a city paralyzed by social and cultural prohibitions against mourning for lost illicit objects of desire, leading characters to melancholia, mania, and suicide. Chapter 4 (“Kincaid’s Claim: The Poetics and Politics of Melancholia”) turns to Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), which Gana reads in terms of its expansion of melancholy identification from the individual to the collective, specifically postcolonial subject heir to an unmournable and therefore persistent colonial history. Chapter 5 (“The Ineluctable Modality of ‘Posthumous Infidelity’: The Ethics of Mourning in Kincaid, Derrida, and Ben Jelloun”) builds on the previous, and reads Ben Jelloun’s *The Last Friend* (2004) alongside comparable texts by Kincaid and Derrida. In this novel, Gana sees an inversion of the structure of mournership that foregrounds the infinite demand placed by the mourned upon the mourner as an allegory of dysfunctional Moroccan sovereignty over its citizens. And Chapter 6 (“Formless Form: Elias Khoury’s *City Gates* and the Poetics of Trauma”) reads the Lebanese author’s novel of 1981 as an allegory of trauma whose disorienting form reflects the nature of subjective experience during his country’s Civil War of 1975-1990. Extending from colonial Ireland and Dominica to authoritarian Morocco and war-torn Lebanon, the narratives under discussion together thus constitute a global canon in which figurations of mourning mediate geopolitical awareness and engagement.

Instantiated in his juxtaposing of Arabic with English and French literary texts, Gana’s geopolitics of mourning necessitates the comparative consideration of Arab experiences of loss, trauma, and mourning in particular, as such are most often obscured in culture and criticism alike, and aids in rehumanizing today’s perhaps most conspicuous object of discursive as well as military violence. In so doing, this model of comparatism exceeds Gana’s stated ambition of opening a space for Arabic in Postcolonial Studies—it moreover renders Arabic an integral and necessary component of any field which aspires to global reach.

Wen-Chin Ouyang's Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition

*Politics of Nostalgia* is the companion volume to Ouyang's earlier *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (2012).<sup>12</sup> As indicated by her subtitles, the SOAS Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature sees both volumes as continuous in their interrogation of the Arabic novel in relation to the tradition-modernity dialectic particular to the Arab world. But whereas the earlier focuses on love (and, relatedly, desire) as the master trope of the Arabic novel's "longing for form" in the context of the triangulated discourses of nation, modernity, and tradition in the region, the latter turns to nostalgia for its assessment of the same.<sup>13</sup> As such, *Politics of Nostalgia* might productively be read alongside the Gana and Sacks texts for its reflections on "loss" (of especially pre-national and pre-textual literary forms, and the traditions from which they arose) as registered in the very fabric of the Arabic novel.

Of the three monographs under discussion here, *Politics of Nostalgia* is the most firmly Arabist, focusing exclusively on the Arabic novel from its nineteenth century origins to the present. Yet its opening epigraph from Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory* (1996), a monumental study of French national constructions and reconstructions of the past, suggests from the outset a parallel trajectory for the Arabic novel as found in familiar scholarship on the European (v). Indeed, just as Ian Watt and Benedict Anderson variously argue that the English novel plays a pivotal role in the formation of an (imagined) national community, Ouyang's central thesis sees the Arabic novel as "aligned [...] with the nation, partaking in imagining, building and allegorising the nation, and modernising Arabic culture and literature at the same time" (v-vi).<sup>14</sup> It does so, she continues, precisely through its engagement with the past, its deployment of socio-political tropes rooted in the Arab cultural heritage and repurposed to serve the needs of the nation under an otherwise hostile and alienating modernity. The crucial difference with its European forerunner is that like the Arab nation itself, the Arabic novel is an imported colonial form whose "cross-cultural genealogy" adds another dimension to the tradition-modernity dialectic it inscribes (v).

Ouyang structures her book in three parts, each of which consists of two chapters, and an epilogue. Part I ("Nostalgia: Politics of the Past") opens the foundational question of Arabic literary modernity via a reading of Adonis, and envisions the Arabic novel in terms of the Bakhtinian "dialogic imagination," as a space where the multiple competing voices of tradition and modernity, past and present, and East and West intersect and overlap (21). In these terms, the novel emerges as formal allegory of the evolving Arab nation, a theme which is pursued through readings of travel narratives and intertextuality in novels by Naguib Mahfouz in Chapter 1, and by Salim Matar Kamil and Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi in Chapter 2. Part II ("Madness: In the Ruins of Dream and Memory") revisits material from *Poetics of Love*, and, through a sustained meditation on Mahmoud Darwish, explores the trope

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<sup>12</sup> See Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Poetics of Love in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Ouyang, *Poetics of Love*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ouyang cites Anderson's argument that the "immemorial past" serves as "one of the legitimating foundations of the nation-state" as a model for her approach to the role of the novel in Arab modernization (66). See also Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

of love madness for its allegorizing function in relation to the madness of hegemonic state ideologies. Stretching from Egypt to Palestine to Lebanon, readings of novels by Mahfouz, Emile Habibi, Ibrahim Nasrallah, and Etel Adnan in Chapter 3, and by Bensalem Himmich in Chapter 4 reveal madness as both illustrative of state sovereignty, and as a means by which such tyranny might be destabilized. And Part III (“Narrating the Nation: Time, History, Story”) turns to more direct (rather than allegorical) treatments of the nation in the Arabic novel. Arabic historical fiction, Ouyang argues, manifests in a variety of genres, including those of the auto/biographical novel, the family saga, and the popular epic. Her readings of novels by Ali Mubarak, Jurji Zaydan, and Mahfouz in Chapter 5, and by (again) Mahfouz and Gamal al-Ghitani in Chapter 6 demonstrate how such genres have been deployed in processes of both instituting and critiquing the nation across the nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. In her Epilogue, Ouyang concludes that although the nation has been the defining horizon of the Arabic novel throughout its history, contemporary writers such as Salim Barakat, Ibrahim al-Koni, Elias Khoury, and others have sought to transcend this limit. In their work, she sees the possibility of a “post-national” future for the form (224).

While entrenched in Arabic literary history, it seems to me that one of the major outcomes of close readings conducted in light of a cross-cultural modernization argument is to frame the Arabic novel as a local variant of the global novel as discussed by especially Franco Moretti.<sup>15</sup> In this literary theorist’s influential work, the novel is understood as an exported European genre whose form is reshaped in its migrations from centre to periphery, due to the pressures imposed upon it by local languages, literary traditions, and historical contexts. *Politics of Nostalgia* might thus be read as a productive extension of world literary systems theory for the novel under Arab peripheral modernity.

#### *Jeffrey Sacks’s Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, al-Shidyaq to Darwish*

Like *Signifying Loss*, *Iterations of Loss* is Sacks’s first book. It originates in his doctoral work at Columbia University’s Department of Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies, from which Sacks graduated in 2006, and was completed at UC Riverside, where he is now an Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature & Foreign Languages. While focalized around questions of language, form, literary institutions, colonial history, and the state in the Arab world from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, *Iterations of Loss* also marks both a more general interest in the colonial category of “simplicity” as deployed to order and control native populations, and a more specific interest in the languages of law, political philosophy, historiography, and poetry in colonial Palestine. These topics are pursued in Sacks’ two current monograph projects, *Simplicities: A Colonial Archive* and *For Decolonization: The Lyric Poem and the Question of Palestine*.<sup>16</sup>

In *Iterations of Loss*, Sacks opens up questions of literary modernization in the Arab world similar to those of Ouyang, but attends to them via the lenses of colonial philology, Orientalism, and institutional history. His central thesis is a historical one—the “institution of literature in Arabic” (10), he argues, is derived from the nineteenth century colonial imposition of “European [...] aesthetic and temporal categories” (6) upon the Arabic

<sup>15</sup> See Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* (Jan./Feb. 2000) and Franco Moretti, *The Novel: Volumes 1 & 2* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> At the time of writing, both of these book projects are in progress, and publication details are as yet unavailable.

language. While directed towards the “purification and simplification” of language, its “modernization,” such imposition results in the “dislodging” of language from “older Arabic-Islamic practices,” and therefore the “destruction” of a “language and [a] world” soon to be overwritten by “a new understanding of form and a European philological and aesthetic inheritance” (10, 6). Highlighting the agency of the colonial state in these processes, Sacks takes the destruction of Palestine in 1948 and the consequent severing of Arabs and Jews, Arabic and Hebrew, and past and present to most vividly exemplify a trajectory initiated as early as the Napoleonic Invasion of Egypt in 1798. Yet language and literature are not merely condemned to the postlapsarian abyss of modernity in his account. Within the confines of their modernization, they everywhere echo and evoke the originary loss by which they were fashioned according to a Derridean logic of iterability.

Sacks develops this thesis through close readings of Arabic and Arab Jewish poetry, fiction, philology, and criticism stretching from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The book is structured in four chapters, each of which systematically and comprehensively attends to a core linguistic mechanism by which the loss described above is both instituted and iterated in a range of literatures. After an Introduction on “Loss”, which draws on Derrida to theorize this topic in relation to its linguistic, formal, literary-institutional, and colonial manifestations in the Arab world, Chapter 1 (“Citation”) turns to the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish as a central illustration of the argument of the book as a whole. In this chapter, Sacks demonstrates that Darwish’s late lyric poetry refuses “to consign the loss of Palestine to [the] past” precisely through its linguistic and formal citations of the *Nakba* (24). The remaining chapters expand the historical and geographical scope, and chronologically flesh out this argument as it pertains to the institution of literature in the wider region. Chapter 2 (“Philologies”) addresses Butrus al-Bustani’s and Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq’s *Nahd-ara* attempts to reorganize and modernize Arabic, shown to be self-deconstructing, and proceeds to interrogate Taha Husayn’s early twentieth century and again self-contradictory critical designations of *adab* as “literature,” and of *ilm* as “science” (129). Chapter 3 (“Repetition”) takes this account into the late twentieth century via a reading of Elias Khoury’s Palestinian epic *Bab al-shams* (1996), which Sacks shows persistently repeats the *Nakba* as narrative fragmentation and circularity. And Chapter 4 (“Literature”) delves further into similar terrain via a reading of Shimon Ballas’s novel of Iraqi Jewish exile, *Iya* (1992). Sacks traces how the iterations and reiterations of such exile in the language and form of *Iya* are constitutive of the institution of Hebrew literature itself. This chapter thus brings the argument full circle—embodying the strong ethical motivations behind the book, it, in an implicit call for mutual recognition, suggests a similar genealogy and a similar fate for what is in effect Israeli national literature as that disclosed for its Palestinian correlate in Chapter 1, and throughout.

*Iterations of Loss* most broadly recalls the comparative methodology and ethico-political imperatives of Edward Said. Indeed, its entire remit is defined by a characteristically Saidian attention to the fine-grain of colonial philology in the Arab world, to the violence such imparts upon the colonized through the mechanisms of language, form, and literature. Furthermore, it is also an important contribution to the large and growing body of comparative scholarship on Palestine, Israel, and their literatures in particular, as in the work of Ammiel Alcalay, Ella Shohat, Joseph Massad, Gil Anidjar, Aamir Mufti, Ariella Azoulay, Gil Hochberg, and others.<sup>17</sup> Such scholars have consistently foregrounded the necessity of

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<sup>17</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Aamir Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 25.1 (1998); Ammiel Alcalay,



Israeli and Palestinian recognition, even reconciliation, on the basis of shared histories and comparable losses. *Iterations of Loss* furthers this vein of scholarship with sophistication, grace, and force.

*Conclusion: Comparatism as Critical Solidarity*

To return to my opening question, what do Gana's, Ouyang's, and Sacks' recent monographs tell us about comparatism in Arabic Literary Studies? Individually, each freshly illuminates canonical texts by extricating them from their hitherto axiomatic conscription in literary histories designed around a single language, nation, or region, and transposing them to multilingual and worldly frames of reference through which what Ouyang calls their "cross-cultural genealogies" are revealed. Further, each brings the considerable resources of high theory, postcolonial theory, world-systems theory, and colonial philology to bear on Arabic Literary Studies, resources that have sometimes been only belatedly acknowledged in the field. Taken together, these texts, and others like them, thus have the potential to revitalize Arabic Literary Studies, and to expand its remit and relevance for a globalized world.

Regarding Palestine, these texts, most overtly Sacks's, contribute uniquely to the rich body of comparative scholarship on this issue since Said by allowing for the cross-cultural thematization and theorization of "loss," and thus for the comparative assessment of the *Nakba* alongside other historical instances of cultural trauma and catastrophe. This seems a most pressing objective, given the near-universal disavowal of the *Nakba* and Palestinian history in general across the fields of Literary Studies. Most pressingly, the *Nakba* would seem a natural and rewarding point of reference for Cultural Trauma Studies. Yet this field as instituted in the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Jeffrey Alexander, and others has been structured around mainly the Holocaust and 9/11, but also slavery, Apartheid, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki as its key case studies.<sup>18</sup> To push the implications of the comparative turn in Arabic Literary Studies to their limit, it comprises, or at least opens the door for the naturalization of the *Nakba* in fields such as Cultural Trauma Studies, and more broadly across the discipline of Literature as a whole.

I would like to conclude by suggesting comparison as a critical complement to solidarity activism. Much like the impact of today's most prominent manifestation of solidarity—the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement—is premised on comparison with its South African precursor, the impact of Palestinian Studies might well be furthered via the critical practice of the same. In pursuing comparison, the imaginary boundaries between languages and nations, enforced both by and as discipline, begin to be obviated or even sublated.

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<sup>18</sup> See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Jeffrey Alexander et al., eds., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

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