

THE THINGS OF LOST WORLDS: NARRATIVE RECONSTRUCTION IN THE WAKE OF
THE HOLOCAUST AND AL NAKBA

by

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How do we construct stories around histories of trauma? And how might these stories—fictions imagined long after the fact—help us reconnect with lost pasts and reimagine possible futures? This thesis explores how *stuff* builds these stories, how the search for language to fill post-traumatic gaps in memory is inextricably bound up with the material world, with the everyday objects that furnished past lives. These domestic relics become a means for narrative, filling in the gaps left by trauma, distance, and time.

The Jewish Holocaust has been foundational in contemporary thinking about cultural or collective trauma, while the Palestinian Nakba has been under-theorized in trauma studies. This exclusion of Palestinian experience from institutionalized conceptions of human experience, as exemplified by global human rights discourse and international law as mediators of recognition, is symptomatic of the uneven circulation and consideration of these histories. My hope here is to intervene, through literary studies, in this continuing unevenness, working towards a more comprehensive and inclusive (thus more robust) critical discourse around trauma and memory.

This project brings together Nicole Krauss's *Great House* and Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*, focusing on the ways their authors use material objects to reconstruct and memorialize pasts to which they do not have direct access. While in both novels attempts to retrieve or restore a prior order to these objects of memory are ultimately frustrated, ritual physical engagement with them engenders as complete a story as is possible in the wake of collective trauma.

Building on Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory" and "traumatic realism," Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading," and Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," I suggest the notion of "traumatic materialism"—an imaginative narrative mode focused on tangible objects and spaces as loci for accessing and reconstructing the lost past—as a framework to describe and compare the ways narrative fiction by latter-generation writers grapples with the legacies of trauma.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

21st Century Memory Keeping

On the tenth anniversary of the September 11th terror attacks on the United States, Edwidge Danticat wrote: “It is the burden of the survivors and the curious to decipher final moments, whether they occurred a year, ten years, or a thousand years ago.”¹ She reminds us that “[a]fter two years, after ten years, there are still people around to look back and to remember. However, after a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years, the bones and images will have to speak for themselves.” The crux of her essay, “Flight,” thus rests on this assertion: “The job of reconstructing lives belongs to the living, the memory keepers, which is what all of us became that day, willing or unwilling witnesses, unable to look away.” When I heard Danticat reading these words, now twenty years after 9/11, they struck me as deeply resonant with the work I am undertaking in this master’s thesis and, more crucially, with why I am undertaking it. As an American who personally experienced that morning in the United States—although I’ve never lived in New York, and didn’t lose anyone close to me that day—9/11 feels as if it “belongs” to me to some extent. So I present Danticat’s reflections—those of a Haitian-American writer who immigrated to New York as an adolescent—to anchor this work in my particular American perspective, in my childhood becoming aware of the global world through this act of violence.

How can we serve as “memory keepers” when the memories aren’t “ours,” when they are those of ancestors, members of or beyond our greater identity groups, when we weren’t direct witnesses of traumatic catastrophe and “the bones and images have to speak for themselves”?

¹ Danticat, Edwidge. “Flight.” *The New Yorker* September 12, 2011.

How do we construct stories around histories of trauma? And how might these stories—fictions imagined long after the fact—help us reconnect with lost pasts and reimagine possible futures? Danticat calls into question the dictate “that we must not compare tragedies,” suggesting that “[p]ast horrors give us a language with which to define new ones. Worldwide terrors become personalized.” Our drive and capacity to imagine, reconstruct, and memorialize the traumas of our own collectives suggests a potential to acknowledge and empathize with those more distant from ourselves. We approach the inexplicable through the lenses we have, and through the traces left behind. This thesis explores how *stuff* builds these stories, suggesting that the material world takes on enormous power in negotiating post-traumatic gaps in memory.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra describes trauma as “a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (41). 20th and 21st century novels that engage with past trauma are marked by that disruption, a violent rupture that has left holes and gaps in narrative and narrator. “When the past becomes accessible to recall in memory,” however, “and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma” (LaCapra 90). I contend that the search for this language is inextricably bound up with the material world, with the everyday objects that furnished past lives. These domestic relics become a means for narrative, and thereby the means for working through.

The post-traumatic imagination is inspired—even obsessed—by the physical traces of what can no longer be directly accessed: the towel left behind by a house’s former occupant in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Visitation* (2009), a lost child’s pillow in Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* (1986), the furnishings of a lost home in Nicole Krauss’s *Great House* (2010), a shirt hand-

stitched by the beloved in Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998). Danticat, too, emphasizes the embodied and material nature of memory and memorialization—"A place setting left unused at a dinner table. An oversized shoe into which we slip a foot. A prayer whispered over unclaimable bones."—and how the physical traces of the past ("the bones and images") provide not only the imperative but also the *means* by which to "reconstruct lives." Inventories, collections, and detailed descriptions of objects are central to fictional retellings of traumatic histories, in which these objects are more than literary symbols; they have agency and exert force. They fill in the gaps left by trauma, distance, and time. They both evoke the lost past and provide the building material for reconstructing memory. In this way, the imaginary around traumatic memory is built upon, and *built of* the material trace.

Multidirectional Trauma: The Holocaust and al Nakba

In literary representations of troubled and troubling histories, rife with gaps and unanswered questions, the Holocaust emerges as a fundamental framework for thinking about fragmented, damaged memory and quests to understand and reconstruct that which has been irrecoverably lost, both to catastrophe and to the distance of time. The Holocaust remains a paradigm of human suffering and, as Michel Rothberg and Stef Craps observe, "the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies" (517). This event has also been both central and foundational in contemporary thinking about cultural or collective trauma. As Michael Rothberg points out, "trauma studies has tended to focus on European and US-American histories and that, within that focus, the Nazi genocide of European Jews has had a predominant place" ("Decolonizing" 227). A key element in its centrality in trauma studies as well as memory studies is the persistent conception of the Holocaust as a "unique, sui generis event,"

incommensurable with any other event, perhaps even with human history itself (Rothberg, “The Work of Testimony” 1232).² In his capacious investigation *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst confirms that, after 1980 “[t]he spectrum of trauma is redrawn, with the Holocaust the worst imaginable collective trauma” (65). Further, he claims, “the more the Holocaust is proclaimed a ‘unique’ and incomparable trauma, the more it in fact becomes a comparative measure and metaphor for all atrocity” (Luckhurst 69). Thus, not only does the Holocaust stand as a central archetype of collective trauma, it also becomes a sort of yardstick against which all other traumas may—or even must—be judged.

In the shadow of this globally acknowledged limit event is *al Nakba* (the catastrophe or disaster), the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their ancestral homes at the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. The repercussions and trauma of this event, like those of the Holocaust, continue to be felt today. Nur Masalha describes the Nakba as “the most traumatic event in the history of the Palestinian people. The rupture of 1948 and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine are central to both the Palestinian society of today and Palestinian social history and collective identity” (1). In stark *contrast* to the Holocaust, Elias Khoury has characterized the event as “not only a memory; it is a continuous reality that has not stopped since 1948” (“Rethinking” 263), initiating what Beshara Doumani and Alex Winder have recently described as “a widespread rethinking of the Nakba as an ongoing process rather than a singular moment” (9).³ Masalha

² Literary, postcolonial, memory studies, and Black studies scholars, among them Edward W. Said (2000), Marianne Hirsch (2012), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Rothberg himself, have refuted this conception.

³ Rosemary Sayigh, too, insists, “suffering caused by the Nakba has to be understood in terms of a continuing state of rightlessness, with all the varieties of abuse and violence that rightlessness exposes people to” (“On the Exclusion” 56), reiterating in later writing that “it is important not to treat [the Nakba] as a one-time event set safely in the past, but as a continuing state of displacement, exclusion, rightlessness, and insecurity” (“Silenced” 3). Recently Ahlam Mustafa AbuKhoti has observed: “The Nakba as a site of memory is not a singular narrative of a specific event, but the sum of all the experiences and stories told by those who experienced the initial event, and those who came after” (50).

echoes Khoury, identifying “[t]he Nakba as a continuing trauma,” which “occupies a central place in the Palestinian psyche. Memory accounts of the traumatic events of 1948 are central to the Palestinian society of today” (12). In this way, and many others, *al Nakba* is decidedly distinct from the Jewish Holocaust, and it is also a profound trauma for the Palestinian people.

And yet,

unlike the rise of Holocaust Studies in the West, which paved the way for the emergence of Trauma Studies — an academic discourse which deals with the psychological consequences of mass trauma — the Palestinian Nakba is rarely acknowledged in Western academic discourses and never mentioned within the context of Trauma Studies or Genocide Studies. (Masalha 11-12)

In trauma studies the Nakba has been under-theorized, if not altogether neglected, while historical and testimonial narratives surrounding the causes, actual events, and repercussions of these two cultural traumas seem to stand in irreconcilable opposition. Hannan Hever has acknowledged “the contradiction between the recognition of the Jewish Holocaust as trauma, on the one hand, and the recognition of the Palestinian Nakba as trauma, on the other” (155), such that to recognize the suffering of one seems to elide that of the other.⁴ As Rosemary Sayigh observes, “even as the trauma genre has expanded over the years to include work on memory, mourning, and postcolonial trauma, the Palestinian Nakba remains glaringly absent from the field” (“On the Exclusion” 52). Others have directly ascribed this absence to the very centrality of the Holocaust in these fields; K.M. Fierke posits, “the memory of the Holocaust has tended to block out the memory of Al Nakba” (787), while Abigail Ward has gone so far as to assert that “the persistent association of trauma studies and Holocaust histories also effectively frustrates

⁴ See also “Introduction,” Bashir, Bashir and Amos Goldberg. *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Palestinian attempts to make visible their trauma” (6). While it is beyond the purview of the present study to address the many reasons why the Holocaust and the Nakba have rarely been considered alongside one another in a trauma studies context, it is essential to recognize the uneven circulation and consideration of these histories, and that, consequently, the comparison I undertake here confronts uneven development⁵ and asymmetries of power. My hope here is to intervene, through literary studies, in this continuing unevenness.

This intervention is crucial because, as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman point out in *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, “[t]rauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence” (xi). They even assert that “psychic trauma affirms the ultimate truth of humanity and negates other possible schemes of description and action” (Fassin and Rechtman 9).⁶ In this context, a discourse of trauma that leaves out Palestinian experience excludes that experience not only from a subset of discourse, but in fact from institutionalized conceptions of *human experience*, as exemplified by global human rights discourse and international law as mediators of recognition. In contrast, Fassin and Recthman refer to Palestine as “the most emblematic—if not the most typical—project of humanitarian psychiatry” (188), asserting the place of Palestinian experience within “the universality of suffering” to which trauma purportedly testifies (Fassin and Rechtman 207).⁷ They contrast the idealized concept of trauma, “a suffering without borders, a suffering

⁵ By “uneven development” I refer both to the differing material and political circumstances of Israelis and Palestinians—citizens of a sovereign UN Member state designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally vs. stateless refugees or second-class citizens within Israel; dramatic disparities in Western support (financial, military, media coverage, and public opinion) and circulation and recognition of individual and collective stories from each of these groups (e.g. punitive reactions to pro-Palestinian stances in the US)—as well as the colonial histories that have led up to these contemporary circumstances.

⁶ Fassin and Rechtman find this conception highly problematic, but nevertheless acknowledge its persistence and cultural power.

⁷ Lest this comment suggest that all peoples experience suffering the same way—let alone on the individual terms established in European theories of trauma—I would call attention to established and

that knows no cultural barriers” (Fassin & Rechtman 239), with the unfortunate reality that trauma [...] effectively chooses its victims. Although those who promote the concept assert that it is universal, since it is the mark left by an event, study reveals tragic disparities in its use. [...] even though the concept of trauma asserts the equal humanity of all suffering people, even though it proclaims that collective memory is now a product of the fate of each individual and that it necessarily implies reparation, testimony, and proof, the use of the concept in fact makes it the basis for a new division between human beings. (Fassin & Rechtman 282-283)

Thus, by examining the memory of the Nakba alongside that of the Holocaust, with which it is inextricably historically intertwined, we destabilize these divisions and expand our conception of whose suffering matters.

In this way, trauma becomes a powerful angle of approach for the contrapuntal reading Edward W. Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism*. “Partly because of empire,” Said explains, “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (*Culture* xxv). To understand both the heterogeneity and the entanglement of cultures, Said insists, “we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external

proliferating postcolonial theories of trauma. For instance, in a 2019 review (*Literary Research* Vol. 35) Eugene Arva locates Jay Rajiva’s *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature, Tactility, and the Ethics of Representing Trauma* (2017) among Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), Stef Craps’s *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013), and Abigail Ward’s essay collection *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* (2015), aligning Rajiva with “Craps’s critique of Western trauma theory and ethical argument that colonial traumata should be acknowledged on their own terms, in the spirit of a genuine cross-cultural engagement, as opposed to a universalizing Eurocentric point of view.” Rajiva’s recent *Toward an Animist Reading of Postcolonial Trauma Literature: Reading Beyond the Single Subject* (2020) not only continues this critique but also offers a generative alternative in animist theories of being.

relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others” (*Culture* 32). Said’s method for thinking through and interpreting together is “looking at different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what [he] call[s] intertwined and overlapping histories,” rereading “the cultural archive [...] not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (*Culture* 51). The interrelated traumas of the Holocaust and the Nakba invite just such a contrapuntal approach, while the literary production of latter generations serves as a productive “cultural archive.” Sadia Agsous suggests “that literature convenes both Holocaust and Nakba for a memorable interweaving between Jews and Palestinians,” going so far as to insist that “only literature currently allows and admits this encounter” (150).

Fiction in the Aftermath of Trauma:

Unexpected Kinship in J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Wandering Star*

How, then, might we read memories of the Holocaust and the Nakba contrapuntally? How might narrative fiction produced in the aftermath of these two fraught and interconnected events engender new possibilities for understanding, empathy, and a more comprehensive and inclusive (thereby more robust) critical discourse around trauma and memory? Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio’s 1992 novel *Wandering Star* (trans. 2004) brings together these two apparently opposed narratives of persecution, flight, and longing for homeland. The novel recounts the life of Esther, a Jewish girl who is forced to flee Saint-Martin for Italy, Paris, and eventually Israel during the latter years of World War II. En route to Jerusalem, her path crosses that of Nejma, a Palestinian girl of about the same age, fleeing her home in Acre at the founding

of the State of Israel. The novel then follows Nejma to the Nour Chams refugee camp, where external aid gradually evaporates and, after two years in the camp, a deadly plague forces her to flee south. Her story is left in a state of uncertainty as the narrative returns to Esther, now studying medicine in Montreal, writing her adolescent memories in a black notebook like the one in which Nejma has been recording her own experiences.

I begin with this novel both because of its ethical implications—highlighting parallels between Jewish and Palestinian refugee experience, therefore calling their incommensurability into question—and because it foregrounds the broader concerns of this project. In its poignant pairing of Esther’s and Nejma’s stories, *Wandering Star* highlights not only the historical correlation between the displacement of European Jews and the resulting displacement of Palestinians, but also a certain material affiliation in the traumatic experiences of flight and exile of these two peoples. And yet it also points up the dramatically different outcomes for these two refugee populations, as Esther ends up in medical school and Nejma faces an indeterminate future of statelessness and poverty. The novel is intently concerned with the material conditions of dispossession and exile, conditions which play a central role in these overlapping and intertwined narratives. Central to the journeys of both girls are the gathering together of precious objects for departure; the things that must be left behind; the repurposing of common materials such as blankets, even refuse, for improvised shelters; and the ubiquitous bundles and suitcases that become both burden and rare source of comfort and stability.

In Le Clézio’s narrative, these material objects become imbued with legendary significance, and serve as both impetus for and means of storytelling, the access points to and building blocks for the reconstruction of memory. Material objects are essential to the girls’ understanding of their situations; it is through a significant physical object, Mr. Ferne’s

“massive, magical piano,” that Esther comes to understand the realities of war:

Esther felt a lump in her throat, because suddenly she understood what war was all about. When there was a war, men, police, and soldiers with strange plumed hats could just come and brazenly take Mr. Ferne’s piano from his house and carry it into the dining room of the Terminus Hotel. They could do that even though Mr. Ferne loved his piano more than anything in the world and it was the only thing that mattered to him in life. (Le Clézio 25)

War is characterized by the disruption of the order of things, and, for Esther, that disruption is made manifest by the sudden instability of material possessions. We might read the seizure of Mr. Ferne’s piano as a symbol for violation of the household, of the personal, or of the violent disregard for the needs, desires, and emotions of the conquered. However, Esther’s child perspective invites us to read this passage more directly. To her, war means literally that people with guns can take your belongings, and the violence of war is the violence of having the things you value most physically taken away. The seizure of the piano does not *stand in for* the violence of war; it *comprises* the violence of war.

In turn, while these material realities draw clear parallels between the two girls’ experiences, they also expose a profound unevenness between the two refugee populations. While Esther comes to understand her circumstances through a bourgeois European musical instrument, Nejma connects the *lack* of objects with the loss of belonging and even identity in the refugee camp. In Nour Chams, she describes improvised “houses of planks and cardboard, the torn tents, the makeshift shelters of car fenders, oil drums, bits of tires attached with wire that served as roofs” (Le Clézio 204), and her experience there is characterized by the *absence* of things—food, water, burial sheets, mirrors. She explains, “It’s been a long time since anyone in

Nour Chams has had a mirror. The soldiers took everything that might have been used as a weapon when they searched our bags—knives, scissors, but also mirrors.” Nejma goes on to muse, “without mirrors we are different, we’re not really the same. Maybe the soldiers who took them away knew that? Maybe they had noticed us looking worriedly at other people’s faces, as if we were trying to see in them what we had become, trying to remember ourselves” (Le Clézio 210). In Nejma’s mind, the material object that allows one to view their reflection is somehow fundamental to an understanding of the self and of one’s situation. By taking away these objects, the soldiers not only bar the refugees from this self-recognizing capacity, but also seem to acknowledge their potential as a weapon.

Most important among the many material details in the novel is Nejma’s notebook, which both physically and metaphorically links the girls and their respective stories. When they meet on the road, each writes her name in the notebook, in which Nejma continues to write her story. Esther, in turn, is inspired to purchase an identical notebook for the same purpose. Both women imagine somehow exchanging these notebooks, a fantasy that is never realized but motivates both to record the incidents of their lives. Their narratives are interwoven, inhabiting multiple (conventionally opposite) perspectives, inviting recognition of both the affiliations and distinctions between the two experiences they represent. *Wandering Star*, then, not only parallels two experiences that are normally opposed, but also reveals a focus on material objects in stories of traumatic loss and displacement. I argue that Nejma’s and Esther’s stories in fact *depend* upon the physical object of the notebook, as does Le Clézio’s pairing of—and apparent political or ethical claim about—Jewish and Palestinian refugee experience. The significance of the notebook cannot be reduced to its function as a textual record; that Nejma holds it close to her body on the road, that both girls hold it in their hands, and that Esther chooses a perfect replica—

a mirror image—to house her own story, center the *materiality* of the notebook in its capacity to connect the two. Indeed, it is ultimately the notebook that enables the telling of the story, that allows the past to take shape, and to be reconstructed and preserved.

Firsthand testimony and historical fact are often valorized as our essential tools for understanding these contested histories. But what can fiction like Le Clézio's (written almost 50 years after 1948) teach us, not merely about the factual circumstances and repercussions of these events, but about our ways of thinking about and remembering them over time? This project is interested not so much in the "truths" behind these histories as in the ways in which writers of fiction have grappled with them. I take the means by which latter-generation authors reconstruct an inaccessible past as representative of the aesthetic response to living in the wake of such traumatic moments. Careful attention to these responses creates space for mutual understanding among individuals, despite contemporary political conflict. In a diverse range of post-Holocaust and post-Nakba⁸ narratives widely available to English-speaking readers,⁹ I find a strong, at times obsessive, interest in material objects, repetition of material tropes, and a tendency to elevate elements of the mundane material world—domestic objects, relics of the home—to a sacred status. Thus, this project aims to articulate a shared imaginative impulse among diverse authors who choose to approach these traumatic histories, despite—or perhaps even because of—their personal lack of direct knowledge or memory of them.

⁸ I use this term to indicate novels written in the long aftermath of the mass expulsion leading up to and during the founding of the state of Israel in May of 1948, with full awareness of the "continuing Nakba," which is manifest at the time of this writing in both the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, as well as the displacement, statelessness, and refugee status of vast numbers of Palestinians.

⁹ This project arose from a broad survey of novels, including Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* (1986), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017), and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Visitation* (2009), and now offers Nicole Krauss's *Great House* (2010) and Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998) as a representative critical pairing.

Critical Contexts

More recently, a coherent canon of scholarship has developed comparing Jewish and Palestinian literary accounts of the historical cultural trauma both groups experienced between 1930 and 1950.¹⁰ Indeed, writers from Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun to Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani have explicitly brought these two events together.¹¹ By attending specifically to the material elements in these stories, this work aims to broaden and interweave that canon, connecting authors and texts more commonly discussed separately. My approach allows for new synergies in the critical conversation around creative representations of traumatic events, and ultimately opens up the field of trauma studies to a broader range of stories than have been considered previously.

This work builds and expands upon that of Anna Bernard and Joe Cleary, who, in the tradition of Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading,"¹² take up similar projects—Bernard with the aim of expanding the purview and explanatory power of postcolonial literary studies and Cleary seeking more comprehensive understandings of the geopolitical phenomenon of partition through the lens of literary studies. Like Bernard, I believe in the value of considering literature about Israel/Palestine together, even in translation, but while she focuses on the ways authors *from* the region narrate the nation, I am interested in how these memories have been transmitted *across* generations, geographies, and cultural contexts, how authors in these wider circles of experience

¹⁰ Nina Fischer (2020); Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg (2018); Lama Z. Khouri (2018); K.M. Fierke (2014); Hannan Hever (2012); Michael Rothberg (2011); Robert Rotberg (2006); Susan Slyomovics (1998), among others.

¹¹ See Hever, Hannan. "'The Two Gaze Directly into One Another's Face': Avot Yeshurun between the Nakba and the Shoah—An Israeli Perspective." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2012, pp. 153-163.; Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 205-225.

¹² Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994. In which Said defines "a contrapuntal perspective" as "able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others" (*Culture* 32).

remember—or rather reconstruct a memory of—the Holocaust and the Nakba. Following Cleary’s insistence on the critical importance of putting literary works from different locations, time periods, and literary traditions alongside one another,¹³ I take a transgenerational and transnational approach to what I read as a single historical trauma.¹⁴ In the way that Cleary uses literature to compare and align similar experiences (of partition) across national contexts, I compare and align *the process of remembering and representing* a past trauma as its memory is transmitted across time, space, language, and culture. Rather than focusing on a political phenomenon that exists in several places, I investigate the ways literary production across nations and generations sheds light on a single epoch, characterized by two foundational traumas that have been unevenly recognized and theorized. My strategy looks not just to the two “conflicting narratives”¹⁵ of the Holocaust and the Nakba but also to intergenerational and transnational iterations of those narratives, which I think point to affinities in ways of imagining and remembering that link these two peoples.

I contend that limiting critical discourse based on geography, temporality, and identity has occluded affiliations that could point to a deeper and more meaningful empathy than other frameworks have been able to cultivate. As an “outsider,” I may in fact be well positioned to

¹³ Cleary, Joe. *Literature Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. (itself informed by Said’s “contrapuntal” model of literary study)

¹⁴ From a global systems perspective, both the Holocaust and the Nakba originate in histories of colonization and persecution of minorities, which not only necessitated a Jewish homeland outside of Europe (and consequently the removal of the native Palestinian population from that homeland), but also leveraged the territory of Mandate Palestine to elicit both Zionist and Arab military cooperation to meet the needs of colonial powers. Further, on the scale of the individual event, the expulsion and ongoing persecution of Palestinians has been characterized by theorists such as Jacqueline Rose (2005) as the direct result of reaction formation in response to the Jewish trauma of the Holocaust. As noted elsewhere, significant power differentials and uneven levels of Western support have not only separated these two histories but also frequently occlude that of the Nakba entirely.

¹⁵ Rotberg, Robert I. (ed). *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*, Indiana University Press, 2006.

make this case; these stories have meaning to me regardless of their distance from my personal experience. As an American, the Israel/Palestine conflict has colored my sense of global politics, and the Holocaust has served as my educational paradigm for collective human suffering. Reading novels, stepping into the imaginative processes of those like and unlike me, has generated my emotional and personal investment in a story that is otherwise abstract and distant. Rather than seeking to identify with the *experience* these texts depict, I instead point to their attempts to recall, memorialize, reconstruct, and preserve those experiences. These authors strive to tell stories that are not entirely their own, and I as a scholar strive to do the same.

Towards Traumatic Materialism

The work I undertake here is deeply indebted to that of Michael Rothberg, who insists “that far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories” (*Multidirectional* 6). For Rothberg, memories of collective violence are not in competition for space in public consciousness, but rather are multidirectional, such that attending to one can shed light on or deepen our understanding of others; like Danticat’s suggestion that “[p]ast horrors give us a language with which to define new ones,” in Rothberg’s multidirectional framework, one collective trauma can provide the means for acknowledging and articulating others. Accordingly, he points to “the need for a form of comparative thinking that, like memory itself, is not afraid to traverse sacrosanct borders of ethnicity and era” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 18). This project employs just such a form of comparative thinking, seeking to cultivate what Rothberg has described elsewhere as “a multidirectional sensibility—a tendency to see history as relational and as woven from similar,

but not identical, fabrics” (“From Gaza” 528).

In turn, my approach owes inspiration to Judith Butler, whose 2004 essay collection *Precarious Life* (not unlike Danticat’s essay) sees in the national loss and grief of September 11th an occasion for contemplating other grief. Butler calls attention to a common human vulnerability, unequal distribution of “grievability,” and possibilities for recognition beyond the “familiar” towards a “collective responsibility.” She points out that “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable. [...] Some lives are grievable, and others are not” (Butler xiv). For example, she observes, “we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support” and so asks, “[t]o what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalized in its ‘Western’ mold by the contemporary workings of humanism?” (Butler 32)¹⁶

On the one hand, she acknowledges that “discourse itself effects violence through omission” (Butler 34), an observation that sheds light on the power asymmetries noted above, which lead to uneven circulation and recognition of traumatic histories. Here, the violence of omission highlights the tendency for some people’s history to be taken up and not others—a tendency owing to colonial histories that have defined the Western “human” against the native “Other”—and more specifically the ways in which Palestinian experience is actively obscured, even censored, in media, political, and academic discourse. On the other hand, just as Rothberg contends, “the uncomfortable proximity of memories is also the cauldron out of which new visions of solidarity and justice must emerge” (*Multidirectional* 313), Butler “consider[s] our recent trauma to be an opportunity for a reconsideration of United States hubris and the

¹⁶ As Fassin and Rechtman make plain, trauma is a central piece of this naturalized conception of the ‘human.’

importance of establishing more radically egalitarian international ties.” “Such mourning,” she proposes, “might (or could) effect a transformation in our sense of international ties that would crucially rearticulate the possibility of democratic political culture here and elsewhere” (40). She insists, “[t]he fact of enormous suffering does not warrant revenge or legitimate violence, but must be mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives” (Butler 104). The intervention I suggest is comparison not so much of the suffering of Jews and Palestinians—the content of memory—but rather of the means by which later generations have reconstructed and reimagined the memory of that experience from material traces. I contend that seeking out shared tropes in the fiction around past catastrophes—and I locate materiality as one salient trope—can broaden the scope and, in doing so, strengthen the explanatory power of trauma theory by encouraging the inclusion of overlooked stories.

I thus compare post-Holocaust and post-Nakba novels, focusing on the ways their authors use material objects to reconstruct pasts to which they do not have direct access. This shared tendency to construct stories around things points to shared ways of remembering, opening a new, more inclusive space for critical discourse around collective trauma. The framework I develop in doing so, what I am calling “traumatic materialism,” is related to Rothberg’s concept of traumatic realism,¹⁷ although, rather than that of living through the events themselves, I take as my focus the experience of living in the wake of traumatic events and the representational

¹⁷ A category of trauma survivor representation developed in Rothberg’s 1999 essay “Between the Extreme and the Everyday: Ruth Klüger’s Traumatic Realism.” *Auto/biography Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1999, pp. 93-107. “The evocation of the traumatic relationship between the extreme and the everyday through the tracking of a homely object in an unhomely landscape,” he asserts, “constitutes a significant, traumatic realist sub-genre of recent autobiographical writings and art” (97-98). He describes traumatic realism as “marked by the survival of extremity into the everyday world and is dedicated to mapping the complex temporal and spatial patterns by which the absence of the real, a real absence, makes itself felt in the familiar plenitude of reality” (103).

strategies of those who only have material relics on which to base their commemoration of traumatic pasts. I intend the paradigm of “traumatic materialism” to serve as a framework to describe and compare the ways narrative fiction by latter-generation writers grapples with the legacies of trauma. Traumatic materialism identifies patterns and revealing kinships in ways of remembering trauma and reconstructing lost homelands and pasts across generations, populations, and geographies.

Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is essential to a consideration of latter-generation representations of catastrophe. “Postmemory’s connection to the past” Hirsch reminds us, is “not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (“The Generation” 107). I contend that in novels written by and about those in the distant wake of collective trauma, the means for this “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” is sifting through the material relics, rebuilding stories from the stuff of the past: furniture, videotapes, kitchenware, photographs, bedding, names written on slips of paper, baskets of flowers. Hirsch specifies that “this form of remembrance need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an ethnic or national identity marking: through particular forms of identification, adoption, and projection, it can be more broadly available” (2001, 9-10). Accordingly, postmemory is not only helpful for parsing the aesthetic production of direct descendants of trauma survivors, but also for connecting and comparing creative responses to trauma across a broad range of cultural, geographical, and temporal distances.

Theoretical Foundations: Intergenerational Trauma

My “traumatic materialism” paradigm has diverse and wide-spanning roots in the fields of trauma theory, memory studies, Holocaust studies, postcolonial theory, and New Materialism.

While the work of Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra provide some of the foundational pillars of trauma theory, I also draw on that of Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török for their particular attention to the mechanisms of the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

In her field-defining *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth reads Freud's theoretical writing¹⁸ alongside literary and cinematic engagement with personal and collective catastrophes. While her definition of trauma—"an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 11)—has become canonical, the fundamental contribution of this work is Caruth's sense of the inextricable connection between trauma and literature, and her reading of trauma as essentially defined by the encounter with the other.¹⁹ She insists that "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4). For Caruth, trauma is not merely the wound but the wound that "cries out," that speaks to us, that demands our listening, and that conveys a truth. She points to "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility

¹⁸ Roger Luckhurst notes: "That Lyotard, Derrida, Felman and Caruth all engage with trauma via Freud suggests that his work is the unavoidable foundation for theories of trauma, and this is undoubtedly the case for cultural studies." Freud's "two-stage theory of trauma, the first forgotten impact making a belated return after a hiatus, has become central to cultural trauma theory" (8).

¹⁹ In his 2020 book *Toward an Animist Reading of Postcolonial Trauma*, Jay Ravija critiques Caruth's conception of this encounter, warning that "In twining the empirical basis for literary trauma theory with western psychology, these and other critics inadvertently perform some of the very erasures of perspective that they wish to avoid, in that they suture trauma theory to so-called western 'advances' in understanding trauma," and that "the study of trauma," by following this model, "risks erasing the experience of marginalized communities – people of color, queer subjects, indigenous communities, and so on – whose relationship to trauma is fundamentally disruptive of what is a tacitly white and western model" (8).

and surprise of listening to another's wound" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 8). In her conception, the listening demanded by trauma is the listening *to another*, a means for accessing experience beyond our own, or understanding the interconnection between our experience and that of others.²⁰

In her later writing, Caruth foregrounds the aspect of Freud's theory of trauma that is most central to the work I undertake here: the element of latency. "What causes trauma," she explains, "is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth, *Literature* 5). In traumatic experience, time is interrupted; our response is delayed and manifests in belated repetitions. "The return of the traumatic experience is not the direct witness to a threat to life but rather the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to master what was never fully grasped in the first place" (Caruth, *Literature* 6). This indirectness, this belatedness, "the mind's attempt to master the event retrospectively [...] the attempt, and failure, of the mind to return to the moment of the event" (Caruth, *Literature* 15) is central to thinking through the commemorative processes of the generations that come after collective catastrophe. For them, the event is entirely absent, indirect in that it is second- or third-hand.

In the psychoanalytic theory of Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, those generations can in fact *inherit* the trauma of prior generations—not the *content* of traumatic memory, but rather the absence in the parent, the silence produced by the parent's inability to process the event. In

²⁰ This conception of the notion of trauma has broad implications for the understanding of history itself, for, Caruth proposes, "it is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma [...] that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma," she contends, "we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (*Unclaimed* 11).

Maria Yassa's analysis,

The traumatic, [Abraham and Török] claim, is found in every experience that is impossible to psychically metabolize, i.e., to know, think, verbalize, symbolize and thereby transform into a bearable aspect of the subject's experiential world [...] The subjective experience is restricted to the sense of harbouring a foreign entity [...] Being radically foreign to the ego, the authors name this conception psychic phantom (Abraham, 1974-75, 1975). (Yassa 83)

Traumatic experience, which cannot be “metabolized,”²¹ inhabits the subject as a foreign body.

This “phantom,” unincorporated into the self, “can be transgenerationally transmitted” as the existence of the phantom in a parent creates a psychically mute zone, unexpectedly inaccessible and incomprehensible to the small child, who, failing to understand the sudden psychic absence of the parent, attempts to metabolize and is thereby compelled to incorporate this mute aspect of the parent, at the price of creating a mute psychic zone in the child. These isolated parts of the psyche are termed enclaves. They are filled with fantasies of the reason(s) for the parent's absence as well as of reparation of the parent's damaged part. (Yassa 83)

In Abraham and Török's theory, then, it is not the content of traumatic memory, but the silence created by its indigestibility, that is transmitted to future generations. Faced with this silence, the child imagines “reason(s) for the parent's absence” and fantasizes about “repairing the parent's damaged part,” responses fundamental to the struggle of later generations with the legacies of catastrophes like the Holocaust and the Nakba.

In those who have directly experienced traumatic events, “[t]he words that cannot be

²¹ Significantly, for Abraham and Török, as for LaCapra, verbalizing and symbolizing trauma is essential to “metabolizing” or “working through.”

uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved. Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject” (Abraham and Török 130). This inaccessible tomb, containing all that is inexpressible for the parent, cannot but be sensed by the child; “Should a child have parents ‘with secrets,’ parents whose speech is not exactly complementary to their unstated repressions, the child will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognizable knowledge—a *nescience*—subjected to a form of ‘repression’ before the fact” (Abraham and Török 140). This pre-repression, and potential unwitting transmission, of an unspeakable wound engenders “a collective psychology comprised of several generations” in which “the unsettling disruption in the psychic life of one person can adversely and unconsciously affect someone else” (Rand 166). As Abraham’s collaborator and translator Nicholas Rand points out, “the dead do not return, but their lives’ unfinished business is unconsciously handed down to their descendants” (167), thus “[t]he phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence” (168). What is key here is that the phantom indicates the consequences not of *trauma* but of *silence* surrounding trauma, which may be understood as the inability of the wound to “cry out” or the absence of listening. Following this understanding, the attempts of latter-generation writers to fill these silences with imaginative narrative represent a reparative impulse, ultimately enabled by the material traces available to them when the content of memory is absent.

We might, in turn, cast this reparative impulse beyond the individual, the familial, and the national. As LaCapra insists, “it is misguided to see trauma as a purely psychological or individual phenomenon. It has crucial connections to social and political conditions and can only be understood and engaged with respect to them” (xi). He establishes the category of “the

founding trauma, the trauma that is transformed or transvalued into a legitimating myth of origins” (LaCapra xii),²² warning that “[i]n societies or nations, a collectively experienced trauma may obscure the significance of other collective traumas, and a later founding myth may supplement or even displace an earlier one” (LaCapra xiii). Like Caruth, LaCapra emphasizes the latency of trauma, and the crucial importance of both linguistic articulation and listening to the wound of the other in working through it.

In turn, while the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub²³ establishes the centrality of the Holocaust to trauma theory, that of Edward Said and Elias Khoury points to a less frequently recognized trauma discourse around the Nakba.²⁴ Luckhurst himself insists that early advocates of trauma

were self-consciously comparative, seeking out links to studies of the psychological reactions of those who survived the Hiroshima bombing, the victims of Nazi persecution, the consequences of slavery and segregation on African-American identity, and women who had suffered incest or rape trauma, and whose experiences were only just beginning to be articulated by the feminist movement. Workers in these distinct areas mutually reinforced each other; what emerged was a general category of ‘the survivor’ that strongly linked trauma to identity politics. (61-62)

By not considering the Holocaust in relation to the Nakba, trauma studies has occluded the possibility of a far broader context of global traumatic experience and its modes of expression.

²² In fact, LaCapra suggests “the founding trauma—the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both [...] is typical of myths of origin and may perhaps be located in the more or less mythologized history of every people” (81).

²³ See, for example Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Routledge, 1991.

²⁴ See Said, Edward W. *The Question of Palestine*. Vintage House, 1992.; *Culture and Imperialism*. Chatto & Windus, 1994.; *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. Columbia University Press, 1999.; Khoury, Elias “Rethinking the Nakba.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2012, pp. 250-266.

Joe Cleary, Anna Bernard, and Gil Hochberg,²⁵ among others, have made a similar case about postcolonial theory, encouraging readings of Palestinian stories as postcolonial, diasporic, and postmodern, though material culture is not the primary focus of these major figures.

In turn, my notion of traumatic materialism—an imaginative narrative mode focused on tangible objects and spaces as loci (even “building materials”) for accessing and reconstructing the lost past—seeks to bring these theoretical threads together in new and productive ways. My intervention is grounded in New Materialism, from Sara Ahmed’s “kinship objects” and insistence on the mutual influence/shaping of human bodies and material objects (Ahmed 248), to the agency of nonhuman matter proposed by Karen Barad and Jane Bennett,²⁶ to the ultimately “interconnected agencies”²⁷ by which Stacy Alaimo interprets the social and the material. The framework of traumatic materialism elucidates how stuff builds stories; physical objects take on enormous power in the face of post-traumatic gaps in memory and especially in the inheritance of those gaps by subsequent generations. It speaks not to traumatic realism but instead to the imaginative investment of postmemory in the material traces, the physical *evidence*, of what can no longer be directly experienced or even recalled. Stories, in turn, become material; they become strings wrapped around fingers to remember something already forgotten; ropes that slip through the hands; threads that are woven and unraveled; totemic amulets that could open secret

²⁵ Bernard, Anna. “Forms of Memory: Partition as a Literary Paradigm.” *Alif* (Cairo, Egypt), vol. 30, no. 30, 2010, pp. 9. ; Bernard, Anna. *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine*. Liverpool University Press, 2013. ; Cleary, Joe. *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. ; Hochberg, Gil Z. *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination*. Princeton University Press, 2007.

²⁶ See Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007. ; Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁷ See Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010. Qtd. in Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity.” *Ecozon@*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, pp. 75-91.

gates and passageways if only the pieces were put back together. In these post-traumatic fictions, things become legend, and legends become things.

A Case for Unconventional Conversation

This project brings together two authors from distinct literary traditions, cultures, languages, and historical periods, whose works are not conventionally linked. Nicole Krauss (born in 1974) is a Jewish-American author of the “third generation” after the Holocaust, while Elias Khoury (born in 1948) is a Lebanese author of Palestinian descent, of a prior generation, writing in Arabic. While Krauss is often discussed alongside other third-generation Jewish-American writers like Jonathan Safran Foer,²⁸ and Khoury’s work has been compared to that of other widely-circulated Palestinian authors, including Ghassan Kanafani, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas,²⁹ in the chapters that follow I will examine their post-Holocaust and post-Nakba narratives together in an innovative pairing based on central material objects. Discussing these authors together requires a critical justification.

The first element of this justification is the historical link between the Holocaust and the Nakba. *Wandering Star*, for example, highlights parallels in the experience of Jews and Palestinians: religious and racial discrimination, mass displacement and wandering, and long histories of violence in the form of war and genocide. Indeed, Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg have pointed out the “natural migration” of language and symbols associated with the Holocaust

²⁸ See, for example, Aarons, Victoria and Alan L. Berger. *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Northwestern University Press, 2017.; Krijnen, Joost. *Holocaust Impiety in Jewish American Literature: Memory, Identity, (Post-) Postmodernism*. Brill/Rodopi, 2016.; Codde, Philippe. “Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2011, pp. 673-693.

²⁹ For example, Levy, Lital. “Nation, Village, Cave: A Spatial Reading of 1948 in Three Novels of Anton Shammas, Emile Habiby, and Elias Khoury.” *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2012, pp. 10-26.

to descriptions of Palestinian refugee and occupation experience (10-12). More crucially, *Wandering Star* reminds us of the historical *correlation* between these two traumas. Mass displacement of Jewish populations necessitated relocation and refuge from Europe, and worldwide guilt in response to the Holocaust was one factor among many that precipitated Western support for Zionism, the founding of the state of Israel, and in turn the 1948 Nakba. This historical linkage only strengthens my case for reading these moments of epochal trauma as related to one another, to develop an ethics sensitive to important distinctions and also rooted in overlapping and shared suffering as well as common memory practices.

Furthermore, I identify thematic and formal affinities between these differently positioned authors who have approached these two interrelated stories from varying points of historical and personal distance. Each seeks to tell a traumatic story that does not fully belong to them, that is filtered through the experience of others (e.g. ancestors, media representations, testimonial accounts, historical documents). In seeking to represent this irretrievable past, they turn to innovative literary forms and techniques, including blurring the boundaries between history/memory and myth/imagination; multivocality, the blending of many stories into one that ultimately slips away from “accuracy” in favor of transmitting experience; and, finally, an intent focus on material objects: things lost and reclaimed, artifacts that become foundational to the reconstruction of lost histories. This imaginative, obsessive return to sacralized physical objects—what I endeavor to categorize as “traumatic materialism”—across a broad spectrum of literature suggests a productive affiliation between literary approaches to these already historically and ethically related traumas, which further justifies bringing such diverse voices together. In addressing moments of historical rupture, writers of subsequent generations return to these similar modes of expression, orienting their narratives around objects imaginatively

invested with some sense of connection with the past. In their engagement with the traumas of their sociocultural collectives, they turn obsessively to physical objects and spaces in order to reimagine and preserve lost pasts in fiction.

The literary critical logic behind bringing these texts not normally considered together into conversation is thus both historical and thematic, ethical and formal. Only by looking across borders, languages, cultural backgrounds, and time periods does a productive kinship emerge; this kinship indicates a crucial leitmotif in perspectives that are traditionally contrasted. In proposing traumatic materialism as a framework for comparing the works I consider here, I suggest its potential for understanding literary production around other instances of cultural trauma beyond the Holocaust and the Nakba. I aim to shift not so much the Postcolonial conversation (as Bernard and Cleary work to do), but rather a greater conversation around human psychology, experience, and memory that stems from a theory of trauma that has been shaped by Western perspectives. I therefore provide a means by which to include Palestinian experience in a discourse of trauma and memory studies from which it has been historically excluded.³⁰ My approach achieves this inclusion not via historical fact but via literary studies, which reveals a shared or similar way of thinking and remembering across post-Holocaust and post-Nakba literatures.

As a literary tendency shared or developed by multiple generations, literary traditions, ethnic and national groups, and even languages, traumatic materialism is a means by which to cultivate what Rothberg has called a “multidirectional sensibility” around the Holocaust and the Nakba, pointing not so much to historical or factual conclusions but to revelations about the

³⁰ As previously noted, the Western Freudian/Caruthian framework is far from the only theory of trauma, but its dominance in popular understandings of trauma psychology and trauma literature render its exclusion of Palestinian experience a matter of significant concern, one that urgently merits correction.

ways later generations remember and process traumatic histories. For example, in her 2008 novel *Visitation* (trans. 2010), contemporary German author Jenny Erpenbeck places the Holocaust in the broader context of the postwar Russian occupation of Germany and the experience of East Germans during and after reunification. Though a non-Jewish writer whose identity does not “authorize” her to address the Holocaust, Erpenbeck’s personal experience and perspective is still haunted by, and driven to represent, its memory. She remembers the Holocaust within a multidirectional experience of the German social, political, and physical landscape across multiple decades and generations. In a strikingly similar fashion, in her 2017 novel *Minor Detail* (trans. 2020), Adania Shibli attends fastidiously to the fictionalized material details of a brutal crime committed in the Sahel in 1949 and a Gazan woman’s compulsion to return to the site in the 21st century. Shibli herself lives and works in occupied Gaza, in the continuous wake of the 1948 Nakba. Though the scope of this project does not allow me to consider these cases in more depth, that traumatic materialism spans such temporal, geographic, and cultural distances points to a particular way of reconstructing the past that builds productively on the tradition of comparing literary representations of Palestinian and Jewish experience. By looking beyond the literary production of the region, and far beyond the literary production of direct witnesses, my approach in turn provides a means by which to consider a broader landscape of traumatic memory and literary approaches to that memory.

Chapter Outline

In the chapters that follow, I will establish a through-line that not only connects Krauss’s and Khoury’s novels but also gestures toward a potential kinship among representations of cultural trauma more generally. Both of the texts under consideration attempt to complete an

intergenerational story that is ultimately unknowable. In both texts, this attempt manifests a traumatic materialism, a form of representation that relies on significant physical objects to build an imaginative *almost* history that can enact remembrance, mourning, and a longing for (if not the achievement of) repair or reclamation.

In Nicole Krauss's *Great House* and Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*, multiple voices strive to create a complete picture of a history that neither characters nor author know firsthand—in Krauss's novel, the horror of the Holocaust and, in Khoury's, the catastrophic expulsion of Palestinians from the lands that became Israel in 1948. While Krauss pieces her fictionalized history together through multiple, overlapping storylines—each with its own narrator—Khoury's single narrator speaks in many voices, relating the stories of others, some of which he admits to altering or making up entirely. In both cases, this act of impossible reconstruction is reliant on physical objects that become imbued with mythic significance. Both novels center photographs and furniture, especially a unique and monstrous desk in *Great House*, and *Gate of the Sun* is populated by a panoply of kitchenware, bedding, clothing, and video cassettes—the material trappings of domestic life.

Thus, the following chapters will examine the domestic object as reconstructive myth that mediates traumatic memory in each novel. Chapter 1 explores the ways in which household objects in *Great House*, especially furniture, are actively sought for their embodied connection to the past, but also exert their own agency, not only enabling narrative but also seeming to inflict unintentional and unexpected traumatic memory. Chapter 2 examines household objects in *Gate of the Sun* both as means for imaginatively retelling traumatic pasts and also as important elements in rituals of preservation and persistence in a continuously traumatic present. While in both novels attempts to retrieve or restore a prior order to these objects of memory are ultimately

frustrated, ritual physical engagement with them engenders as complete a story as is possible in the wake of collective trauma.

CHAPTER II

FABRICATED FURNISHINGS: THE DOMESTIC OBJECT AS RECONSTRUCTIVE MYTH IN NICOLE KRAUSS'S *GREAT HOUSE*

Nicole Krauss's 2010 novel *Great House* shows us how latter generations seek to understand and retell traumatic histories through their material traces. The novel also demonstrates how the relationship to the material is reshaped by trauma, which destabilizes the coherent individuality of the agential self and opens up the potential for objects to exert their own agency, generating unpredictable connections between disparate experiences and temporalities. The objects in this novel elicit memory and provide the substance for postmemory's imaginative engagement with a lost past. These physical things bring people into unexpected proximity with one another and with pasts to which they would not otherwise have access. Thus, *Great House* exemplifies traumatic materialism, an imaginative storytelling mode in which objects are the foundation for narrative in the wake of trauma. Here, a traumatic past has left the things of the world in disarray, and these displaced objects become the means for storytelling. Embodied contact with and proximity to objects has palpable effects on human beings, both affective and narrative. While this physical engagement cannot restore a prior order, it builds narrative that serves to begin the working-through process. In other words, *Great House* demonstrates both the multiplicity and fragmentation characteristic of post-traumatic postmemory narrative *and* the crucial importance of objects to the search for language to fill the traumatic and temporal gaps in that narrative.

The novel moves across space and time as four characters—Nadia, Aaron, Arthur Bender, Isabel, and George Weisz—narrate its story. Nadia, a novelist, gives an account of her

life as a writer in New York as a sort of confession or testimony in the Jerusalem hospital room of a former judge, Dov, whom she has struck with a car. Aaron, Dov's father, addresses Dov's empty chair at the kitchen table as he awaits his son's return from habitual midnight wanderings, unaware that he is unconscious in a hospital room. Arthur, a retired professor of Romantic literature, recounts his marriage to writer Lotte Berg, and his search for the child she gave up for adoption long before they met, of whom he learned only at the end of Lotte's life as Alzheimer's disease unraveled her sense of past and present. Isabel, an American, recalls meeting eccentric siblings Yoav and Leah Weisz—George Weisz's adult children—while studying in London, from a future in which she and Yoav are married and have just had their first child. Finally, George Weisz himself reflects on his attempt to rebuild his life after his parents' 1944 arrest by the Gestapo and his subsequent emigration from Budapest.

These narratives intersect around a unique desk that once belonged to George Weisz's father and was seized with the rest of the family's possessions when his parents were arrested. Lotte writes at the desk for many years until she gives it to Daniel Varsky, a young Chilean poet who likely reminds her of the son she gave away and might, by this point in time, be about Varsky's age. Though we never learn who he is, or how the desk came into his possession, we are given to understand that the father of this abandoned child gave Lotte the desk. Nadia serves as a "foster home" for the desk when Varsky leaves New York for Chile—where he is violently killed, so never returns to reclaim it—and writes at it until Leah Weisz, claiming to be Varsky's daughter, comes to collect the desk on the orders of her actual father, George Weisz, who has finally tracked down the desk after Arthur, whom he visits in England, gives him Varsky's diary. So distraught at the loss of the desk, Nadia travels to Jerusalem, where she believes Leah has taken it—in reality, Leah has locked it in a storage facility in New York to keep it from her

father—where she meets George Weisz (who claims to have no knowledge of such a desk) and unravels over an encounter with a young Israeli man who reminds her of Varsky, such that she is erratically driving a borrowed car late at night when Dov is walking in the road.

The novel's timeline is somewhat vague, an effect that is heightened by its retelling through non-chronological interspersed sections. Clearly George Weisz's visit to Arthur in England takes place before Leah's to Nadia in New York—which is concurrent with the period Isabel comes to know Yoav and Leah, as Isabel is present when Leah returns to London “with the strangest look on her face” (167)—and at least thirty years (the length of time Arthur believes he's kept the diary) after Varsky's contact with Lotte. It is less certain, however, when Nadia met Varsky. It could have been at any point during the nearly twenty years that Augusto Pinochet was in power in Chile, but as Nadia recalls having the desk for “more than twenty-five years” (15) and she “found a yellowed paperback Daniel must have forgotten so many years ago, a collection of stories by a writer named Lotte Berg, inscribed to him from the author in 1970” (20), we might deduce that the desk came into Daniel's hands in 1970 and into Nadia's in the mid-1970s, and that the primary plot events take place around the year 2000.

Many of the characters in *Great House* are directly or indirectly affected by the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust. While George Weisz lost his parents and his childhood home in Budapest, his children Yoav and Leah bear the repercussions of those losses. Lotte was “forced to leave her childhood home in Nuremberg when she was seventeen” (79), escaping only because she obtains a visa to chaperone a Kindertransport to England while her parents were “murdered in the camps” (245). She deliberately lives a life bearing “almost no trace of her past” (247), with the exception of the desk. Aaron, the father of the judge to whom Nadia tells her story, seems to have emigrated to Israel “while the others were being murdered in the pogroms”

(73), while the judge, Dov, was traumatized while serving in the Israeli army during the Yom Kippur War. Even for Nadia, apparently without a personal connection to this history, the desk becomes an object of mourning after the disappearance of Daniel Varsky in Chile. “After that,” she recalls,

the sight of the desk every morning made me want to cry, not just because of the violent fate of my friend, but also because now it only served to remind me that it had never really belonged to me, nor would it ever, and that I was only an accidental caretaker who had foolishly imagined that she possessed something, an almost magical quality, which, in fact, she’d never had, and that the true poet who was meant to be sitting at it was, in all likelihood, dead. (204)

Both Krauss’s personal history—as the granddaughter of Jewish émigrés³¹—and the varying degrees to which the novel’s characters are affected by the trauma of the Holocaust, have made *Great House* a fruitful focus for scholarly discussions around third-generation Holocaust representation.³² Victoria Aarons and Alan Berger identify the unique challenges of this generation of authors, who “must navigate with an inexact, approximate map, a broken narrative” (4). They argue that “third-generation works represent the Holocaust through indirect means,” aligning these writers with postmemory, a concept Marianne Hirsch originally developed to describe the experience and representational strategies of the children of Holocaust

³¹ In a 2010 interview with *The Atlantic*, Krauss herself explains, “I would not say that I’ve written about the Holocaust. I am the grandchild of people who survived that historical event. I’m not writing their story—I couldn’t write their story. There are characters in my novels who have either survived the Holocaust or been affected by it. But I’ve written very little about the Holocaust in terms of the actual events. What interests me is the response to catastrophic loss.”

³² See, for example Aarons, Victoria and Alan L. Berger. *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Northwestern University Press, 2017; Krijnen, Joost. *Holocaust Impiety in Jewish American Literature*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 02 May 2016; Berger, Alan L., and Asher Z. Milbauer. “The Burden of Inheritance.” *Shofar* (West Lafayette, Ind.), vol. 31, no. 3, 2013, pp. 64-85; Krasuska, Karolina. “Narratives of Generationality in 21st-Century North American Jewish Literature: Krauss, Bezmozgis, Kalman.” *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2016, pp. 285-310.

survivors, or the “second generation” (Aarons and Berger 11). Aarons and Berger observe that “this literature features a careful attention to detail, numbers, places, dates, and identities, as if the recreation and visualizing of the particulars will fill the empty spaces created by time and distance” (15). My contribution to this discussion is a careful attention to the way material objects mediate traumatic postmemory in the writing of those who come generations after collective catastrophe.

The pivotal role of material objects emerges immediately in the novel when Nadia describes “running around the apartment with the strange little brass wrench made especially for tightening the bolts on either side of the antique window frames” (3-4) after her boyfriend, R, has left with the majority of the furniture. She explains that the stormy weather that required her to repeatedly tighten the window frames with this specialized wrench somehow “helped” in the wake of his departure. Already a domestic implement—a unique and unusual one, carefully described—becomes associated with mediating loss. Reminiscent of how, in *Wandering Star*, Esther understands war through the seizure of Mr. Ferne’s piano, for Nadia, R’s grand piano “was the last of his possessions to go, and as long as the piano had been there, it was as if he hadn’t really left” (4). Later, she describes a period of intense anxiety in terms of the way she must negotiate the material world: “A hidden weight seemed to attach itself to simple objects, a teacup, a doorknob, a glass, hardly noticeable at first, beyond the sense that every move required a slightly greater exertion of energy” (33). Here, the mundane objects with which she interacts on a daily basis become implicated in her mental and emotional state, as if her anxiety has somehow impacted these objects, or vice versa.

Following R’s departure, Nadia lives “with just a mattress, plastic utensils, and the one chair” (6), the circumstances that lead to her serving as a “foster home” for several articles of

furniture belonging to Daniel Varsky when he travels back to Chile. Among these is a desk, already accompanied by the legend that it “had been used, briefly, by Lorca” (11), which becomes the central object of the entire novel. Nadia recounts, “I wrote my first novel at Daniel Varsky’s desk” (13), and the way she describes her relationship to “the wooden desk at which I had written seven novels” (16) makes clear the agency she ascribes to it. She refers to its

nineteen drawers, some small and some large, whose odd number and strange array, I realized now, on the cusp of their being suddenly taken from me, had come to signify a kind of guiding if mysterious order in my life, an order that, when my work was going well, took on an almost mystical quality. Nineteen drawers of varying size, some below the desktop and some above, whose mundane occupations (stamps here, paper clips there) hid a far more complex design, the blueprint of the mind formed over tens of thousands of days thinking while staring at them [...] Those drawers represented a singular logic deeply embedded, a pattern of consciousness that could be articulated in no other way but their precise number and arrangement. (16)

The unique configuration of drawers suggests a “guiding order,” a physical structure that seems to direct not only her writing but also her life. To Nadia, this feels, at times “almost mystical,” resonant with a higher power or spiritual forces beyond her understanding. The pattern of drawers is not a map that might *reflect* the internal mental processes of the writer, but instead a “blueprint,” a plan that *determines* the mind’s organization. The drawers possess—even impose—a “singular logic” that has become a fundamental part of Nadia. Just as her mind “formed” through her interaction with the desk, she realizes that “over the course of two and a half decades I’d physically grown around [the desk], my posture formed by years of leaning over it and fitting myself to it” (17). Not only the writer’s mind (and, presumably, the novels she

produces) but also her very body has been shaped by, even shaped around, this potent object.

On the eve of its departure, Nadia describes the desk as “the single meaningful object in my life as a writer, the lone physical representation of all that was otherwise weightless and intangible” (23). This statement seems to discount her novels themselves as representations of her writing life, the physical object of the desk displacing them as “the lone physical representation of all that was otherwise weightless and intangible.” As the physical space of her writing, the desk has rendered the “weightless and intangible” stuff of thought tangible—arguably the purpose writing itself is intended to serve—more fundamentally than the novels she has composed on its surface. After Leah Weisz takes the desk, Nadia is confronted by “the yawning emptiness where the desk had stood” (41), an emptiness that destabilizes her so profoundly that she decides to travel to the address in Jerusalem that Leah leaves her in a note, if only to see the desk again.

The subsequent narrative of widower Arthur Bender surpasses the creative agency Nadia ascribes to the desk, rendering it with a kind of animacy that is palpable, potent, and frightening. He first encounters the desk when he begins courting Lotte, in her sparsely furnished apartment. “In that simple, small room,” he recalls,

it overshadowed everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster, clinging to most of one wall and bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture to the far corner, where they seemed to cling together, as if under some sinister magnetic force. It was made of dark wood and above the writing surface was a wall of drawers, drawers of totally impractical sizes, like the desk of a medieval sorcerer. (83)

Whether at the time or merely in his memory of it, Arthur immediately ascribes a decided malevolence to the desk; it is “grotesque” and “threatening,” not merely monstrous in size but in

fact a “monster” that exerts a “sinister magnetic force.” He depicts an agential interaction between the desk and the other objects in the room; not only does it cling actively to nearly an entire wall, it overshadows, even bullies the other furniture, which seems to huddle together for protection. The threatening animacy of the desk is only heightened by Arthur’s association of its oddly sized and configured drawers with sorcery, layering the physical force of the desk on its surroundings with an element of the supernatural, of power outside or beyond the physical realm.

The fact “that every last drawer was empty [...] somehow made the desk, the specter of that enormous desk, really more like a ship than a desk, a ship riding a pitch-black sea in the dead of a moonless night with no hope of land in any direction, seem even more unnerving” (83). Here the supernatural presence of the desk is recast from imposing solidity to haunting spectrality. Arthur imagines the desk as a sort of ghost ship, and it serves as the occasion for a startlingly specific description of “a ship riding a pitch-black sea in the dead of a moonless night with no hope of land in any direction,” what could be the opening scene to a seafaring epic. Clearly the desk acts on Arthur—“unnerving” him—just as it seems to act on “the other pathetic bits of furniture.” He even describes “a kind of strange, inexplicable jealousy [that would] overtake me when she opened the door and there, hovering behind her, threatening to swallow her up, was that tremendous body of furniture” (84). Though he cannot rationally account for this impression, the desk comes to seem like a romantic rival, a “tremendous body” capable of possessing, even consuming, his beloved.

Because the desk was a gift from a previous lover, Arthur’s jealousy might be ascribed to the desk’s symbolic value as a reminder of Lotte’s past and his own replaceability. However, his fixation on the desk’s physical interaction with Lotte, his calling it a “body,” suggests that the jealousy is directed at the piece of furniture itself. Indeed, she has “[agreed] to live with that

monstrous thing, and not just live with it but to work in the lap of the beast day in and day out” (103). Rather than a souvenir from the past, the “monstrous thing” not only cohabitates with Lotte but also shares an intimacy with her—as the “lap” in which she writes—that is inaccessible to Arthur. The desk, confined to Lotte’s attic study in the house they eventually share, stands apart from (and even threatens) the delicate balance of Lotte and Arthur’s domestic life. He reflects, “everything in [our life together] was designed to give a sense of permanence, the chair against the wall that was there when we went to sleep and there again when we awoke, the little habits that quoted from the day before and predicted the day to come, though in truth it was all just an illusion, just as solid matter is an illusion” (95). Familiar objects are placed alongside familiar habits as signifiers of stability and predictability. And yet, the cohesion implied by these things and rituals is undermined by his admission that “solid matter is an illusion,” acknowledging the countless atoms, perpetually in motion, that make up the seemingly stable things of the world. Arthur’s reflections thus reveal not only the supreme importance of domestic objects in maintaining feelings of permanence and safety, but also their profound potential to undermine or disrupt that (illusory) sense of security. This resonates with the observations of Samantha Coole and Diana Frost in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*:

Even when vast numbers of atoms are assembled in the kind of macrostructures we experience in the “condensed matter” of the perceptible world, their subatomic behavior consists in the constant emergence, attraction, repulsion, fluctuation, and shifting of nodes of charge: which is to say that they demonstrate none of the comforting stability or solidity we take for granted. (11)

This understanding, enabled by modern scientific discovery, calls into question not only our

facile impression of a stable material world, but also the reliability of the distinctions we draw between human bodies and the nonhuman objects around them, tending towards an intermingling, or what Karen Barad has called “intra-action”³³ in which the human and the nonhuman are entangled and mutually co-constructing.

Isabel’s narrative presents a very different example of the relationship between physical things and (un)stable identities. She fills in the context for the travels of the desk through her relationship to Leah and Yoav Weisz, who live in “a large and dilapidated brick Victorian [...] filled with darkly beautiful furniture that their father, a famous antiques dealer, kept there. Every few months he came through London, and then everything would be magically rearranged according to his impeccable taste” (109). Consequently, she explains, “the rooms were always changing, taking on the mysterious, dislocated moods of houses and apartments whose owners had died, gone bankrupt, or simply decided to bid farewell to the things they had lived among for years” (110). By way of these pieces of furniture, and their careful arrangement by George Weisz, something of the people who once owned them, the domestic lives they once comprised, is transmitted to—perhaps even intrudes upon—Yoav and Leah’s house in London.

In turn, this unpredictable, even “magical,” transformation destabilizes the illusion of permanence Arthur describes, perhaps reflecting more accurately the volatile nature of matter, bodies, and lives. Indeed, Weisz himself explains that he raised his children to be comfortable with this volatility: “While they slept I rearranged the furniture. I taught them to trust no one but themselves. I taught them not to be afraid when they went to sleep with the chair in one place, and woke up with it in another” (287). Given his personal quest and his profession, George Weisz is well aware of the power of furnishings, the way their presence and presumed

³³ See Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2006.

dependability builds the illusion of stability that can, in fact, be upended at any moment. The pain of losing his parents is inextricably linked with the loss of the familiar environs of his childhood, and while he seeks tirelessly to reconstitute his father's study, he simultaneously seeks to protect his own children from the consequences of this illusion. For Yoav and Leah, he renders instability the norm, such that waking up with the furniture rearranged, or in a new place altogether, will not cause them any fear or pain. From these passages, we gather that both Arthur and George Weisz link the destabilization of one's domestic surroundings with the destabilization of the self—in other words, with trauma. In response, Arthur strives to maintain the illusion of stability to keep his deeply wounded wife (and their marriage) safe, while George labors to inure his children to instability even as he seeks to reclaim the comfortable stability of his own childhood.

In addition to the Weisz household, Isabel frequents the Freud museum while in London, which offers a model for understanding George Weisz's unrelenting obsession. She explains: "When Freud fled Vienna almost all of his belongings were crated up and shipped to the new house in London, where his wife and daughter lovingly reassembled down to the last possible detail, the study he'd been forced to abandon" (110). In a belated repetition of Freud's wife and daughter's efforts, Weisz "had searched for and repossessed every other piece of furniture in that room, the same pieces that had sat in his own father's study in Budapest until the night in 1944 when the Gestapo had arrested his parents" (114). Krauss's inclusion of Freud—a clear parallel to Weisz—in this narrative invokes his psychoanalytic legacy, his work on "that metaphorical house, the mind" (111), including, importantly, his foundational work on trauma. In fact, the deliberate material instability to which George Weisz subjects his children echoes the "*fort-da*" game Freud observed his grandchild playing, using an object—a wooden spool—to mediate, and

even inure himself to, the pain of separation.³⁴ Freud's model of the latency of trauma,³⁵ as well as Marianne Hirsch's of "postmemory," bears directly on Yoav and Leah's experience in the decades-long wake of their grandfather's imprisonment and their father's escape. Isabel muses, "Maybe all exiles try to re-create the place they've lost out of their fear of dying in a strange place" (110). This remark locates the Weisz family, along with Freud and his reconstructed study, in the broader context of the profound loss and widespread displacement caused by the Holocaust and the subsequent longing for return and repair.

In the case of both Sigmund Freud and George Weisz, household objects and domestic surroundings are imbued with a powerful significance, seen as capable, perhaps, of enacting the longed-for reclamation of what has been traumatically lost. Isabel recalls being "struck by the irony that Freud, who shed more light than anyone onto the crippling burden of memory, had been unable to resist its mythic spell any better than the rest of us" (111). Her characterization of memory, and thereby the objects associated with it, as a "mythic spell" emphasizes the seemingly supernatural power of these objects of memory, echoing Arthur's association of Lotte's desk with sorcery. What is so remarkable about the desk is that both Nadia and Arthur, with no direct knowledge of the desk's traumatic history, somehow intuit its significance. Its very materiality, its monstrous size and unique configuration, seems to transmit something of its past: the burden of history, a beast that threatens to swallow up the self and yet also engenders narrative, a ghostly ship making an uncertain and terrifying journey.

In fact, across these intertwining narratives, several encounters with objects elicit other tangentially related memories in Isabel, Arthur, and Nadia, none of whom have a direct

³⁴ See Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1961 pp. 10-17.

³⁵ See Cathy Caruth's reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the first chapter of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

connection to the traumatic events that precipitated the monstrous desk's journey from Budapest to England. When she stumbles across a "hall of furniture" at Mr. Leclerq's Cloudberg estate in Brussels, Isabel is "suddenly reminded of a photograph I'd come across some years earlier [...] an image of a large group of Jews in Umschlagplatz, adjacent to the Warsaw Ghetto, all of them crouching or sitting on shapeless bags or on the ground, awaiting deportation to Treblinka" (155). She recalls "the sense of a geometric order so powerful that it became inevitable, where each common material—Jews, bricks, and windows—had its proper and irrevocable place" (156), as well as other

photographs of various synagogues and Jewish warehouses that had been used as depots for the furniture and household items the Gestapo looted from the homes of deported or murdered Jews, photographs showing vast armies of upended chairs, like a dining hall closed for the night, towers of folded linens, and shelves of sorted silver spoons, knives, and forks. (156)

These images reveal not only the centrality of materiality to the catastrophic violence of the Holocaust, but also the power of the covered furniture to evoke the scenes they echo.

Arthur, too, is overtaken by an unexpected memory when he encounters an object from Lotte's past. When he finds "a small lock of dark, fine hair" in an envelope in Lotte's "deceptively small cabinet," he recounts,

what came to mind was a tuft of hair stuck to a low branch I had once found walking in the woods as a boy. I didn't know what kind of animal it was from, and in my mind I saw a majestic beast as large as a moose, but very graceful, making its way silently across the forest floor, a magical creature that never revealed itself to humans, but that had left a sign behind for me alone to find. (106-107)

What he has discovered is in fact Lotte's only memento of the child she gave up for adoption long before she met him, and yet the feeling of holding it in his hand returns Arthur to his own childhood. This inexplicable connection associates the lost child with a "magical creature" that has left a trace for him alone. In this way, the mythical beast he once imagined blurs together with Lotte's elusive internal world, the "wolves" he calls her violent memories, and the desk that he has called a beast. These material traces coalesce into an animate sorcery that provides Arthur's only glimpses into a traumatic past he can never fully know.

Nadia is also visited by a puzzling memory when she first sits at Daniel Varsky's desk: while I sat cowering beneath it I remembered, for some reason, a film I'd once seen about the Germans after the War, how they starved and were forced to chop down all the forests for firewood so that they wouldn't freeze, and when there were no trees left they turned their axes on the furniture—beds, tables and armoires, family heirlooms, nothing was saved. (202)

Nadia, who seems to have no personal connection to the Second World War, comes into proximity with it as she comes into proximity with Varsky's desk. The imposing piece of furniture seems to her an unlikely survivor of the violent salvage necessitated by extreme circumstances, a refugee of this traumatic history. This sudden, inexplicable memory also brings to the fore the very materiality of the object; its immensity, the amount of wood that was required to construct it, means that it could provide fuel for a large, long-lasting fire. Just as it survived a time of extreme danger, it could itself provide heat to support survival.

In each case, the physical encounter with a material object—the hall of covered furniture, the unfamiliar lock of hair, the desk itself—elicits memories of a different valence. The innocuous collection of furniture, when Isabal encounters it unexpectedly at night, calls up

traumatic images of household goods looted by the Nazis, piled up in mass quantities that reveal the overwhelming scope of destroyed and disassembled lives. While the shadowy piles of furniture are perhaps visually reminiscent of these vast caches, the suddenness and emotional force of Isabel's recollection is startling, as is the connection to the image of the Warsaw deportees whose bodies become "common material" with their sacks of belongings and the buildings behind them in a "geometric order" that not only objectifies the Jews but also casts their victimization and impending death as "inevitable." Conversely, while Arthur immediately understands that the lock of hair came from the child Lotte gave up so many years ago, and is thus a relic of a deeply felt and long-concealed trauma, the object returns him to a moment of childhood wonder, a special discovery meant just for him. Finally, Nadia, "cowering beneath" the monstrous desk is suddenly aware of its vulnerability, and the trauma of postwar starvation in Germany. Importantly, all of these unlikely connections are indirect; Isabel remembers photographs, Arthur a beast that he never saw, and Nadia a film. As such, these powerful encounters remain firmly in the realm of postmemory, leaving these protagonists to reassemble only the second-hand fragments of traumatic memory.

These instances complicate Laini Kavaloski's assertion that in *Great House* "affect has become attached to external materialities of a collective Jewish consciousness" (124) and that these "objects take on imagined qualities of a pre-ruptured contemporary existence – they become a way of returning to a lost Jewish existence" (126). These physical things *do* "stand in for a lost material world" and "constitute the only material traces of the architectures that might rebuild the pre-war world," but I contend that their impact on the characters in *Great House* goes beyond merely "accumulate[ing] resonances and histories as they pass through different geographies and emotional stratifications," simply absorbing and reflecting human affect

(Kavaloski 128). While the obsessive fixation of George Weisz and his clients on objects from the past exemplifies human intentionality and affective projection, the contingency of the memories that objects evoke in postmemorial generations suggests something more like what Jane Bennett has called “impersonal affect or material vibrancy.” She insists that this quality “is not a spiritual supplement or ‘life force’ added to the matter said to house it” or “a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body,” but rather “a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such” (Bennett xiii). I contend that these things, imbued with trauma of the past, demonstrate a capacity to act beyond, even against, the intentionality of the characters, in some cases *inflicting* unexpected and unsought memory generations after catastrophic events.

For Weisz, a direct survivor of the Holocaust, the “crippling burden of memory” is displaced onto the physical objects of his past; recovering these objects, more real or solid than the lives with which they are associated, is the closest he can come to recovering his murdered parents, to reclaiming, even repairing, his lost past. “Unlike people, [George Weisz] used to say, the inanimate doesn’t simply disappear” (114). And, as he seeks the lost relics of his own family, Weisz makes a business of retrieving “the furniture [his clients] so coveted, the desks or bureaus or chairs they longed for, had long ago sat in and thought they would never sit in again, all that furnished the lives they lost” (118). The word “covet” implies a yearning beyond acquisitive desire, suggesting (sac)religious fervor or worship. This powerful craving derives from the association of these household items with the past, but even more so from their remembered and longed-for touch. Long ago these people—and those they loved most—sat, slept, worked, cooked, and leaned on these objects, not realizing that their reliable permanence was a fragile illusion, vulnerable to traumatic rupture. To touch them again, Weisz’s clients believe, would be to come as close as possible to physically re-inhabiting the lives they once furnished. In other

words, Weisz sells a myth that he himself believes, that objects *are* permanent and retrievable, unlike human lives. “Out of the ruins of history,” he tells Arthur, “I produced a chair, a table, a chest of drawers” (285). He explains, “I can’t bring the dead back to life. But I can bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept” (275). Here, the material objects—the trappings of home with which lost loved ones have been in physical contact, have lived among—serve as the only available means of reconnecting with the lost past. Retrieving a specific item of furniture is the next best manifestation of resurrection.

Weisz links the desires of his clients, as well as his own quest, to the Great House of Jewish history, the school of Yohanan ben Zakkai that became the center of Judaism following the Roman destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Weisz tells Arthur, as his father told him: “The temple was destroyed. Those that survived were sent into exile. In his agony, [ben Zakkai] thought: What is a Jew without Jerusalem? How can you be a Jew without a nation? How can you make a sacrifice to God if you don’t know where to find him?” (278) “Only later,” he continues, “after ben Zakkai died, did his answer slowly reveal itself [...]: Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form” (279). Accordingly,

every Jewish soul is built around the house that burned in that fire, so vast that we can, each one of us, only recall the tiniest fragment: a pattern on the wall, a knot in the wood of a door, a memory of how light fell across the floor. But if every Jewish memory were put together, every last holy fragment joined up again as one, the House would be built again, said Weisz, or rather a memory of the House so perfect that it would be, in essence, the original itself. [...] We live, each of us, to preserve our fragment, in a state of

perpetual regret and longing for a place we only know existed because we remember a keyhole, a tile, the way the threshold was worn under an open door. (279)

This association roots Weisz's attempt—and Freud's, and perhaps that of “all exiles”—to recreate lost, beloved places in both a spiritual duty to preserve and a longing for a mythic (in Weisz's conception, messianic) reconstitution. Although the return of the destroyed temple “will not be for us, [Weisz's] father used to say,” the temple is in fact preserved, in its most minute material details, by the Jewish collective. As the Jewish people “only know [the temple in Jerusalem] existed because [they] remember a keyhole, a tile,” the narrators in *Great House* are able to reconstruct and retell the story of a past they do not know only because of the material traces that remain.

In the same way that the Jewish people are bent “around the shape of what they lost,” Nadia feels the loss of “that desk around which I had bent my life” (227) and Weisz's clients have “bent their memories around a void” (227). While this language clearly has a metaphorical sense, the physical, material connotations of bending a body around an object—or an absence—cannot and should not be overlooked. In her essay “Orientations Matter,” taking the writing desk as her example, Sara Ahmed points out that “objects not only are shaped by work, but they also take the shape of the work they do” (244). Reciprocally, “[t]he object leaves its impression: the action, as an intending as well as a tending toward the object, shapes my body in this way and that” (Ahmed 247). For Nadia, the desk's drawers are “the blueprint of the mind formed over tens of thousands of days thinking while staring at them” (16) and she vividly recalls “crouching over my work,” physically “spilling myself out in those drawers, nineteen drawers, some big and some small, how easy it was to pour myself into them” (211). The physical dimensions of the desk shape her body and her thinking, her life's work as a novelist. Further, its panoply of

drawers—one of them locked but, unbeknownst to Nadia, empty—present a materialization of the inner “tomb” theorized by Abraham and Török, in which trauma is compartmentalized and walled off. In this way, Nadia has been bent around the desk as well as the silences she inherits with it. Lotte, too, worked in “the lap of the beast,” which threatened to “swallow her up,” indicating the profound importance of her physical engagement with the desk to write the fictional stories that were her only way of processing her painful memories of loss and, in turn, one of Arthur’s few ways of learning about them.

In George Weisz’s case, the void remains unfilled. In a letter Isabel receives from Leah, she learns, “*For forty years my father labored to reassemble that lost room [...] The only thing missing in the study on Ha’Oren Street was my grandfather’s desk—where it should have stood, there was a gaping hole*” (116). This hole, this absence, echoes the one left in Nadia’s apartment, and arguably her life, after Leah takes the desk. In the concluding section of the novel, Weisz himself narrates: “My father died fifty years ago on a death march to the Reich. Now I sit in his room in Jerusalem, a city he only imagined. His desk sits locked in a storage room in New York City, and my daughter holds the key” (287-288). Importantly, Weisz calls it *his*—his father’s—room, blurring the past and present as his father died fifty years ago and “only imagined” Jerusalem. These items are meaningful because they *belong*, still, to his father, and thereby to his own lost childhood in Budapest. Though he has himself reached the Promised Land, George Weisz seems unable to claim his own life in the present; under memory’s “mythic spell” he has instead sought, through the furnishings of this room, a way back into the past.

Before his suicide in the nearly-reconstructed study of the house on Ha’Oren Street, Weisz does find his way to the desk in its New York storage room and, as he runs his hands across its surface, he reflects, “I knew the moment well. How often I had witnessed it in others,

and yet now it almost surprised me: the disappointment, then the relief of something at last sinking away” (289). It seems that this physical encounter with the object so prominent in his memory is necessary before he can end his life. Weisz’s disappointment and his suicide point to the inevitable failure of attempts to reclaim or reconstruct the past through its relics. And yet, there is also “the relief of something at last sinking away,” perhaps the irresistible impulse to retrieve or repair, perhaps the remembered image—perfected by the imagination, but also marked by the trauma of the past—of the object as it was long ago. What is key here is that this “something,” whatever it may be, *sinks away*—contact with the desk enacts neither a return nor a resurrection; the missing piece does not fill the gaps to make a whole. Instead, like the ghost ship Arthur imagines, the wreck of the past at last ceases its wandering and sinks into the “pitch-black sea in the dead of a moonless night.”

However, viewed in another way, the desk *has* in fact performed an act of reconstruction; it has become the occasion of the narrative itself. Nadia’s journey to Jerusalem, where she believes Leah has taken the desk, precipitates her collision with Dov, and thus the telling of the histories of Dov’s father, Lotte Berg, and the Weisz family. So while Weisz’s attempt to literally reconstruct his father’s study ultimately fails, the pursuit of the unique desk allows a *story* to be reconstructed and preserved, however imperfect, by the unlikely community that emerges through their contact with it, not unlike the memory of the lost temple held in its myriad details in the minds of the Jewish people spread across the globe.

CHAPTER III

SACRED STUFF: MATERIAL RITUALS OF PRESERVATION IN ELIAS KHOURY'S *GATE OF THE SUN*

Elias Khoury's 1998 novel *Gate of the Sun* (trans. 2006) not only serves as another illustrative example of traumatic materialism but also demonstrates the productive ways in which traumatic materialism allows us to read post-Holocaust and post-Nakba literature contrapuntally and multidirectionally. Both Krauss and Khoury invoke the power of the material trace and physical, ritualistic engagement with objects as essential to reconstructing lost pasts and enacting powerful desires for return and repair. But reading these imaginative literary approaches to past trauma contrapuntally requires attending to distinctness as well as commonality. While an examination of *Gate of the Sun* reveals parallels with Jewish postmemory narrative in the ways in which objects become the occasion for memory (and so for story) in the post-traumatic imagination, it also highlights the distinctive workings of trauma, materiality, and memory in narratives of Palestinian experience, marked by both past and continuing trauma.

Not unlike Nadia at Dov's bedside, Khoury's narrator Khalil, a Fedayeen fighter-turned-doctor-turned-nurse, narrates the entirety of the novel to Yunes, an aging revolutionary in a coma. Though its stories span vast distances and temporalities, the novel takes place almost exclusively in a room in the Galilee Hospital in the Shatila Refugee Camp. As in Krauss's novel, neither author nor narrator has direct memories of a pre-Holocaust Europe, a pre-Nakba Palestine, or the catastrophic violence suffered by the Jewish and Palestinian people in the 1940s. So Khalil, like Nadia, Arthur, and Isabel, relies on the stories of others. These stories, in turn, arise from and are defined by physical engagement with material relics of the homeland. As he

speaks to his unresponsive patient, Khalil retells Yunes' revolutionary exploits and his fraught romance with his wife Nahilah, as well as myriad stories of the camp's other inhabitants—the midwife Umm Hassan, Khalil's lover Shams, the swindler Salim As'ad, rape survivor Dunya, among many others—and their acquaintances, relatives, and ancestors before, during, and after the catastrophe of 1948. He interweaves these stories with those of his own childhood: the murder of his father, Yassin Ayyoub, subsequent abandonment by his mother, Najwah, and his upbringing by his grandmother, Shahineh, who often conflated him with his father. And, just as in childhood he “listened to stories I thought were mine and got confused. I would tell stories about my father as though I were telling them about myself” (314), in his constant conversation with Yunes he takes on the voices of those whose stories he repeats, inhabiting their traumatic experiences as if he himself were Yunes or Umm Hassan.

It is crucial to draw a distinction between Krauss and her characters and Khoury and his, as despite its lasting aftereffects the Holocaust is an event that has ended, while the Nakba can be understood as ongoing. After the 1948 expulsion came the 1967 war, followed by the Lebanon war and Sabra and Shatila massacres in the 1980s, the First and Second Intifadas in the 1990s and 2000s, and more localized conflict and property destruction persist in the region. The Israeli military occupation (the longest in modern history) of the West Bank and Gaza continues to this day, as does the unresolved dispossession and statelessness—whether in exile as refugees or citizens in other nations, or second-class citizens under Israeli occupation—that characterize contemporary Palestinian experience. Indeed, Nur Masalha has described *Gate of the Sun* as “a fictionalised attempt to render an account of the Palestinian Nakba and the continuity of the trauma.” He reminds readers that “[t]he novel is based on the experience of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon” whose stories Khoury spent years gathering (Masalha 10). The trauma in *Gate of*

the Sun is thus not only that of the 1948 expulsion, which Khalil must reconstruct indirectly, but also a continuous experience of violence and erasure. Consequently, manifestations of traumatic materialism after the Holocaust and the Nakba are distinct and their elaboration requires nuance. While in *Great House* contact with material objects primarily evokes memory, allowing those in the present to fill gaps in an inaccessible traumatic past, those in *Gate of the Sun* are a means of coping with a traumatic present. Not only do material objects allow Khalil to knit together fragmented stories of his community's history, but they are also crucial to rituals of persistence.

“Ritual,” Stephan Feuchtwang suggests, “functions as a creation of memorable experiences and as a training of memory” (295). “Ritual is not history,” he emphasizes, “Nor is it personal memory. It produces experiences that are memorable. But of itself, it is a transmission of its own discipline of memory and of its intrinsic temporality” (Feuchtwang 298). Issam Nassar offers a helpful frame for understanding commemorative ritual in the context of Palestinian refugee experience. He observes, “the [Palestinian] refugee articulation of the trauma took various forms of remembering and commemorating, most of which focused on preserving an image of the lost past, rather than on the uprooting experience itself” (Nassar 73). He identifies this focus on “the glorious past” as “both an act of steadfastness and redemption. It affirms the refugee’s status as someone else other than a distribute refugee, and it maintains the hope of the return to Palestine alive” (Nassar 74). The critical importance of such commemorative ritual for Palestinian refugees becomes even more clear when we consider that “Nakba commemoration has been actively suppressed” (Masalha 8). As Masalha details,

The ethnic cleansing and politicide of 1948 were immediately followed by Nakba memoricide: the systematic erasure of the expelled Palestinians and their miniholocaust from Israeli collective memory and the excision of their history and deeply rooted

heritage in the land, and their destroyed villages and towns from Israeli official and popular history. (10)

Beyond 1948 and its immediate aftermath, Masalha points to “repeated cycles of Israeli looting of Palestinian historical documents, archives and library collections” (137). Thus, not only the material reality of Palestine but also the official evidence—the historical memory—of its existence has been deliberately and systematically erased. In this context, Khoury’s narrative is riven with the gaps and fragmentations of memory wrought by the original and continuing trauma of *al Nakba*, as well as those of Khalil’s temporal and spatial distance from 1948 and its victims. This fragmentation is compounded by the continued external efforts of the Israeli state to obliterate the historical narrative that does remain. Under these circumstances, rituals engaging material relics of the lost homeland—practices with the potential to create and transmit new memories—become a primary means of preserving and passing on imperiled knowledge of both the Nakba and a pre-Nakba Palestine.

This form of traumatic materialism manifests in the novel both in the relationships to objects Khalil describes in his stories and in Khalil’s own endeavor, unraveling and knitting back together fragmented pasts through his tending to Yunes. We might even read his urgent attempt to reanimate the legendary revolutionary as linked to the urgency of preserving the memory of Palestine (and that of its violent destruction) before it disappears completely. “Do you believe we can construct our country out of these ambiguous stories?” Khalil asks Yunes, “And why do we have to construct it? People inherit their countries as they inherit their languages. Why do we, of all the peoples of the world, have to invent our country every day so everything isn’t lost and we find we’ve fallen into eternal sleep?” (376) The “eternal sleep” that this perpetual reinvention works to ward off is, after all, not unlike Yunes’s comatose state and Khalil’s efforts, through

storytelling, to reawaken him. Material traces are central to the “ambiguous stories” to which Khalil refers, and in turn to the continuous reconstruction and reinvention of Palestine in the face of destruction, dispossession, and erasure. Though Khalil is doubtful that such an endeavor can succeed, even affronted at its necessity, he—and those whose stories he repeats—persists in engaging the relics of the past in rituals that construct and maintain a tenuous present.

It becomes increasingly clear through Khalil’s stories that objects are essential to memorial ritual for his community; preserving memory requires physical, embodied engagement with these objects. We see Khalil’s grandmother changing the flowers in her pillowcase and tending to her son’s portrait; Umm Hassan watching, rewinding, and re-watching the videotape of her visit to her former home; Yunes wearing the clothing that matches that of his firstborn son; and his wife Nahilah rewriting the names of her loved ones on slips of paper to be mixed in with the freshly cut flowers in her basket. For each character, these objects seem to *demand* ritual; rituals emerge around them just as Khalil’s stories do.

For example, one of Khalil’s earliest memories of Yunes centers on just such a relic. He recalls:

In the office at the boys’ camp, you’d stand spinning and spinning the globe and then would order it to stop. When the little ball stopped turning, you’d extend a finger and say, “That’s Acre. Here’s Tyre. The plain runs to here, and these are the villages of the Acre District. Here’s Ain al-Zaitoun, and Dier al-Asad, and al-Birwa, and there’s al-Gabsiyyeh, and al-Kasbri, and here’s Tarshiha, and there’s Bab al-Shams. We, kids, are from Ain al-Zaitoun. Ain al-Zaitoun is a little place, and the mountain surrounds it and protects it. Ain al-Zaitoun is the most beautiful village, but they destroyed it in ’48. They bulldozed it after blowing up the houses, so we left it for Deir al-Asad. But me, I founded

a village in a place no one knows, a village in the rocks where the sun enters and sleeps.”

(19)

Here, the globe is a physical representation of the many Palestinian villages destroyed or displaced in 1948, proof of their existence or at least an opportunity for Yunes to acknowledge them and pass that knowledge along to the younger generation. In this way, the tangibility of the globe serves as mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of memory. Yunes speaks of the villages in the present tense, alongside his own secret village, the cave he comes to call Bab al-Shams (“Gate of the Sun”). He thereby marks not only the villages’ persistence despite erasure (from the land and from official maps) by the Israeli government, but also suggests the continuing possibility of return, and of founding new villages.

Early on in the novel, Khalil also refers to his grandmother Shahineh’s “amazing pillow” (35), another material trace of Palestine; she “used to stuff her pillow with flowers, saying that when she rested her head on it she felt as though she’d returned to her village” (36). “My grandmother used to change the flowers at the beginning of each season,” he explains, “and I think she expected me to continue the tradition” (37). Both the ritual of replacing the flowers with the changing seasons and physically laying her head on the pillow preserve a connection to the lost home. Moreover, her (unfulfilled) expectation that her grandson will “continue the tradition” speaks to the role of ritual in renewing and transmitting memory forward in time. Khalil recalls, however, “I would lay my head on her pillow and smell nothing but decay. [...] I hated the perfume of decay and ended up connecting the smell of Palestine with the smell of that pillow” (36). For Khalil, the new memory is one of confusion and even disgust; the pillow is unable to evoke in him his grandmother’s personal relationship to Palestine, so her ritual is abandoned after she dies. And yet Khalil keeps the pillow, wondering, “Why does a person turn

to dust when he dies, while an object decomposes and yet remains an object?” (37) His observation speaks to the persistence of objects, even as their meanings change for new generations that inherit them. Decayed and disintegrating, the pillow memorializes not only the loss of his primary caretaker but also the unbridgeable gulf that existed between them, his inability to relate to her direct memories of a pre-Nakba Palestine.

The centrality of objects to memorializing traumatic loss in Khoury’s novel exemplifies Dima Saad’s assertion in a special issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* that Palestinian refugees “entangle their belongings with longings for a lost homeland, as metonymic fragments of home and of the self, as vessels of identification and belonging,” and that these objects “reconstruct the (im)materialities of the homes and dreams that were, involuntarily, left behind. Generations of Palestinians, in this context, hold on to the residues of a universe that is no longer; they invest themselves and their stories in the enduring artifacts of a ‘lost paradise’” (58). As metonyms, mundane household items stand not just for the lost homeland but also for the continuation of personal and collective identity; as vessels, they are imbued with emotion. But beyond their apparent passivity—onto which human beings project significance—these artifacts endure, become central characters in stories, and demand attention and engagement. As George Weisz insisted, “the inanimate doesn’t simply disappear.” The things refugees manage to take with them can actively “reconstruct” what once was, and ultimately “become the vessels of transgenerational transmission, the building blocks of ever-expanding shadows, the glittering residues of a universe that is no longer” (Saad 60). As the globe and the pillow are mnemonic vessels onto which Yunes and Shahineh (both of whom experienced the Nakba directly) project memory, these objects actively transmit this memory to the boys in the refugee camp. Through ritual physical engagement they becoming “building blocks” for embodied experiences that

make the inaccessible homeland real in the present. But, as the example of Shahineh's pillow demonstrates, people are not always in control of the experience these objects transmit or the new memories they build. In this way, rituals of persistence open up possibilities for later generations to relate to objects of memory in new ways.

In a quasi-echo of Shahineh's flower pillow, we learn that towards the end of her life Nahilah "had taken to carrying around a small basket into which she put flowers and little folded scraps of paper on which she wrote the names of those she loved. She'd mix up the flowers with the scraps of paper," and, as for Shahineh her pillow is her homeland, "Nahilah believed the basket was her family" (417). She asks her daughter and granddaughter to continue this practice after she is gone, instructing: "Keep the names safe, Daughter, and don't you dare stop writing them and putting them in the basket. This basket keeps the names safe from death" (417). But Khalil reflects, "I don't believe that little Nahilah has kept up the tradition, for we forget our promises to our dead; we keep them for a few days, and then we forget" (417). He predicts that "little Nahilah has forgotten the basket she inherited from her grandmother among her toys, that the basket of flowers ended up like my grandmother's pillow, and that mold will find the scraps of paper on which the woman wrote the names of the ones she loved" (418). In contrast to Shahineh's pillow, the flowers and hand-written names, safe in their basket, preserve not a connection to the homeland (as Nahilah and her children remain in Galilee) but to the loved ones, like Yunes, from whom the conflict has separated her. For Shahineh and Nahilah, ritual care for and renewal of these totemic objects is crucial to the preservation of what they love. And, in both cases, there is an urgency to pass on this practice to the next generation, although the next generation is ambivalent, even resistant. Instead, these objects become the building blocks for retelling history. Now neglected and stinking up his house, Khalil's grandmother's

pillow becomes one of many objects that elicit retellings of the stories she once told him. In the context of Khalil's postmemory, rather than reconstructing a pre-Nakba Palestine, the pillow reconstructs *Shahineh's memories* of her homeland and the trauma of losing it.

Khalil himself has no memories of Palestine; "Like all the other children who grew up in the camps," he explains, "I heard all the stories, but I never understood" (171). In the months he spends at Yunes' bedside, he imaginatively reconstructs the homeland by retelling stories he's heard and inventing other ways things might have happened. He admits, "I don't know any real stories" (28), implying that the stories he tells Yunes, the stories that comprise the novel, have been to some extent imagined. "I speak of a country I've never visited," he says, "a country I entered a few times at night with the Fedayeen but never really could see" (418). But he is determined to "try to put together the fragments I've heard from you and others" (223). The stories Khalil cobbles together—fragmented both by the trauma of the tellers and by Khalil's temporal and spatial distance from their events—are identified by the objects around which they center: the story of the icon of the Virgin Mary (8), the story of the cotton swab (87), of the pita bread (213), of the white sheets (216), of Reem smuggling the jerry can full of arak liquor on her head (221). Consequently, objects, in addition to their role in rituals of commemoration, are also the occasion for, and often the central figures in, stories of the past. Khalil claims, "I'm acting out your story, and Dunya's story, and Salim's story. I'm acting out all your stories" (296), in effect performing or enacting pasts that are not his own, enabled by the material props that populate these histories.

Here, engagement with the material traces of the past allows Khalil to make what Karen Barad has described as "[t]he move toward performative alternatives to representationalism," which "changes the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality

(e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices or doings or actions” (28). “A performative understanding of discursive practices,” Barad explains,

challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Unlike representationalism, which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly merely reflect on, a performative account insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being. (133)

Barad’s concept resonates strongly with Khalil’s persistent doubt and questioning of the validity of language and offers a framework for attending to the materiality and performativity that characterize Khalil’s approach to the fragmented history of his community.

In this context, engagement with the materiality of Yunes’s body constitutes not only a ritual of persistence but also a performative, rather than representational, approach to the trauma of the Palestinian past and present. This ritual engagement is evidenced in Khalil’s meticulous schedule of care for the unconscious man:

I enter your room at 7 a.m., empty your catheter and clean your nails. Then I mop your room. After that I give you a bath with soap and water, for which I use an expensive soap that I bought myself, because here at the hospital they refuse to buy ‘Baby Johnson’ claiming that it costs a lot and is supposed to be for babies. Then I change your white gown and call Zainab to help me lift you and sit you in the chair; she holds you up while I change the sheets. I don’t want to give you more to worry about, but the sheets were a problem. What kind of hospital is this? They said they weren’t responsible for sheets, so I had to buy three sets. I’ve asked Zainab to wash them, and I give her a small amount for the service. That way I don’t have to worry anymore about changing the sheets every

day. Next, I put you back in bed, get the mucus extractor (because you can't cough now), extract the mucus from your windpipe, clean the extractor, and rest a little. (45)

As the desk in *Great House* is rendered a body, Yunes's body is rendered an object under Khalil's fastidious care. Khalil even calls Yunes "a fragment of the past, a relic, walking among the ghosts of memory" (421). "When I'm with you," he explains, "I feel as though everything is still at its beginning, my life hasn't started yet, your story is still before me to try to unravel, and my father has come back to me, as though he'd stepped down from the picture on the wall and is speaking to me" (300). His physical interactions with Yunes allow him to unravel the stories of a Palestinian past before his time, "as though everything is still at its beginning," present in the room with the doctor and his patient.

The "picture on the wall" Khalil refers to is a large portrait of his father who, Khalil tells Yunes, "died before I could set eyes on him. I see him as a photograph hung on the wall, a big photograph with a brown frame" (298). He explains that his grandmother,

Shahineh, Yasin's mother, had a theory about photos. She thought they died if we didn't water them. She'd wipe the dust from the glass over my father's photo with a damp rag and place a container full of flowers and sweet-smelling herbs beneath it saying that the picture lived off the water and the nice scent. She'd pick basil and damask roses and put them in vases underneath the picture. Bending over it with a damp rag, she'd talk with her son. (299)

Though she knows that her son is dead, Shahineh believes that his photograph is alive, requiring care and capable of sensory experience. The ritual cleaning and offering of flowers to the portrait allows her to talk to her departed son.

After his grandmother's death, Khalil, on a whim, tries out her ritual, but abandons it,

finding it ridiculous. “I lit a candle,” he tells Yunes, “took a wet rag, and wiped the picture, telling it I’d come back tomorrow with flowers and basil. I didn’t go back, however. It was an absurd thing to do, don’t you think?” (300) And yet, just as Khalil finds his grandmother’s ministrations to the portrait absurd, others on staff at the hospital—Doctor Amjad and Nurse Zainab—think Khalil’s attention to Yunes is pointless and irrational. “Khalil is going through a psychological crisis driven by the need to find his father,” Amjad insists, advising Zainab to “leave him with that corpse until he’s had enough” (315). Not only do they believe that Yunes will die no matter what Khalil does, they also assume that Khalil’s obsession with caring for the unconscious “patient” is merely evidence of a “psychological crisis” in which Yunes is a surrogate for the father Khalil lost in his distant youth. Though Khalil insists that his treatment will revive Yunes, Amjad and Zainab’s assessment of the situation may not be far from the truth. However, Khalil’s childhood, including his vague memories of his father, is only one of the many Palestinian pasts his engagement with Yunes allows him to work through.

Khalil’s ritualized attention to Yunes reanimates and reimagines Yunes’s own material rituals in the wake of 1948. While living in exile, Yunes finds an unusual way to connect with his wife and young son, through matching outfits Nahilah sews. At first his wife “said I was crazy, wanting my son and me to wear the same pajamas. Then she took things one step further. She started buying us the same outfits. [...] She would make us matching clothes and say that when Ibrahim grew up we’d be like twins” (55). By putting on a shirt that he knows looks like Ibrahim’s, by wearing the matching fabric against his skin, Yunes comes as close as he can to the boy he has seen only once, asleep in his bed. In turn, dressing her son this way gives Nahilah a kind of access to her husband in between his brief visits to his cave above their village. “I started wearing my clothes and imagining my son wearing his,” Yunes explains, “She’d dress him, and

then speak to him as if he were me. We became like one man divided in two, one half in the cave, the other at home” (55). Through their matching outfits, the boy and the man seem to become one, the fabric bridging the distances that separate the family. Eventually, “[c]lothes became the prime subject of the meetings of husband and wife in that cave suspended above the village of Deir al-Asad. The husband would bring cloth from Lebanon and the wife would sew it” (55). In effect, the fixation on the matching outfits—the small material ritual they can enact while other solutions are unavailable—displaces the trauma of the loss of Palestine, Nahilah’s life in the Israeli-governed village, and Yunes’s exile with the Fedayeen in Lebanon.

Yunes and Nahilah are not the only people in the novel to fixate upon clothing; Khalil retells a strange scene from al-Birwa, in a reprieve between Israeli assaults, when “we found everyone’s clothes stuffed into bags and placed in the center of the patio. People were attempting to pick out their own clothes from the jumble. I swear no one knows what he took and what he left behind. The clothes were all mixed up, and we couldn’t make heads nor tails of them.” Although they had returned to the village to harvest their fields, the people seem unable or unwilling to abandon their clothing: “We celebrated. I can hardly describe it, my dear – clothes were flying through the air, and everyone was trying things on and pulling them off. Everyone wore everyone else’s things, and we came together and were joyous” (195). The clothing instigates an almost surreal moment of joy in the midst of catastrophe and displacement. The villagers are overjoyed to reclaim their possessions, although their “clothes were only rags,” and their random, jubilant exchange is reminiscent of Yunes sharing clothing with his son. By trying on the clothing of their neighbors and disentangling the jumbled contents of the sacks, the villagers are able to come together in celebration. Reclaiming their clothing seems, if only for a few wild moments, to displace the impossibility of reclaiming their village.

Through Khalil's repetition of the stories he's heard, we learn that Yunes and his wife Nahilah improvise an unconventional domestic space in the cave at "Bab al-Shams, which you made into a house, a village, a country" (380). Furnished with the mundane necessities of domestic life, Yunes's hideout, outside of both the refugee camp system and occupied Israel, becomes a home. The cave is the only space where Yunes and Nahilah, separated by geopolitical borders and a legal system according to which Yunes is a wanted outlaw, can engage in the domestic rituals of a husband and wife—bathing, dining, sleeping—during his short visits. Khalil describes how "Nahilah had fixed up the cave, how she'd brought mats and the mattress and the wooden chest and the primus stove and so on" (379). Nahilah calls a certain rock in the cave "the pantry" (85) and "the open space inside the cave [...] became a bathroom" where she "bathed him with water and bay laurel soap, dried him and dressed him in fresh, dry clothes" (408). Household items—some literal, others imagined—allow the couple to reconstruct, if only briefly and sporadically, the life they lost in 1948. In her later years, Nahilah asks her son Salem

to visit the cave often to keep it neat and clean. "Don't let the sheets, towels, and blankets get moldy. It's your father's village [...] His home must be kept neat. And when I die, take everything out and close up the entrance with stones. We cannot let the Israelis in there; it's the only liberated plot of Palestinian land." (514)

After Nahilah's death, Salem fulfills his promise, "he'd closed the 'country' with stones. He said he'd gone at night with his son Yunes, and Noor's son, Yunes, and Saleh's son, Yunes, and Mirwan's son, Yunes...they'd gone and closed the country. They'd taken everything out and had divided the things up among them" (515). In this way, the possessions in the cave, as well as the secret of its existence, are passed down to Yunes's descendants, both his second son Salem and the many grandsons who bear his name. Though separated from their paternal ancestor, they

inherit a sort of “estate,” the traces of the home he carved out in the wake of expulsion and in the midst of exile.

In the present, Khalil becomes fixated on the only trace of domesticity in the decrepit hospital room: Yunes’s bed, “this coffin of a bed” (30), which he sees Yunes as “nailed” to, “which has become your ship on the sea of death” (284). The bed is not only a figure of death and immobility, but also (echoing Arthur’s eerie characterization of the desk in *Great House*) a ship, a vessel for traveling from one world to the next. Khalil in fact makes this metaphor real when he announces, “The miracle finally has occurred: I’ve managed to buy you a waterbed” (301), explaining that “[b]y sleeping on water, you’ll find that your body will return to you” (244). “This bed will help,” he insists,

Your bed sores will heal because waterbeds don’t stick to people’s bodies like ordinary beds do. In the beginning, I substituted a cotton mattress for the hospital mattress, which is made out of foam. Cotton is more comfortable, but it’s soft. As soon as you start sleeping on cotton, the mattress fills with lumps. I thought of cotton because I was afraid of the heat of the wool we normally stuff our mattresses with. (302)

As the primary object in Yunes’s reduced experience—in effect, his entire world—the bed on which his body rests takes on incredible significance and is central to Khalil’s attempts to treat his condition. It is as if, in Khalil’s mind, finding the right surface—along with cleaning, feeding, and talking with him—has the power to bring Yunes back to the living world. Consequently, he ponders the different options, carefully considering their interaction with Yunes’s inert body and, at great personal expense, provides a luxury waterbed amid the material lack of the camp and its dilapidated, collapsing hospital. While the extravagance of the waterbed presents an obvious contrast to the conditions surrounding Khalil and Yunes, its association with movement (not only

its wave-like motion but also Khalil's insistence that it doesn't "stick to people's bodies like ordinary beds do") suggests a subtler resistance to the seemingly inescapable restrictions of the hospital and the camp.

This obsession with bedding also seems linked to Khalil's memory of his mother, who left their family soon after his father's death. He tells Yunes, "I used to long for her at night. [...] I'd get up from the mattress and go to hers, and not find her. I'd sleep next to her when she wasn't there." Like George Weisz's desperate clients longing for the chair or bed that once held a lost loved one, the empty mattress is all that remains of Khalil's mother and sleeping in it is the closest he can come to her. That is, until "my grandmother began to rearrange the house. She bought two beds, one for her and one for me, and my mother didn't have a place anymore, and I could no longer go to her mattress at night to sleep next to her or smell the scent of her hair" (318). By rearranging the house around its two remaining occupants, Shahineh erases the memory of Khalil's mother. This effort seems to indicate Shahineh's wish to displace Najwah as Khalil's caretaker, but it may also be an attempt to soothe the child, removing the space that reminds him of his mother's absence. And yet, it is clear that the removal of this empty space, which still held "the scent of her hair," is felt as a loss, as if her mattress, though empty, served not only as his way to fulfill his longing for her but also maintained the possibility of her return.

Perhaps his grandmother understood the significance of the mattress because, before she was forced to flee al-Gabsiyyeh, the bed she had shared with her husband, "the only bed we ever owned," held a special significance for her. "My husband," she tells Khalil, "bought a brass bed unlike any in the whole village," a luxury item that is normally reserved for the husband, though "he started asking me to sleep in the bed next to him. He said it was because he loved me" (338). She explains, "I hadn't slept in the bed since his death. It was his bed. I used to make it every day

and wash the sheets once a week, but I never slept in it” (339). Her ritual laundering of the bed, keeping it neat for her departed husband, signifies not only her mourning but also his continued presence in her life. When she returns to the house in secret to gather supplies after the expulsion,

Shahineh said she regretted one thing. “I’m sorry I didn’t make the bed. In my fear and haste, it was like I didn’t care. I know my husband was angry with me: I dreamt of him, Son. We were here in the camp, and he came to me in a dream and said, ‘Even so, Shahineh, is that any way to leave my bed? Where am I going to rest now?’” (339)

Shahineh deeply regrets her failure to make the bed that last time, though she has been exiled from her home and her village by events outside of her control. Another resident of the refugee camp frets over leaving a pan of zucchini over a flame in her own kitchen, mourning the burnt pan. These household objects left behind, uncared for, become the emblems of all that has been lost, as if making the bed or shutting off the flame could repair the catastrophe they have suffered or, if not reverse their dispossession, make it bearable.

The story of Umm Hassan, the camp’s midwife (on the day of whose death the novel opens) further emphasizes the crucial importance of domestic objects in maintaining a connection to Palestine—though not necessarily through retrieving or retaining them. Her story also introduces the especially physical engagement with videotapes and photographs that comprises rituals of remembrance in the refugee camps. Khalil learns that “Umm Hassan had visited al-Kweikat again, six months before, and had seen her house and made up her mind to die. Every day she’d watch this cassette and tell stories while others joined her in her lamentation, her sorrow, and her memories [...] It’s falling apart it’s been used so often” (98-99). While Umm Hassan is profoundly affected by both the visit to her former home and the video

recording made of it, the video, too, is marked by her repeated viewings, its tape degrading with use.

Umm Hassan's visit to her former home hinges upon a mundane object: an earthenware water jug. Upon entering the house, "Umm Hassan said – like everyone else who's gone back to see their former homes – 'Everything was in its place. Everything was just how it used to be, even the earthenware water jug'" (104). The Israeli woman who now lives in the house suggests that Umm Hassan take it back with her, but "Umm Hassan went over to the water jug, picked it up, and tucked it under her arm; then she went back to the Israeli woman and handed it to her. [...] the Israeli, who took the jug and returned it to its place" (105). The jug brings to Umm Hassan's mind the spring of sweet water she remembers from when she lived in the house, and she takes the new homeowner out to the spring, now a well; the vessel for water revives Umm Hassan's appreciation for the special sweetness of the water of Palestine, which she shares with the Israeli woman. This moment exemplifies the tendency Nassar attributes to Palestinian refugees to "focus on preserving an image of the lost past, rather than on the uprooting experience itself" (73). Before she leaves the house, however, the Jewish woman gives the jug to Umm Hassan once again, and this time she does not refuse. Later, "she was sorry she'd brought it with her, it should have stayed in its own house" (110). Instead of a sense of reclaiming a piece of her home, the jug leaves Umm Hassan feeling that she has uprooted it—as she has been uprooted herself—from "its own house."

Just like the unmade bed in Shahineh's house and the burnt pan of zucchini in Umm Isa's, the removal of the water jug is a disruption of the home. Distress and regret over these material disruptions, trivial enough that remedying them feels within reach, seems to displace the irreversible trauma of being forcibly separated from that home. "Can you imagine," Khalil

remarks, “that Umm Hassan would die weeping for the earthenware jug she brought with her from her house?” (110) Viewed as yet one more thing out of place—something that might have stayed in its place—in a long string of traumatic loss, her weeping does not seem so inexplicable. In the reality of these displaced women, the imagined order of an undisturbed and perfectly preserved house—even one they can never again inhabit—would be a comfort, as so many houses have been destroyed. This understanding sheds new light on George Weisz’s reconstruction of his father’s study; his repossession of his father’s furniture can be read as less about owning it himself than about restoring a disrupted order, returning the objects to their familiar arrangement—their familiar relation to one another—despite the fact that his relationship to Budapest, to his father, and to his own childhood is irreparably lost. In Umm Hassan’s case, Khalil concludes, “the story was turned into a videotape that’s now mine” (110).

Umm Hassan is not alone in her ritual viewing; Khalil observes that “[t]he Shatila Camp has turned into Camp Video. The videocassettes circulate among the houses, and people sit around their television sets, they remember and tell stories. They tell stories about what they see, and out of the glimpses of the villages they build villages” (103). The cassettes become the occasion for gathering together, for repeating familiar rituals, for retrieving and passing on memories and stories. Khalil describes these rituals as “building,” as if the videotapes, “the glimpses of the villages,” and the stories they inspire, become the building material for new or reconstructed villages to replace those they can no longer live in. Elsewhere, however, he equates these viewing sessions with “imagining” and “inventing.” He says Umm Hassan’s is “a beautiful tape, made up of lots of snapshots joined together. [...] we can imagine the scene as we watch.” Again, he insists, “We’ve become a video nation” (110). These fragmented snapshots are reminiscent of the story fragments Khalil imaginatively knits together in his “conversations”

with Yunes. “These days we can stand it because of video,” he explains,

Umm Hassan brought me a tape of al-Gabsiyyeh, and some other woman brought a tape of another village – all people do is swap videotapes, and in these images we find the strength to continue. We sit in front of the small screen and see small spots, distorted pictures and close-ups, and from these we invent the country we desire. We invent our life through pictures. (455)

In this way, the tapes cease to be a real record of the Palestinian villages in which they were filmed; they show only “small spots” and “distorted pictures,” from which viewers “imagine the scene.” It is not the *content* of the tapes that rebuilds Palestine, it is the collective imaginative efforts of viewing them again and again, gathered around television screens. Khalil equates inventing “the country we desire”—the “video nation”—with the invention of “our life.” The refugees rebuild their homeland, and thus themselves, through their engagement with the videotapes, as Khalil does with his ritual ministrations to Yunes, and Shahineh’s with her flower-stuffed pillow and the large photograph of her son.

Like the videotapes, photographs serve an important role in commemorating, even preserving, what has been lost. “Instead of searching for those who have disappeared,” Khalil observes somewhat cynically, “we look for photos of them. [...] It’s almost as if we think that by carrying around the pictures of our dead with us, it will save them from death” although “photos fade even behind glass” (494). In this way, the fragility of photographs, like that of the videotapes, makes unmistakable their materiality (and corollary impermanence) as objects of memory, an instability that recalls Yoav and Leah’s ever-shifting furniture. These pictures must be *carried* on the person, not merely reminders of “those who have disappeared” but powerful talismans of their existence that might be able to “save them from death.” Though it seems that

Shahineh's special physical attention to the portrait of her son is unique in the camp, photographs and videotapes are eagerly sought, exchanged, and held, taking on metonymic value beyond mere representation of their content.

Elizabeth Edwards has poignantly argued that, rather than its visual content alone, "[t]he materiality of the photograph is integral to its affective tone as an *image*. The subjective and sensuous experience of photographs as linking objects within memory are equally integral to the cultural expectancies of the medium" (332). "Objects are links between past and present," she tells us, "and photographs have a double link as image and as material, two ontological layers in one object" (Edwards 340). "One of the most widespread functions of photographs as material objects," Edwards observes, "is as objects of exchange. While the image itself is, of course, central to the act, giving, receiving and utilizing the material object is integral to the social meaning of those images. Photographs operate as exchange objects and circulate as 'memory texts'" (338). This "operation" resonates with the swapping of the videotapes around the camp, and indeed with Umm Hassan's bequest of her own to Khalil. Further, "[f]rom its earliest days," Edwards points out, "the relationship with photographs has demanded a physical engagement," exemplified by "an almost insuperable desire to touch, even stroke, the image. Again the viewer is brought into bodily contact with the trace of the remembered" (335). Hers seems an especially apt framework for thinking through the photographs that appear throughout this novel, not only Shahineh's physical engagement with the portrait of her son but also Khalil's with the photographs he finds in Yunes's house. In the bedroom, he recounts,

I saw them all. It's like a studio. Seven photos frame to frame on the wall and, above the bed, a large photo of Nahilah. An amazing number of small photos of children of various ages hung on the other wall. A world of photographs. A strange world. I don't know how

you managed to sleep amid all that life. (386)

He feels as if he is “floating with the photos in the dark. I went up to them, one by one, and discovered your secret world, a world of photographs hung from the cords of memory. The photographs seemed to move. I heard low voices emanating from the walls and was afraid” (386). Not only does he feel compelled to come close to each photo, “one by one,” but they also elicit a feeling of physical immersion, of entering and “floating” in a world of memory, an immersion that is overwhelming, even frightening. The photos seem alive, appear to be moving and speaking. And the novel’s strange final scenes suggest that one of the photographs has quite literally come to life.

Though he intends to be away only a short time, Khalil is kept from Yunes’s bed by a mysterious “woman, who came from nowhere and stood like a photograph in front of your house, with her black scarf over her head” (528). The morning after his passionate night with her, she seems to vanish in thin air, and as he attempts to recollect the encounter, he becomes sure that “[i]t was my wife, who’d been in my bed,” so he wonders, again looking at the walls of Yunes’s bedroom, “what was my wife doing in this photo? What was this woman whose name I didn’t know doing inside the photo of Nahilah?” (531) Like Khalil, we are left to wonder whether the encounter really happened—its traces seem to have disappeared from the world—and whether the mysterious woman was, somehow, Nahilah herself. After Yunes’s death, Khalil pleads at his grave:

I’ll go get the photos and we’ll tell the whole story.

The story will be different.

We’ll change everything

I’ll hang all the photos here, and we’ll live among them.

I'll take down a photo from the wall and will hand it to you, and you'll tell a story. Then I'll choose another photo and a new story will come. Story will follow story.

That way we can compose our story from the beginning without leaving a single gap for death to enter through. (517)

Again, the attempt to reconstruct the past seems to end in failure—as with his grandmother's, and his father's, Khalil is absent at the moment of Yunes's passing, and his absence is in fact caused by his impulse to bring the photographs to the hospital. And yet, the scene he imagines, in which he hands photos to Yunes and from the photos spring story after story, has in fact already been taking place, has comprised the entire novel. The narrative Khalil reconstructs is admittedly imperfect, rife with gaps and moments of doubt, but his hope that caring for Yunes's body and “bath[ing him] in words, and wash[ing his] wounds with memories” (303) will bring him back to consciousness has resulted in the very novel of his life—and Khalil's, and that of his community—that Khalil wishes Ghassan Kanafani could have written. In fact, Khoury's invocation of Kanafani, exemplar of first-generation Palestinian Nakba fiction, highlights the distinctness of his own postmemory narrative and its material practices of performativity in place of direct representationality. As 1948 recedes into the past, the next generation takes up and reimagines the traumatic past in the context of a continuously traumatic present, refashioning Palestinian identity through new engagements with the materiality that remains.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

These novels demonstrate the reverberating impact of traumatic pasts and the kinds of narratives generated by those writing in trauma's long shadow. In the wake of collective trauma, objects become a way to touch that history indirectly and invite attempts to literally put its fragmented pieces back together. Objects are traces of the past, and bear the traces of those who once touched them. Physical, even ritual engagement with these objects—or craving that engagement—offers a means to inhabit that past and experience what has been lost. While these things are objects of human desire and affective projection, they also exert a kind of agency, shaping bodies, memories, and ultimately narrative. The narrators of these novels—Nadia, Arthur, Isabel, Khalil—are trying to put together the stories of others, to make contact with a history that they are a part of but have no direct memory of. While the experiences of Yoav and Leah Weisz, as well as Dov—none of whom speak directly to the reader—can easily be identified in terms of Marianne Hirsch's concept of “postmemory,” so can the imaginative investment of Krauss's narrators, and especially Khoury's narrator Khalil.

Further, the trauma of the Holocaust and the Nakba is refigured in these novels as the displacement of objects; these catastrophes have left things out of place, instilling in descendants a profound longing to restore order. As we have seen, these attempts to literally reconstruct a distant past—to restore the material conditions before the rupture of catastrophe—are doomed to failure. And yet, the attempt to put things back in place becomes the occasion for reconstructing *the story*. This attempt and failure to resolve or reclaim the past through its material relics renders complex, interwoven stories that embody the fragmentation wrought by trauma. Thus,

although material repair is impossible, without its attempt *the story* would be impossible.

However, as scholars such as Stef Craps (2013), Abigail Ward (2015), and Jay Rajiva (2017; 2020) demonstrate, narrativization is far from the only way to work through trauma. Attention to the material and embodied engagement with physical remnants of the past allows us to develop a more nuanced sense of the relationship between trauma, memory, and literature as collective cultural traumas are passed down to and reinterpreted by later generations. Further, this attention allows us to recognize both commonalities and important distinctions in the experience and reimagining of trauma across cultures. The examples provided by *Great House* and *Gate of the Sun* offer opportunities to examine not only the emotional investment of human characters in material objects, but also ways in which objects respond to and influence those investments.

Like *Wandering Star*, both *Great House* and *Gate of the Sun* highlight the centrality of physical things to the experience of refugees in the midst and immediate aftermath of mass trauma, as well as the significance of these things to later generations. In turn, both novels, like Le Clézio's, acknowledge the material interconnection between the Holocaust and *al Nakba*. Material objects in these novels call attention not only to parallels between Jewish and Palestinian refugee experience, but also to the co-implication of the epochal traumas suffered by both groups and the unavoidable historical and causal relationship between these two events.

When George Wesiz buys the house on Ha'Oren Street in Jerusalem, its seller tells him: "When I came here, [...] the floor was still littered with pistachio shells the Arab had eaten before he fled with his wife and children. Upstairs, I found the little girl's doll, [...] with real hair that she had lovingly braided. For some time I kept it but one day the glass eyes began to look at me in a strange way" (Krauss 285). Here, not only the house itself—appropriated from the

fleeing Arab family—but also the objects that remain—the pistachio shells and the doll—recall its previous owners both to the seller and to Weisz. For the seller of the house, the doll’s “glass eyes began to look at me in a strange way,” suggesting not only an uncanny animacy in this object but also its capacity to unsettle the current occupant, reminding him that he is living in someone else’s house. That Krauss has chosen to include this detail suggests not only an awareness of but also an intention to communicate the interlocking traumatic histories of the Jews and the Palestinians, and the ways material things and spaces implicate, and are implicated in, that connection.

In an echoing instance in *Gate of the Sun*, Nahilah recalls that “in the house in Deir al-Asad, which had become our house, and among the furniture and the pots and pans left by its owners, I felt afraid, and strange, and insecure, drinking out of their cups and cooking in their saucepans.” It makes her wonder, “What do the Jews who live in our houses feel?” (Khoury 401) Here houses, especially the domestic implements of everyday life—pots, cups, saucepans—bear some implacable trace of their former owners, even instilling a sense of fear and instability in new inhabitants. And yet, displaced, forced to live in the abandoned home of another refugee, Nahilah reflects on neither the Israeli army that has expelled her from her home nor all the other appropriated Arab houses, but instead the Jews who now inhabit them, what they must be feeling in strange houses whose every detail remind them that they are not at home.

Khalil comments even more explicitly on the connection between the Holocaust and the Nakba, remarking, “I’m not equating executioners and victims. But I do see a mirror broken into two halves, which can only be mended by joining the parts together” (Knoury 283-284). He assures Yunes, “I believe, like you, that this country must belong to its people. [...] This Palestine, no matter how many names they give it, will always be Palestinian. But tell me, in the

faces of people being driven to slaughter, don't you see something resembling your own?"

(Khoury 290) Here Khalil uses the image of a mirror to elucidate the connection between Jewish and Palestinian refugees. He calls into question their seeming incomparability and fundamental opposition. His suggestion that the mirror "can only be mended by joining the parts together" suggests that repair for both communities will require mutual recognition. In this way, these literary examples are already doing the work that this project attempts—providing a framework for understanding these two traumas and the ways they are memorialized in tandem.

My hope is that traumatic materialism may enable continuing work in interpreting and connecting global traumas in ways that combat the unevenness with which these events are often received. Traumatic materialism opens up Western trauma theory to embodied, performative, and transcultural understandings of grief and its lasting legacies without flattening or universalizing experiences and representations of trauma. This framework speaks both to a consistent connective thread as well as infinite variations and specificities in transnational, transgenerational memory keeping, contributing to an ethics of recognition, empathy, and solidarity. Armed with its particular attentiveness, we can approach with nuance and multidirectionality the ways in which catastrophe and atrocity are inherited, reimagined, and perhaps even redressed in diverse global creative endeavors and cultural production.

One area that strikes me as especially generative for future applications of traumatic materialism is a consideration of the text as material object, and the materializing language of thread and weaving that persistently characterizes storytelling. "Braided" narratives such as Anton Shammas's *Arabesques* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* point to the intrinsically braided or woven nature of narrative itself, intertwining literal string and cloth with the metaphorical language of story as thread and tapestry. In these novels, a clear source of the

signifying power of the textual object—books, letters, diaries, folded amulets—is the materiality of these often painstakingly handwritten items. Taken together, the textual and the textile reveal layered valences of materiality that are crucial for reconstructing—perhaps better, reimagining—the past. Both Foer and Shamma weave or braid together two distinct narratives: a mythical or legendary past and a realist present of writer protagonist, which become increasingly intertwined over the course of the novels. The material remnants that link these intertwining (un)realities, recalling Nejma’s notebook, are texts and documents, as well as threads and fabrics. Folded paper amulets, blueprints, maps, letters, and texts-within-texts—Daniel Varsky’s diary in *Great House*; variously authored manuscripts in *Arabesques*; *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*, *The Book of Antecedents*, and Brod’s diary in *Everything is Illuminated*—abound in these fictional retellings of counterfactual pasts and presents. In turn, literal string, thread, and fabric accompany consistent metaphoric language of yarn and weaving around storytelling, layering the physicality of text as object with the materiality of textiles. Ultimately, the “myth” and the “history” cannot be disentangled; myth becomes the way to access and transmit the past. This entanglement is the product of both the weaving *of* the story and the weaving *in* the story.

Further, I contend that this paradigm can be useful in postcolonial contexts far beyond Jewish diaspora and Palestinian dispossession. For example, discussions of literature and graphic narrative that grapples with past and ongoing traumas in the Americas—from Indigenous genocide to crises at the US/Mexico border to Latin American magical realist reimaginings of colonization—would be enriched by deliberate attention to relationships between traumatic memory, embodied practice, and physical things. In addition to an obsession with objects in Latin American magical realist fiction of the 20th century, contemporary novels like Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* and Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, imaginative

histories like Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire* trilogy, and graphic narratives like Charles Bowden and Alice Leora Briggs's *Dreamlands: The Way Out of Juarez* center the material, specifically the text(ile)ual. In turn, the fiction of Linda Hogan, Louise Erdrich, and James Welch offers irreal material ecologies into which traumatic materialism may be a generative pathway. Thus this project, limited in its own specific scope, serves also as a call to investigate material manifestations of trauma on a far broader scale.

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